

THE OLD AND THE NEUTRAL

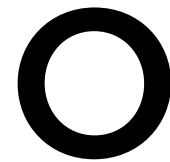
THE MILE-LONG CRESCENT PARK IN NEW ORLEANS SHOWS AMBITIONS MEETING REALITY.

BY JOHN KING, HONORARY ASLA



TIMOTHY HURSLEY

MANDEVILLE WHARF
An elliptical lawn marks the heart of Crescent Park, part of an ambitious project intended to revitalize a rough industrial edge of the Mississippi River in New Orleans.



ON A LANGUID FRIDAY afternoon in New Orleans, the sounds of the French Quarter Festival spill downriver toward Crescent Park. The music is loudest at the park's Mandeville Wharf, but the dozen or so visitors seem to pay no notice as they lounge on a raised lawn next to remnants of a vast storage shed, or ride scooters in the shade cast by the new corrugated roof, or lean against galvanized steel guardrails to watch a barge plow through the dark waters. Nor can the distant din compete with the cries of the seagulls who have claimed a fenced-off stretch of the wharf as their own.

TOP
The industrial heritage of the riverfront seen in this 1950s photo is retained in the forms and materials of the park.

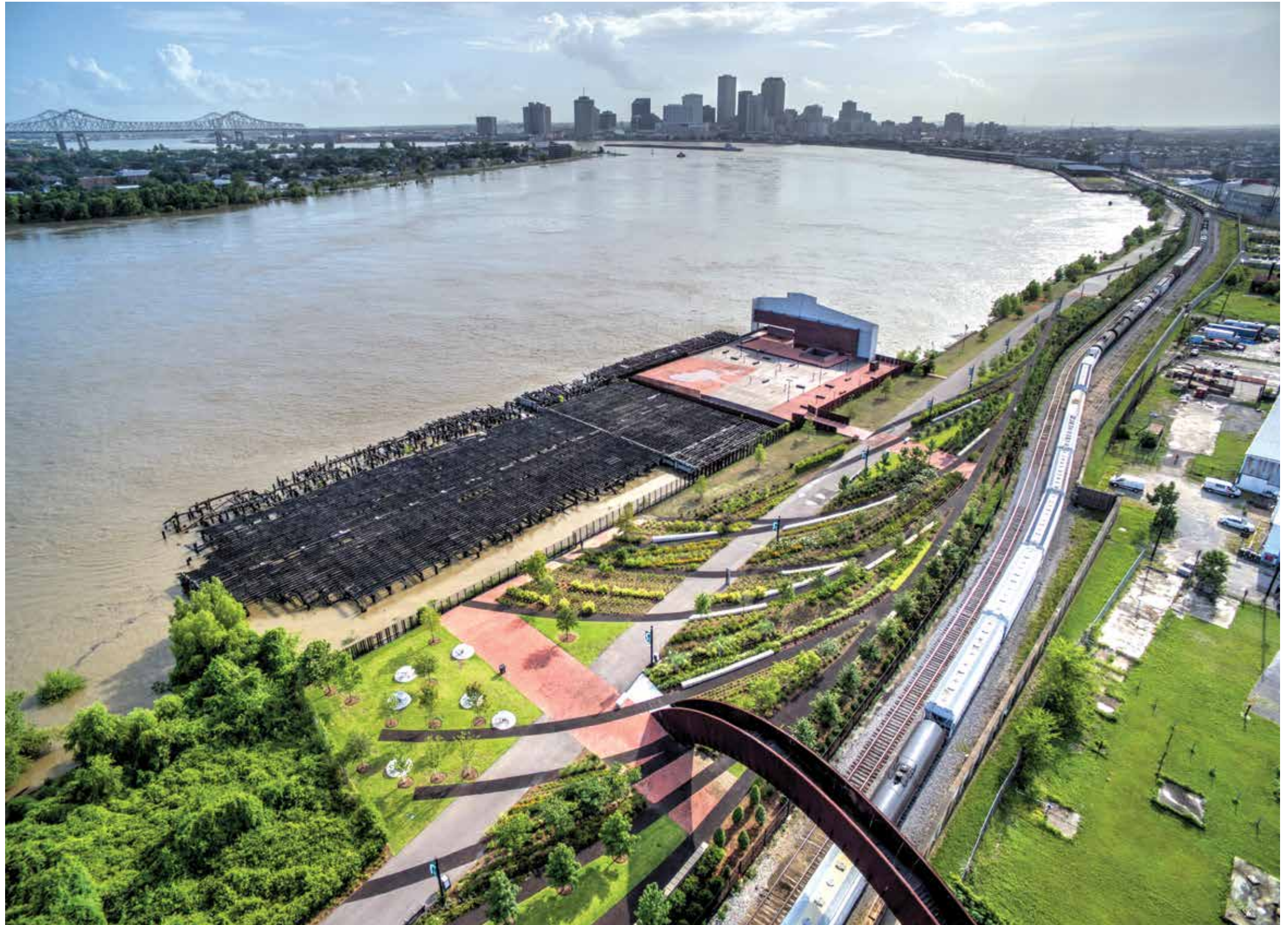
RIGHT
From above, Hargreaves Associates' arcing lines take a hint from the crescent of the riverfront as it bends.

