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# LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE

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Thomas

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Balsley

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BY MIMI ZEIGER

**IMAGE CREDIT**  
Patrick Pantano

AFTER 40 YEARS IN PRACTICE, THE VETERAN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT TRAVELS WELL WITH A PORTFOLIO BUILT ON AN ARCHIPELAGO OF SMALL CIVIC SPACES IN NEW YORK CITY.

Places

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To Be

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# It would be hard to overestimate the changes that public spaces have undergone

in New York City in the four decades since Thomas Balsley, FASLA, founded his landscape architecture firm. The once-gritty urban realm is now marbled with city-sponsored green streets and bike lanes, and the era of modernist plazas has blown by like the wind that swept them free of activity. With the development of new parks in almost every borough as well as the revival of existing urban parks, Gotham is in the midst of a landscape renaissance, and Thomas Balsley Associates (TBA) is behind the design of great swaths of acreage.

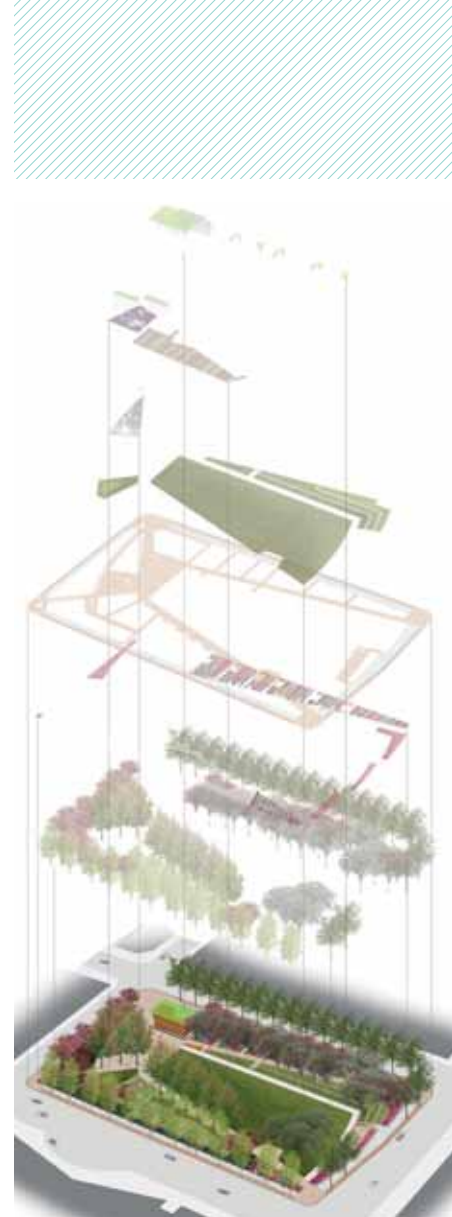
Early in his career, Balsley would weigh the importance of many small, local parks in the urban fabric against Frederick Law Olmsted's iconic Greensward Plan with its grand meadows and forestlike rambles. These days, when his office tallies up the amount of parkland it has shaped in New York City since Balsley hung out his shingle in 1970—waterfronts, pocket parks, public plazas—it nearly equals the size of Central Park.

However, TBA's work isn't limited to the five boroughs. The firm has created plans for places as far afield as Doha, Qatar, and Seoul, South Korea. And stateside, cities such as Baltimore, Dallas, Cleveland,

Tampa, and Denver have turned to Balsley for help in fashioning green space and reviving urban cores. Over the past few years, the office has been building a robust civic portfolio—and it's reaching a critical mass.

Balsley is an expert at creating intimate moments within the city grid. His practice was built on advocating for and designing (or rather redesigning) bonus plazas—those parcels of land required to be set aside by developers as public space. More often than not, they exist as bleak, underused wastelands in the shadows of high-rises, but when optimized by designs like his, they provide a green respite and an outdoor seat.