This low-key scene is typical for Crescent Park, a 1.4-mile-long public space along the Mississippi River that was completed in 2015. The park starts just east of the French Quarter but is cut off from easy inland access by a

floodwall roughly 10 feet high as well as railbeds where freight cars might sit for days between journeys. The stylized promenade is promoted by some as New Orleans's answer to Millennium Park or the High Line, one with a photogenic bridge designed by the architect David Adjaye. Its impact on the adjacent Bywater neighborhood, where small colorful houses line streets where the sidewalks come and go, can be seen in the condo complexes starting to rise along its edge.

Viewed through a wider lens, Crescent Park fits within the constellation of urban waterfronts reclaimed by cities across the United States in an effort to serve locals, attract visitors, and help to kick-start growth. But as the rough-edged, sparingly artistic space designed by the firm Hargreaves Associates has settled into the physical and cultural landscape,

CAMPANELLA/NOPI, LEFT; STEPHEN HOUSER, RIGHT



CRESCENT PARK – PLAN



it feels less like a catalyst than one more layer of New Orleans's seductively tangled connection to its river—an insertion that's different from what the city has seen before, but also one tempered by the deeper realities of place.

JUST AS THE 20-ACRE PARK is shaped physically by the industrial and natural features that press close on each side, its origins were shaped by a much grander development plan that most likely will never come to pass.

The concept traces back to Reinventing the Crescent, a planning effort launched by the New Orleans Building Corporation in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The plan's final version was released in 2008 with an official goal to create "the most significant physical addition to this

city since the French Quarter," according to the cover letter cosigned by then-Mayor Ray Nagin. Each end of the six-mile-long planning area would be anchored by residential towers, with an array of attractions between them to form "a new, 21st century urban landscape."

The plan, which received a 2008 ASLA Professional Award for Analysis and Planning, included projections that a \$294 million public investment would reap nearly \$3.6 billion in private development and 24,000 new jobs. But the crystal ball was clouded by hype. Today, Nagin is in jail after being convicted of

(unrelated) corruption charges. The towers are nowhere to be seen. Only Crescent Park exists—built with \$30 million in Katrina-related federal recovery funds, on a stretch of the river where cargo operations ceased decades ago.

Hargreaves was part of Reinventing the Crescent's planning team, and it started work on Crescent Park as soon as city officials decided to focus resources on what they hoped would be an attention-getting waterfront destination. To up the star wattage, the architects Michael Maltzan and David Adjaye were each hired to design bridges that would span the

floodwall and rail lines and connect the isolated linear park to the city beyond—and, it was hoped, become symbols of head-turning change.

"We wanted designers who would understand New Orleans at a very deep level," said Sean Cummings, a local developer who led the Building Corporation during Nagin's time in office. "The project needed to look good, but also be authentic and instantly familiar to local people."

The rezoning to allow the park was approved in January 2010, with an expectation that it would open in 2011. But progress was fitful, and the first piece didn't open until 2014. The second followed one year later.

Along the way, design features were sacrificed to hold down costs. Custom-designed picnic tables be-

came standard-issue circular ones. A playground was deleted, as was an interactive water feature on the edge of Mandeville Wharf's elliptical lawn. The biggest loss, literally: Maltzan's pedestrian bridge, which would have swooped from the edge of the French Quarter out above the river and then down into Mandeville Wharf.

Partly because of all this subtraction, but also because of Hargreaves's design strategy, Crescent Park today is less a unified space than a string of encounters connected by a 20-foot-wide path of concrete and asphalt little changed from when it was a wharf apron where workers moved pallets stacked with break-bulk cargo.

There's the area around Mandeville Wharf, reached from the French Quarter and the adjacent Marigny

neighborhood by a striking but straightforward prefabricated bridge that rises amid utility towers and touches down alongside the platform-like wharf, which covers three acres. Downriver at the other end, there's a dog run and a parking lot that offers the lone ground-level entrance to the park. Only a chain-link fence separates the parking lot from the rotted wooden remnants of a derelict pier.

The one section where things open up and Hargreaves could craft a more elaborate space is midway, at Piety Street, which also is where Adjaye's bridge serves as the most obvious link to Bywater and such local mainstays as Frady's, a corner market with humble but heroic po'boy and muffuletta sandwiches. Here, the curving rail spurs to the abandoned wharfs were replaced by porous asphalt strips, between which

TOP
The plan of the park knits a series of character-driven wharves together and is intended to draw locals from the Bywater, Marigny, and French Quarter neighborhoods.

INSET
A prefabricated bridge elevates pedestrians for a bit of industrial glamour.

HARGREAVES ASSOCIATES, TOP; TIMOTHY HURSLEY, BOTTOM

RIGHT
Plantings feel restrained compared to the rest of the city's storied fecundity.

are bands of native plants arranged in strokes of color. It's a focused space intended as a communal crossroads, with a hammock as well as the round picnic tables scattered beneath oak, maple, and birch trees.

The striped plantings aren't nearly as bold as in renderings, a lingering effect of elevated acidity levels in the soil imported by the contractor. The troubles related to soil quality were among the reasons for the delayed opening; even now, the park's vegetation looks sparse and strained for a warm, humid coastal city where everything else seems overgrown.

But even if the plants and trees were thriving, the main show would still be the surroundings. The river churns past on one side, masked in long stretches by fast-growing volunteer trees that emerge from alluvial soil along the riverbank and in the spring are laced with aromatic honeysuckle vines. (Kirt Rieder, ASLA, Hargreaves's principal in charge for the park, calls this stretch of the tidal zone known locally as batture "junglelike. It's mind-blowing.") Inland are the rail lines and floodwall, only a few buildings



TIMOTHY HURSLEY



ABOVE
A bridge by the architect David Adjaye was intentionally designed to be a marketable icon of the park.

beyond them tall enough to be visible. Then there's Piety Wharf, a clearing entered through blunt gates of rusted steel. The storage shed that once covered the now-open wharf is long gone except for a 122-foot-long concrete fire wall that is 40 feet high at its peak; on the far side, behind fences, a scarred tangle of piles and timber bears witness to a fire in 2009 that apparently started in a homeless encampment beneath the wharf.

"We left it as an artifact," shrugs Steve Dumez of Eskew+Dumez+Ripple, the New Orleans architecture firm that led the Reinventing the Crescent planning team. "The inspiration from the start was that this had been a working waterfront, and it

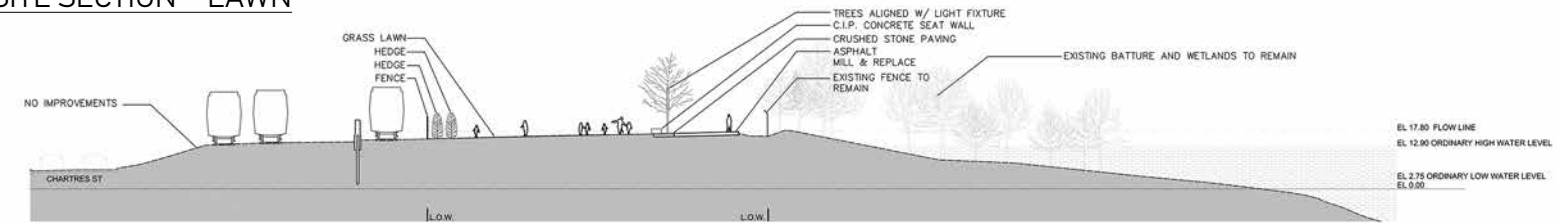
was important to recognize that heritage and build on what was there." Mary Margaret Jones, FASLA, Hargreaves's president and a senior principal, agrees. "The design needed to be robust, because it's along the Mississippi, and the existing wharfs already have that character. All that figured into our decision not to challenge the industrial context."