"A little piazza is where someone can go to on the weekend or after work or during work or for breakfast or coffee," Balsley says, passionately listing off uses. "It's a place to get off the street, like in Italy or France. And people remember those little piazzas. They don't know the name. It doesn't really matter. The point is, they got off the beaten path, they sat down, and they watched the world go by. So I make the case sometimes that these little spaces could even be more important than Central Park in touching our daily lives and defining our urban experience."



TBA's projects in New York City, such as Gantry Plaza State Park in Long Island City and Riverside Park South along the Hudson River side of Manhattan, deploy the lessons learned from small parks across a larger canvas. Balsley takes design cues from existing bits of the built environment—a crumbling pier, railroad tracks, a skyline. But his thinking about how people act in public space is indebted to the sociologist William Whyte's studies of New York City's parks and plazas. It was Whyte who famously stated the now seemingly obvious aphorism, "People tend to sit most where there are places to sit." As such, TBA creates places for people to gather, play, walk, and take in a view. Terraces, lawns, and footpaths combine with extensive seating areas and shade structures.

Perhaps as an outgrowth of working within the constraints of Manhattan's bonus plazas and trying to make as much as possible in a tight space, Balsley's work is filled with design moments and activities. And, at times, his schemes teeter on the brink of overprogramming. For example, Main Street Garden Park, which opened in downtown Dallas in late 2009, fits, among other things, a café pavilion, a dog park, a stage, a burbling fountain, a

**ABOVE LEFT**

TBA's Main Street Garden Park restores a previously ragged edge of downtown Dallas.

**ABOVE RIGHT**

Multiple programs—a café, dog park, art installations—ring the park's main lawn.

**IMAGE CREDITS**

Craig D. Blackmon, left; Courtesy Thomas Balsley Associates, right

**LEFT**

Junior landscape architect Chris Barnes (standing) and project manager Marc Delouvrier pore over new designs in the firm's New York City office.

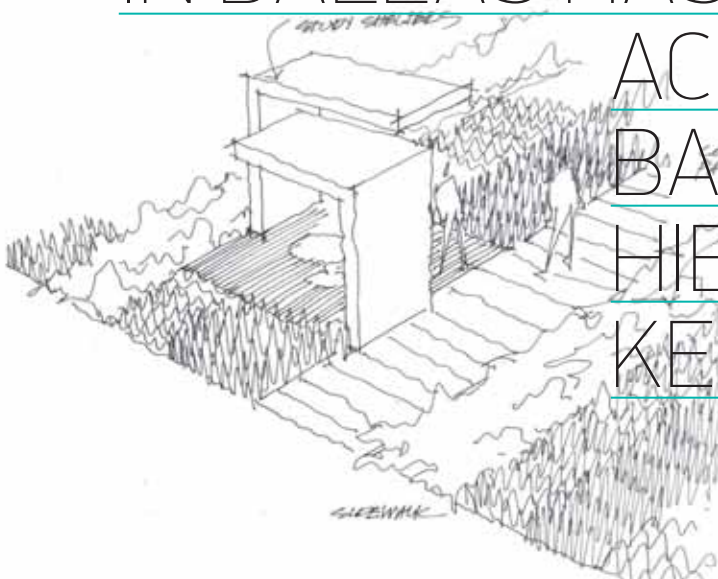
**BELOW**

Study shelters appear in a sketch of Main Street Garden Park.

**IMAGE CREDITS**

Patrick Pantano, top; Courtesy Thomas Balsley Associates, bottom

BALSLEY'S MAIN STREET GARDEN PARK IN DALLAS HAS MANY PREDEFINED ACTIVITIES, BUT BALSLEY SAYS THE HIERARCHY OF SPACES KEEPS IT FLEXIBLE.