INEVITABLY, Crescent Park has been likened to the High Line. Usually it's in an upbeat, check-this-out sort of way ("New Orleans' version of N.Y.C.'s High Line," was *Condé Nast Traveler's* shorthand last winter). Faded infrastructure is repurposed as a must-see destination. But the analogy has also been used by skeptics

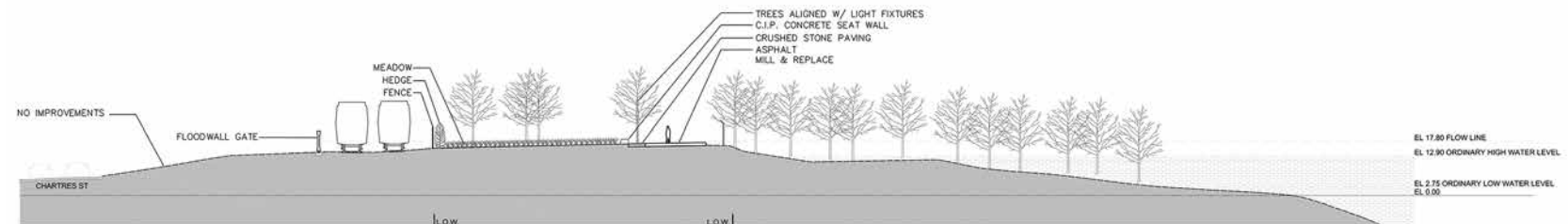
who see the park and its design aspirations as magnets for new development and for people seeking the latest chic twist to a familiar locale.

Look past the easy symbolism, though, and the comparison is a stretch. Crescent Park isn't nearly as seamless, for starters. Where the High Line is a curated progression of fine-grained sensations, at once romantically disheveled and meticulously maintained, Crescent Park feels like a collage of found parts amid an immense landscape—not just the mighty Mississippi or the tattered wooden piers, or the graffiti-scarred freight cars, but such local landmarks as a pair of large gray naval ships that are anchored just beyond park boundaries and aren't

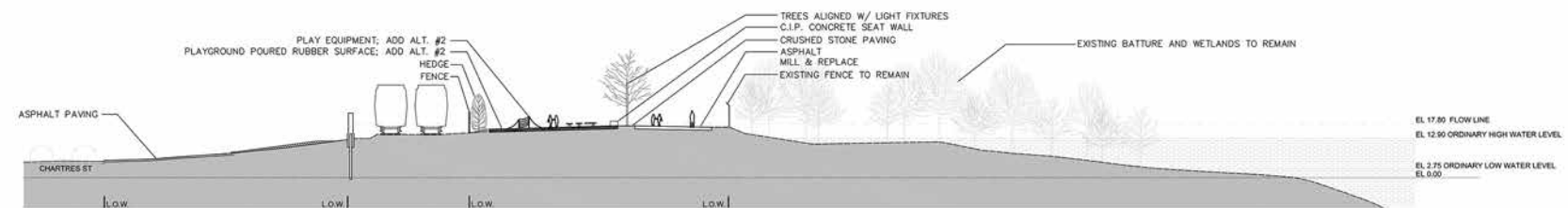
SITE SECTION – LAWN



SITE SECTION – GALLIER STREET



SITE SECTION – BATTURE



likely to be redeployed anytime soon. The signature design element for Crescent Park is Adjaye's bridge at Piety Street. Known locally as the "rusty rainbow" for the Cor-Ten steel panels that frame the arcing form, it fans up over the floodwall to land alongside the picnic area. "The arch signals transcendence," Adjaye said in an e-mailed statement, with a desire "to celebrate the city and its many triumphs." But this is a determinedly controlled celebration, given that the Cor-Ten panels lining the steep steps inside are so high that you can't look over the sides. Then you reach the peak—and instead of a 360-degree vista, there's a hemmed-in view straight ahead of the fire-scarred half of Piety Wharf and the water beyond.

"David was pretty clear-eyed about what he wanted," says Dumez, conceding that he knows people who hate the bridge as well as love it. "He desired that spatial quality of being within a contained path with the release being a rifle-shot view toward the river."

All this adds up to an overly mannered drama in a setting where structural remnants like Piety Wharf's concrete fire wall have an innate power all their own. Yes, the materiality of the bridge relates to the industrial surroundings. Yes, local boosters proudly call the bridge iconic. It still seems to try a bit too hard.

Another difference, to state the obvious, is that New Orleans is not New York.

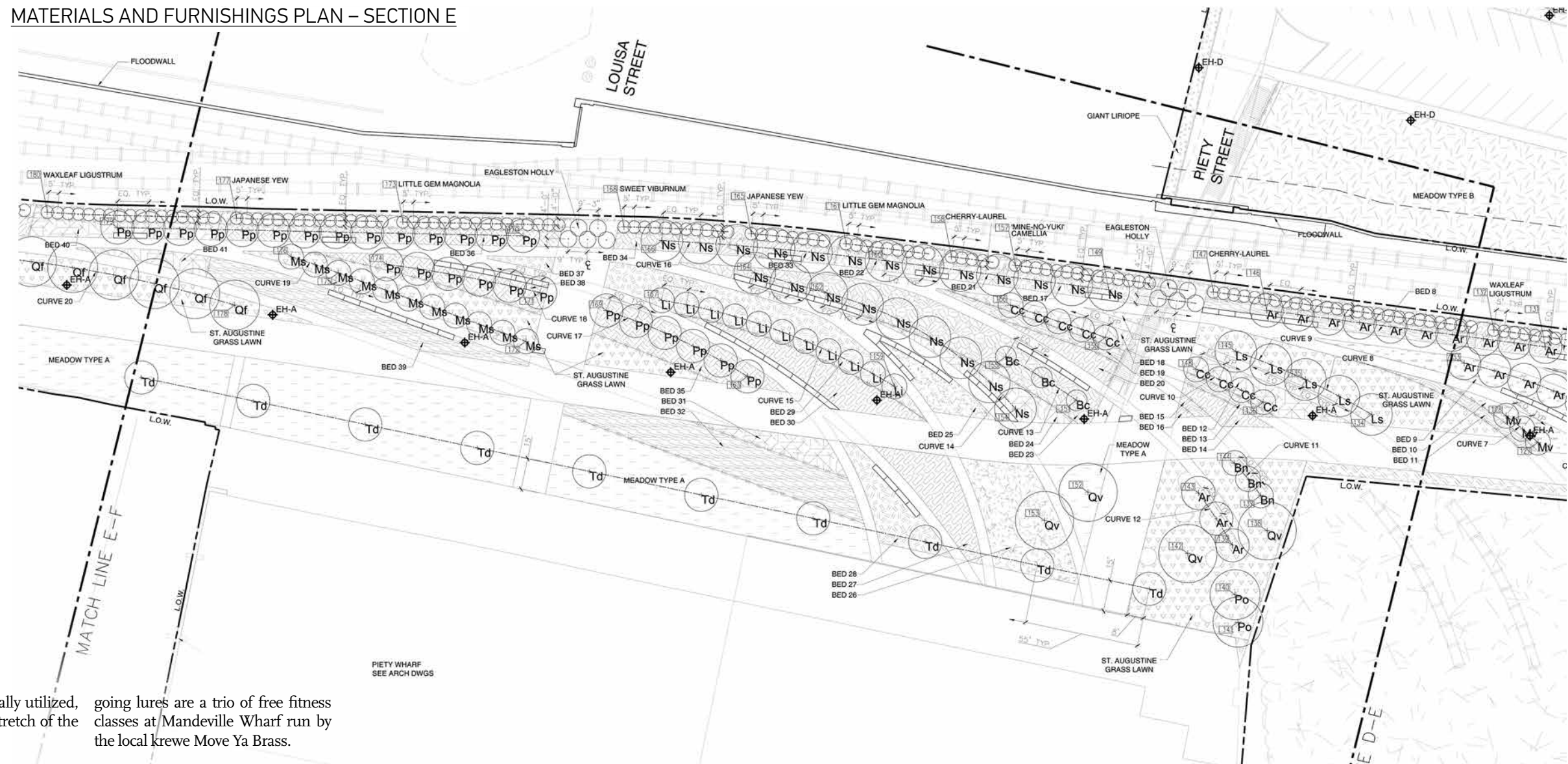
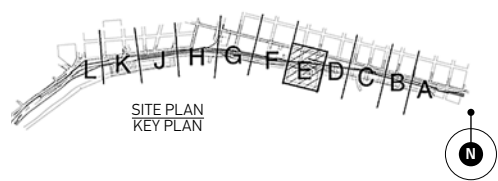
Though both landscapes are roughly the same length, the High Line has a \$3.5 million operations budget with a large maintenance staff augmented by volunteers. Crescent Park has two maintenance staff members and a contract with a landscape company to tend the gardens. New York's elevated Eden is framed by showy buildings by the likes of Zaha Hadid and Jean Nouvel, with the Brobdingnagian towers of Hudson Yards rising at the High Line's north end. The only infill project completed near Piety Bridge, Crescent View Lofts, consists of seven condominiums in two three-story buildings.