**LEFT**

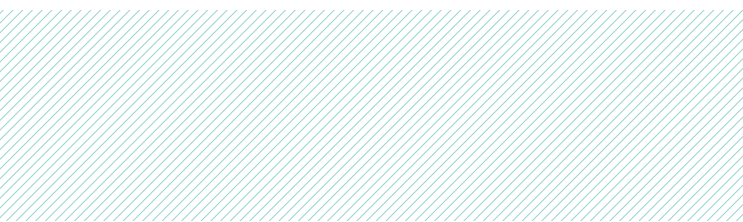
Good sight lines in Main Street Garden Park, far left, not only offer a feeling of security, but knit the greenspace into the urban fabric. A playful water feature, near left, appeals to the diverse constituency that visits the park.

**BELOW**

A parkwide Wi-Fi connection makes the bright green "study shelters" ideal for a working lunch.

**IMAGE CREDITS**

Craig D. Blackmon



children's play area, and sculptural "study shelters" in a 1.75-acre block. (TBA teamed with local ALB + Blair Architects and landscape architecture firm Linda Tycher and Associates to build the park for the city of Dallas.) The dense programming is a direct response to the complex urban condition. It's an effort to revive civic space. In November 2010, Willis Winters of the Dallas Parks and Recreation Department sat on a panel with Balsley at the 2010 ASLA Annual Meeting and EXPO in Washington, D.C. Cityparksblog.org quoted the discussion. "Main Street Garden served as the reason to revitalize the buildings surrounding the area," Winters said.

The park, which replaces a parking lot, sits within Dallas's Harwood Historic District, a collection of commercial buildings that date from the late 1800s through the 1950s. As is the case with many older downtowns, city officials and developers are hoping to redevelop the area. Landmarks surround the park—the Dallas Municipal Building, the Texas Commerce Tower, and the currently shuttered Dallas Statler Hilton, the chain's midcentury modern flagship—but within just a few blocks, the urban core gives way to vacant lots. Rather than limit the use of the space, Balsley contends, predefined activities make the place usable for a diverse population.

"To a certain extent you can say that the defining of those spaces and uses removes some flexibility from the park," Balsley says. "However, I mitigate that danger because I create a hierarchy of spaces, because we can't predict what's going to happen 10 years from now. There needs to be that big central space that can be anything to anybody at any given time. So, that flexibility is built in. And then the creation of these secondary and tertiary spaces offers more human experiences. I feel, to create that more human experience, you really have to literally define those more intimate spaces."





#### THIS PAGE

On the far west side of Manhattan, Riverside Park South, above, is a green oasis, despite the looming highway. TBA's design transformed a derelict waterfront filled with crumbling piers, top right, into a rich ecosystem planted with grasses and crossed with boardwalks, bottom right.

#### OPPOSITE PAGE

A large esplanade and several smaller platforms jut out over the water, making reference to the working piers that once lined the shore.

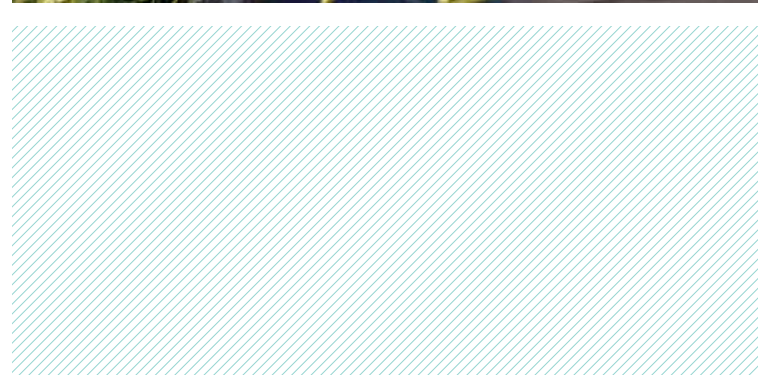
#### IMAGE CREDITS

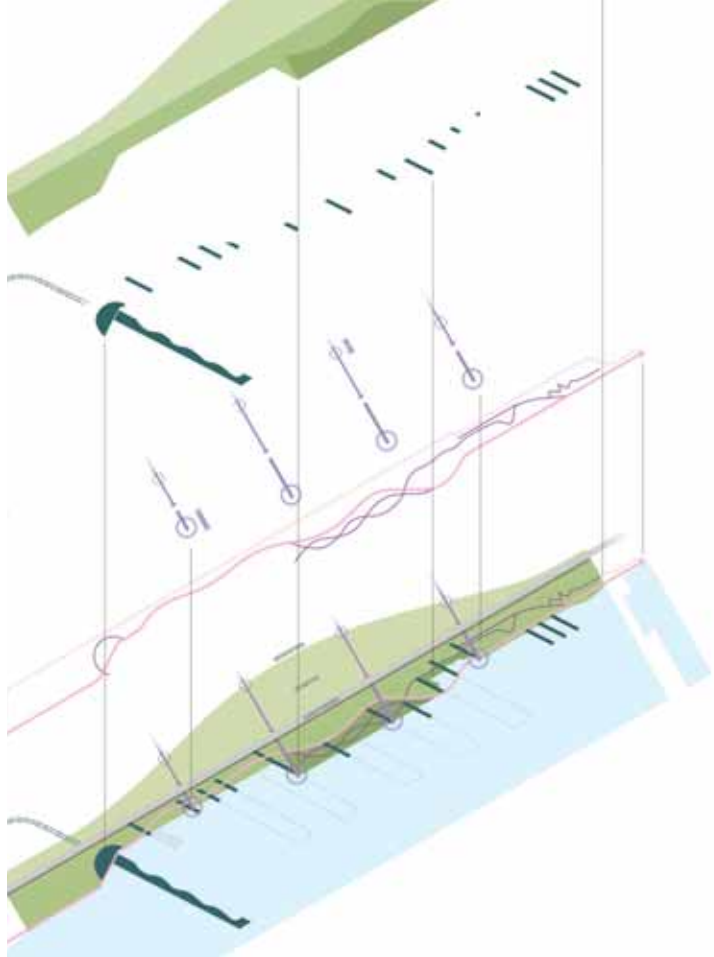
David Quinones, top left; Courtesy Thomas Balsley Associates, top right and opposite; Michael Koontz, Thomas Balsley Associates, bottom

Case in point, on a chilly November morning, white-collar residents who live in the lofts recently constructed nearby bring their dogs to the Main Street Garden Park's central lawn. Moms sit with strollers and lattes by the coffee kiosk (a boxy, lime-green structure surrounded by an ipe deck and sheltered by a dramatic shade canopy), and a few homeless men sit on the concrete seat walls that form lawn terraces, quietly warming themselves in the sun before shuffling off to another perch. Most surprising is that people are working on laptops. A dozen "study shelters" sit among grasses and azalea borders. Each small, bright-green shade structure brackets a metal café table and two chairs and, because the park has WiFi, provides neighbors and students a coveted Internet connection. (Outposts of Texas A&M University Commerce and the University of North Texas are housed across the street.) Here, Balsley's design, combined with technology, points to a redefined future of democratic public space: parks that are acutely aware of the pluralistic needs of the people they serve. "It may sound like we're throwing everything and the kitchen sink in there, but I don't think we're doing that," he notes. "We're thinking long and hard to make sure that we're reaching out to the different constituents. I don't think anyone is going to walk up into that park and feel like it's not for them."

Balsley believes that parks fundamentally express our democratic ideals. "They reflect how we feel about each other and how a city—or a municipality or a state—feels about the unspoken promises made to us, its citizens. They give the terms of the kind of quality of life that we should expect from that entity."

In New York City, Riverside Park South illustrates the complexities that come with democratic design. The park is a collaboration





with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and part of a 65-acre redevelopment that was first approved in 1991. The first phase of the project opened in 2001, and the past decade incrementally ushered in four of the proposed seven phases, with phase four finished in 2010. The park is a critical link between Olmsted and Calvert Vaux's 1875 landscape and the waterside promenade, designed by Gilmore D. Clarke and Clinton Lloyd under the administration of Robert Moses. The first piece of park along the river since 1930, the greenway covers 23 acres of waterfront from 59th Street to 72nd Street, but to reach the extensive network of sinuous and interwoven paved paths, wooden boardwalks, and overlooks, you have to pass under the elevated West Side Highway. Plans are in the works to remove the rumbling and fuming roadway and bury it, thus linking the parkland to the lineup of high-end apartment buildings that look out over the Hudson. Extell Development, which funded the Riverside Park South project, is pushing forward on hiding the highway underground, but that plan is wrapped up in a web of federal and municipal decision making and faces uncertain funding. Balsley strategically designed the park to accommodate eventual demolition and development, even if it takes another two decades.