Although other projects are on the way, including a 12-unit complex next to the bridge that is being marketed

TIMOTHY HURSLEY

HARGREAVES ASSOCIATES

MATERIALS AND FURNISHINGS PLAN – SECTION E



as Piety on the Park, fears that Crescent Park might be a Trojan horse for gentrification seem to have faded. Airbnb is a more pressing concern of local activists; many of the cheerfully ramshackle houses in Bywater and Marigny have been purchased by affluent nonresidents who treat them as second homes and rent them out for much of the year.

“Crescent Park abetted a reinvestment movement that was already under way” rather than serving to kick-start gentrification, says Richard Campanella, a geography professor in the Tulane University School of Architecture and the author of such books as *Cityscapes of New Orleans*. A former neighborhood resident, he puts the park in context by switching to local slang: “Crescent Park is *lagniappe*, a little something extra.... On a beautiful Saturday morning

you’ll see it enthusiastically utilized, but not packed by any stretch of the imagination.”

What the linear space has become, for now, is a neighborhood park with a spectacular location. You see people strolling deep in conversation, parents teaching toddlers to use their bikes, young adults lurching at the picnic tables or sharing bottles of wine later in the day. Piety Bridge is popular with people working out, doing their best to jog up and over, back and forth.

Not only does Crescent Park lack the crowds associated with the High Line, or such high-profile waterfront esplanades as San Francisco’s Embarcadero, it’s free of the programming that fills other recent urban spaces in other U.S. cities. Though both wharves are wired for large events, the only on-

going lures are a trio of free fitness classes at Mandeville Wharf run by the local krewe Move Ya Brass.

Part of the reason for avoiding large events was a conscious decision not to rattle neighbors who had complained at meetings about the traffic and noise impacts that might result from concerts or festivals. But the low-key draws that are offered instead have struggled. A morning coffee truck in the picnic area did almost no business. Nor did a cart on summer evenings offering sno-balls, New Orleans’s take on shaved ice.

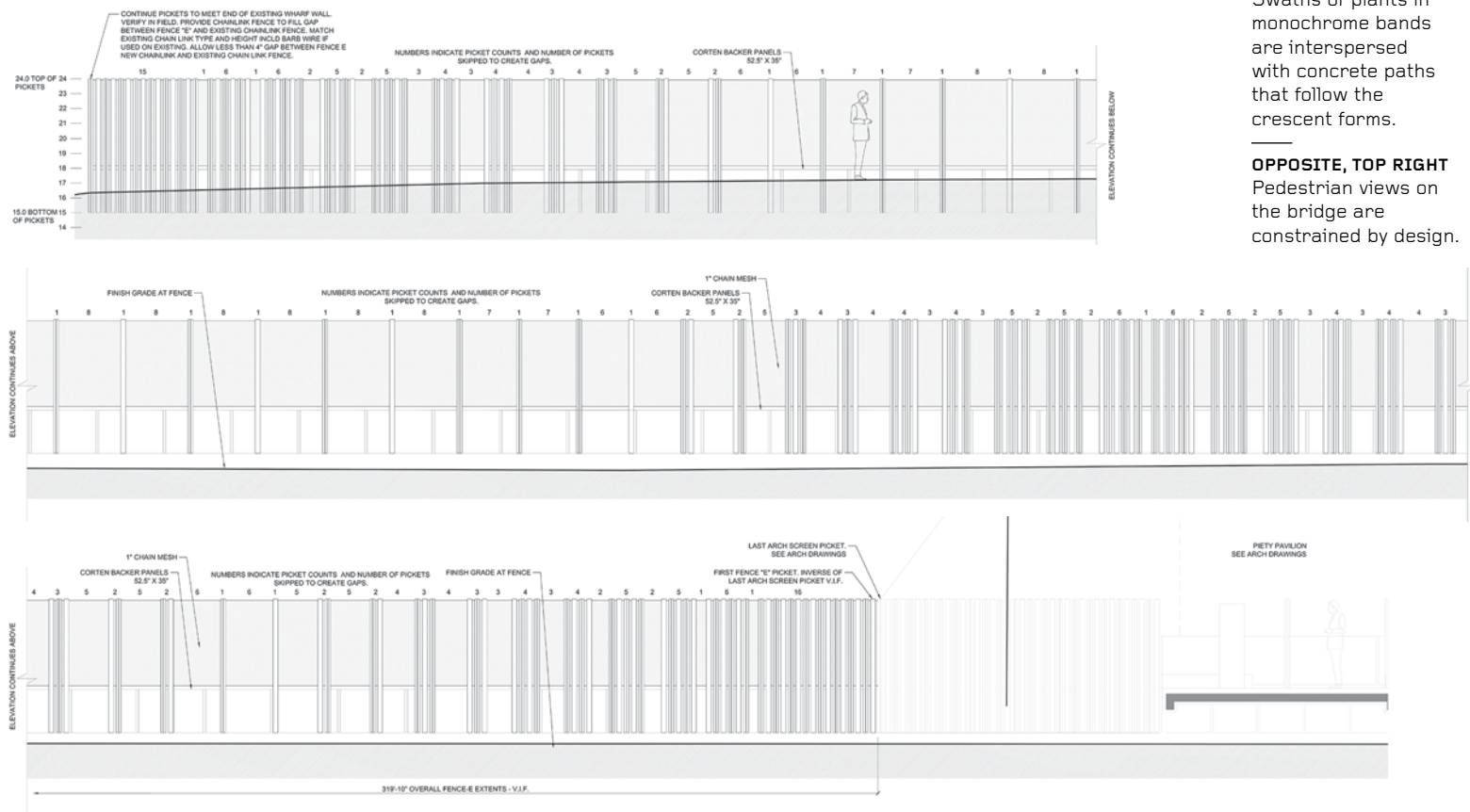
“We live in a city saturated with events and markets on the weekends,” says KC Guidry, who manages Crescent Park for the French Market Corporation, an autonomous city body that was selected for the job when larger operators showed little



ABOVE
Butia capitata (South American jelly palm) and *Liriope muscari* (big blue lilyturf) are among the plants featured in the gardens found midway through Crescent Park.



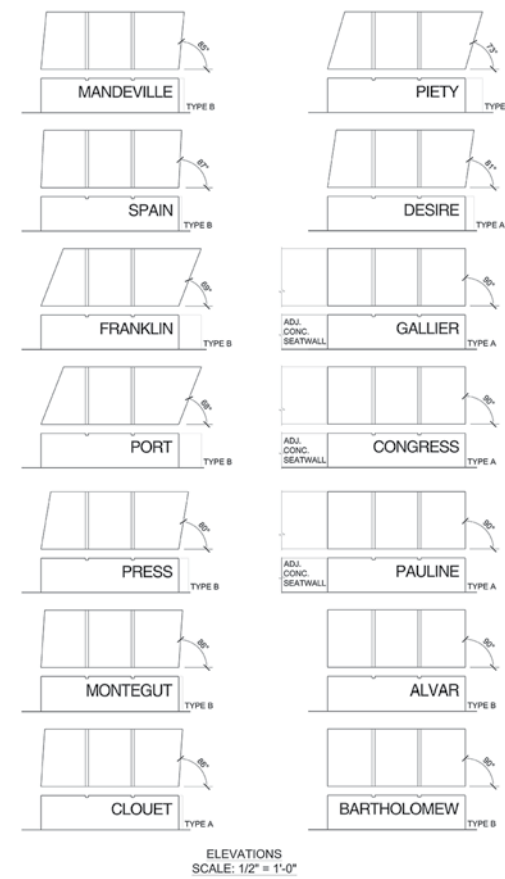
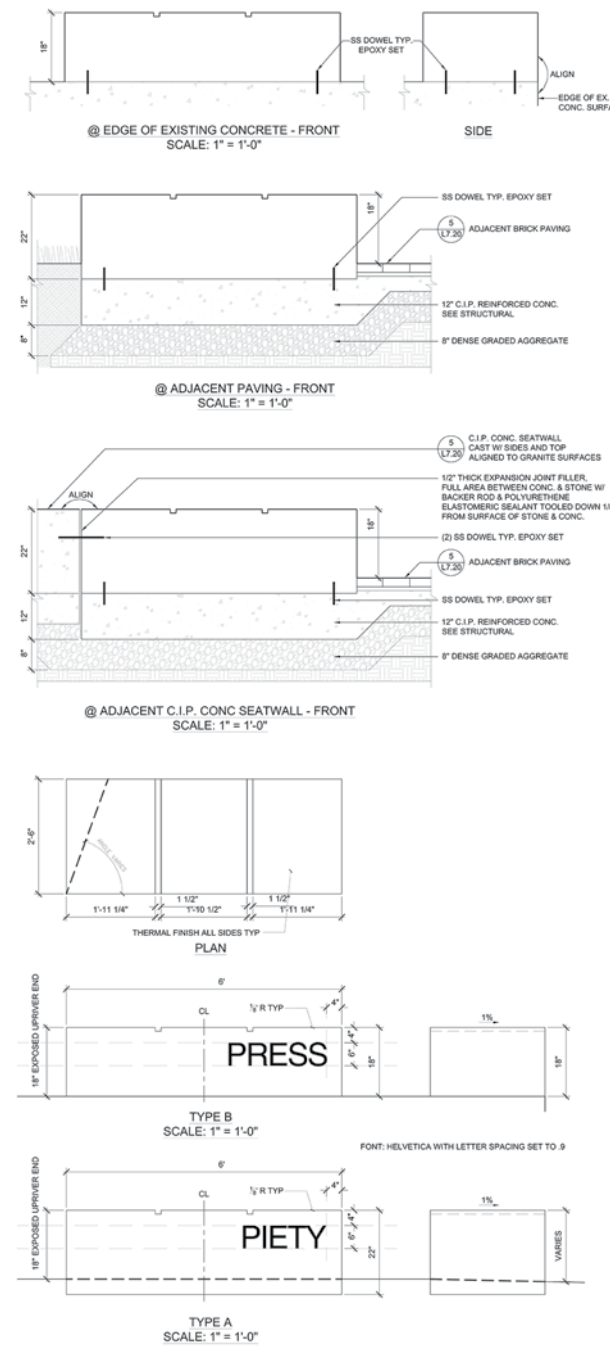
PIETY WHARF FENCE (PARTIAL DETAIL)