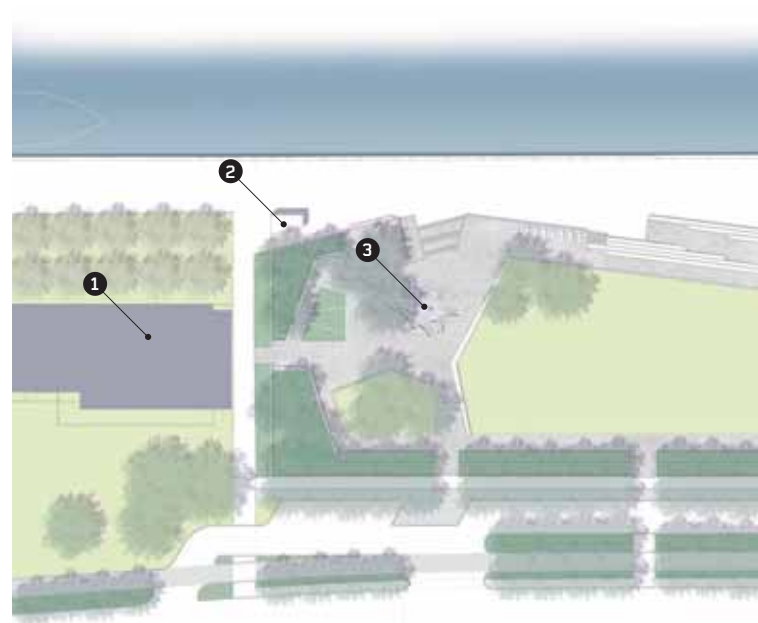
Meanwhile, locals vie for the coveted lounge chairs that dot the esplanade—some decadently arranged as if on the deck of one of the cruise ships that dock just south of the park. Balsley's design references the site's old piers (the remains of which are still evident) with a new brick-paved pier edged by a subtle scallop that reaches more than 800 feet into the Hudson and with several more modest wood-planked decks that jut out over the water. True to Balsley's desire to make places for people to sit and watch the world go by, each small deck is enclosed in a

BALSLEY'S  
WATERFRONT  
PARKS IN  
NEW YORK  
SHOW WHAT  
UNDERPINS  
HIS WORK—  
HISTORICAL  
NODS,  
ECOLOGICAL  
SENSITIVITY,  
ESPLANADES,  
AND, OF  
COURSE,  
PLACES TO SIT.



sleek steel railing, and the intimate space is just large enough for a lounge and several high stools that are cantilevered from a countertop built into the protective rail. More industrial past is referenced in the wooden boardwalks that are edged with railroad ties and native grasses. In an effort to restore the Hudson River ecosystem, TBA reconstructed a marshy wetland by preserving a rocky inlet and planting native sedge along the shoreline. Also preserved is a black steel gantry that once lifted freight in and out of Manhattan. Its hulking outline, rising from the water, is a historic reminder and visual folly. There's even a vintage locomotive that, poised as sculpture, forms the focal point of the paved plaza at 62nd Street.