ABOVE
Swaths of plants in monochrome bands are interspersed with concrete paths that follow the crescent forms.

OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT
Pedestrian views on the bridge are constrained by design.

GRANITE BENCHES



interest. "The thing that's hard is that people say they *want* these things, but getting them to come over the bridge is difficult."

Soon, there might be more options.

City Hall and the Port of New Orleans last fall worked out a deal to transfer a pair of wharves alongside

Crescent Park to city ownership so that they can become publicly accessible. A full makeover is years away, with no telling what form any new public spaces might take, but the short-term goal is clear walkways that will connect Crescent Park to the Moonwalk, a public waterfront space that leads down to Jackson Square in the French Quarter.

The Moonwalk dates to 1975, and it was the first place where a regular person could stand alongside the Mississippi on this stretch of the river. A decade or so later it was joined by Woldenberg Park, adjacent to the city's aquarium toward the convention center. Though both spaces are popular and have been recently renovated, they're fairly generic clearings

RIGHT
Part of a challenged plan to revitalize the Crescent, the park is coming into its own as a destination, slowly.

that offer benches and panoramas but not much else.

The idea of Reinventing the Crescent was to push New Orleans beyond the tried and true, to use the waterfront as a tool “for attracting new talent in a new economy driven by information, media, and technology,” to quote the 2008 plan. This raw global ambition is part of why the effort foundered in a historically proud though troubled city, why neighborhoods were wary. But the comfortable success of Crescent Park has exerted a slow gravitational pull that helps other elements begin to fall into place.

“When you build a thing like this, nobody wants to go all-in at first,” Guidry says. “You have to be patient.”

Despite the loose ends and half-realized visions, Crescent Park feels right for New Orleans, a city where tattered shingles or stoops add to the shrugging ambience. If the tension between ambitions and reality is inescapable, so is the pleasure of a wholly new landscape that takes the complexity of its surroundings as a given.

There’s an only-in-New-Orleans phrase, “neutral ground,” that applies to street medians and the like. Figuratively, at least for now, Crescent Park is neutral ground as well—between locals and tourists, recently arrived hipsters and deep-rooted residents, people who want a photogenic spot for selfies and people who just want to be alone. In today’s America, stratified and suspicious, that’s a modest triumph in itself. ●

JOHN KING, HONORARY ASLA, IS AN URBAN DESIGN CRITIC FOR THE *SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE* AND LIVES IN BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA.

Project Credits

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MARK BIENVENU