Adrian Benepe, Honorary ASLA, the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation commissioner, was instrumental in the park's development (it was his idea to install the locomotive), and he's also an enthusiastic user. He runs and cycles through it often, zipping down the dedicated bike path tucked under the highway. "I love [the landscape's] pastoral quality—the grasses, *Rosa rugosa* roses, the boardwalk," Benepe says. "It's amazing how that can take you away from the noise of the city. Once a park replaced the rail yard, it immediately attracted wildlife. Crickets and song





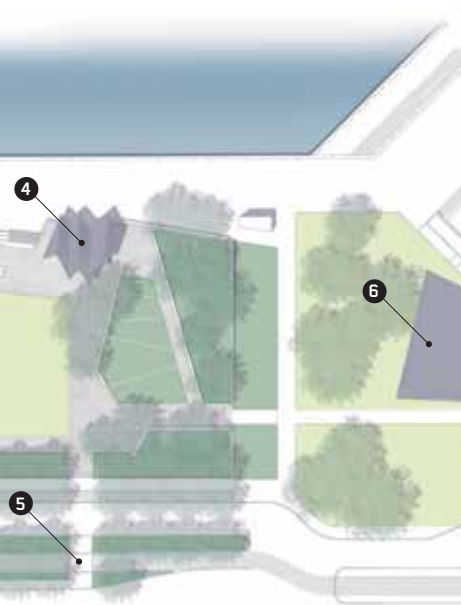
sparrows—a kind of bird associated with beach meadows—you really don't hear that anywhere else in Manhattan.”

Over on the industrially frayed banks of the East River in Queens, Gantry Plaza State Park mirrors many of the design approaches at Riverside Park South. Both projects were developed over the same time period and, taken together, form the vocabulary that underpins TBA's work—historical nods, ecological sensitivity, esplanades, and, of course, places to sit: beaches, lounges, seat walls, chess tables, and bright red Adirondack chairs. Undertaken as part of the 26-acre Queens West Open Space Master Plan (the client is the Queens West Development Corporation), the first phase of Gantry Plaza State Park, located in the middle of the site, opened in 1999; the second phase to the north opened in 2003, and the last phase, Hunters Point South Park, is scheduled to open in 2012. Wrapping the southern edge of the Long Island City shoreline, this landscape is a collaboration between TBA and Weiss/Manfredi with the engineering expertise of Arup. The project, designed for the New York City Economic Development Corporation, is an ambitious combination of real estate development and environmentally minded infrastructure. The park encompasses 11 acres of the Queens West site. “The whole master plan takes into account what uses go together well. [Balsley's] taken very detailed care of each of the individual elements. He's created many small parks within the larger park,” explains Arup's project manager, Matt Best.

Some of those uses include a recreational artificial turf field and an intensive marshland habitat reconstruction (plans include biofiltering plantings such as ferns, rushes, and asters); play areas and a dog run; Weiss/Manfredi's architectural pavilion (a sweeping folly that serves as park offices, a concession stand, and a shade structure for the water taxi dock), and the pathways that reconnect Queens residents to the water. Unlike Riverside Park South, where the luxury Trump Place high-rises overlook the parkland, here the hope is to build housing for a variety of tax brackets on the currently light-industrial blocks next to the river, a prospect that raises Balsley's spirits.

“A diverse constituency is one of the most critical elements in the sustained success of a park,” he explains. “If any space is designed too much to the needs of a narrowly defined constituency, the public will come, and then they will go. I love the mix of the intense urban and the social sustainability and the environmental sustainability coming together.”

Balsley's ability to engage a community (with all its varied needs) is on display at the West Shore Park in Baltimore's Inner Harbor. TBA and a local landscape architecture firm, Horde Coplan and Macht, Inc., were commissioned by the city of Baltimore. The



## SITE PLAN

### IMAGE CREDIT

Courtesy Thomas Balsley Associates

### 1 VISITOR CENTER

### 2 CAFE KIOSK

### 3 INTERACTIVE FOUNTAIN PLAZA

### 4 OVERLOOK/STAGE CANOPY

### 5 BIKEWAY

### 6 SCIENCE CENTER

### OPPOSITE TOP

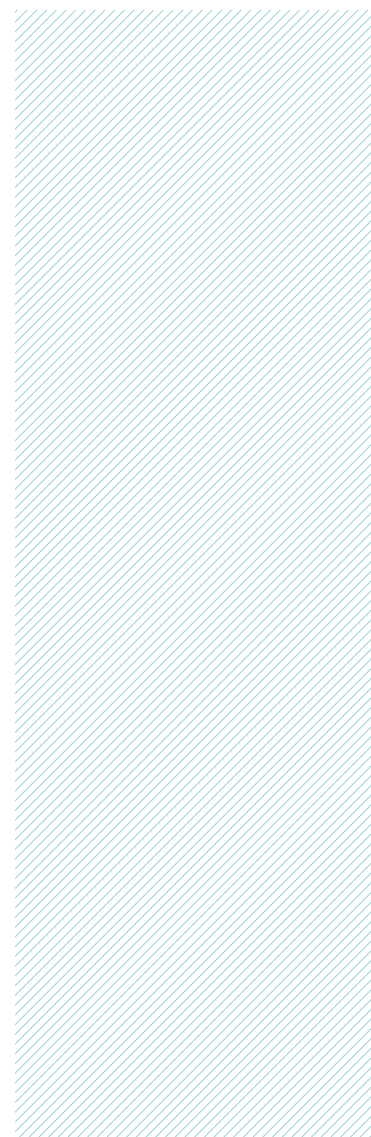
The Baltimore Area Visitors Center and the city's downtown backdrop the West Shore Park's red oaks and water feature.

### ABOVE

Still hands on after 40 years of practice, Balsley consults with senior associate landscape architect Dale Schafer, ASLA.

### IMAGE CREDITS

Patrick Ross, opposite top; Patrick Pantano, above





BALSLEY SAYS THAT LITTLE PARKS CAN SOMETIMES BE MORE IMPORTANT TO USERS THAN LARGE PARKS.

#### OPPOSITE

In view of Baltimore's harbor and the colorful facade of the National Aquarium, local kids splash in the TBA-designed fountain.

#### ABOVE

Benches set among Natchez crape myrtles, black-eyed Susans, and tall grasses are a tranquil respite from the active promenade.

#### IMAGE CREDITS

Thomas Balsley, Thomas Balsley Associates, opposite and above; Patrick Pantano, right

2.5-acre park they developed has transformed what was essentially a bus drop-off squeezed between the Maryland Science Center and the Baltimore Area Visitors Center into a space for civic performance. The park sits three feet higher than the brick-lined promenade, and the grade change allows for an elevated view of Baltimore's quirky waterfront skyline—the stocky World Trade Center tower, the National Aquarium's angular and colorful facade, and the tall masts of the USS Constellation. Built as part of a 30-year redevelopment of the industrial harbor into a tourist destination, Balsley's design, which replaces a parking lot, is a place for both locals and visitors to pause amid the promenade's renewed bustle.

A clipped lawn forms the centerpiece of the composition. Outlined by a walkway, a few shade trees, and geometric planting beds, it's large enough for sunbathers or for school kids on field trips to eat lunch and play tag, but it isn't a great lawn like in Central Park. It is, fittingly, the scale of a neighborhood park. There are simple benches and, in the warmer months, an in-ground fountain spurts water several feet into the air, much to the delight of the kids who run through the sprays. However, raised above the lower walkway, the green space takes on a civic grandeur. Two staircases—one on the north and one on the south—take you directly to and from the water's edge. In both cases, they grow out of the seat walls that line the promenade. Yet it is a gently sloping ramp, angled to catch walkers and joggers, that effortlessly eases the public into the park. If the pavers didn't change from red brick to gray hexagons, the transition would almost disappear. "It was immediately obvious to me that other than a few spaces outside the aquarium, there was no open space, just the promenade where you had to drink Coke, buy a beer, buy a T-shirt, have an ice cream, and keep moving," Balsley recalls. This park, on the other hand, is supposed to be a sort of stage for downtown Baltimore. "You're not going to have performances every day," he says. But the idea is that as more people began to pass by the area, they would pause, stick around, and start to populate a part of the city they had neglected to consider. ●

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