

Play With a Purpose: Newly-Constructed NYC Playscape Serves as Example for Urban Flood Zone Landscapes

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Capping the redevelopment of Battery Park at the southern tip of Manhattan in New York City, the Battery Playscape opened to rave reviews on an unusually warm December day in a ribbon cutting ceremony attended by a cadre of political and community leaders—and many happy children. The Playscape is a unique playground for a unique community, and delivers an inclusive, creative, and educational destination for Lower Manhattan residents as well as visitors to the historic park. Three times the size of the former playground, the Playscape offers residents of and visitors to Lower Manhattan’s Community District 1 an open and engaging 1.5 acres of green space inspired and informed by the local ecosystem.

The Playscape construction was managed by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (NYCDPR) with support from Hill International, Inc., designed by BSK Architects and Tribeca’s own Starr Whitehouse Landscape Architects and Planners. It was built by contractor Paul J. Scariano, Inc. (PJS), and represents the culmination of years of careful planning, community involvement, environmentally responsive design, and high-quality construction.

Coordination, Inspection, and Oversight:

Hill’s Resident Engineer Salim Short, CCM, managed the project. Senior Management oversight was provided by Project



Director Gene McGarry, who has worked on NYCDPR projects in New York City for more than 20 years.

“The Playscape is an example of what you can do with a team of dedicated and talented stakeholders. From the leadership and financial support of the Battery Conservancy to the global team of designers and vendors, everybody bought in to the project’s vision,” Short said of the project.

In addition to the advocacy of Conservancy President Warrie Price, Short also cited the help of NYCDPR Commissioner Gabrielle Fialkoff, Lower Manhattan Development Corporation Chair Holly Leicht, Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, Council Member Margaret Chin, and Manhattan Community

Board Member Chair Tammy Meltzer for their support, funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) for their contributions to the Playscape. Says Short, “New York is a multi-stakeholder environment, and coordinating among and between different groups and keeping everyone informed and up-to-date on project progress is always critical to keeping work moving.”

The unique character of the Playscape—from its historic location to its vulnerability to extreme weather events to the involvement of the community—necessitated a project team of exceptional depth and breadth, with vendors producing components from as far away as Germany. “Our primary role on the project was construction management and inspection,” explains Short. “So, that meant overseeing the work of five different designers, the performance of PJS, and 18 separate subcontractors, and the products and materials of eight different suppliers. It was hectic, sure, but it was worth it.” Short and the Hill team also ensured that the project finished on time and under its budget of \$16 million.



Resiliency and Biodiversity:

Playscape’s biodiversity will likely serve as an exemplar for urban flood zone landscapes around the world. Located at the promontory of Manhattan Island where the Hudson River meets New York Harbor, the playground is sited on low-lying land and is vulnerable to storm surges and flooding. So, the Battery Playscape was designed after Superstorm Sandy and is built for resiliency, with the capacity to hold 30,000 gallons of stormwater through its Stormwater Detention Tank.

In addition, many key features of the Playscape are built high above the flood line, minimizing any damage to the equipment during storm events. Other resiliency features of the award-winning landscape design of the Playscape include impermeable paving to direct surface runoff to rain gardens and plants selected for their high salt tolerance. Short explains, “NYCDPR knows climate change is going to impact New York, so they’ve committed to building green infrastructure into everything they do, as Commissioner Fialkoff said. ‘The Playscape might be the most high-profile example of that goal.’”

Play with a Purpose

For children visiting the park, of course, the opportunity to learn and play on the park’s many unique features and equipment is the most important consideration. The Playscape



features five “zones” - Bluff with five granite slides; Riverbed and Marsh with salt-tolerant gardens, elevated tree houses, and sand/water play area; and Dune and Meadow presenting ShowBox, the first improv/puppet theater in a New York City playground.

Each zone reflects its own typology, with custom play equipment and structures and plantings. These zones encourage play while also educating children on the unique ecologies of marshlands and rocky bluffs. “The features here are amazing,” says Short. “They come from around the world, and a lot are one-of-a-kind.” Specific features include:

- » Five granite slides in the Bluffs Area including the Baby Slide, Medium Slide, and High Slide.
- » A Synthetic Carpet Bowl with a Shotcrete + Poured in Place Surfacing Foundation.
- » Buried “Fossils” for children to discover in the Water+Sand Play Area.
- » The highest ADA-accessible point in a New York City park in the Bluff zone, with striking view of the harbor and the Statue of Liberty.
- » Poured in Place Safety Surfaces throughout.
- » Drainage features in the Riverbed Zone.
- » Architectural walls representing “cliffs” in the Bluff zone.
- » A climbing wall of pre-cast Ultra High-Performance Concrete components.
- » Stamped metal shade structures in the Bluffs.

At the opening ceremony, Short and an audience of residents, donors, NYCDPR personnel, and other team members and visitors enjoyed hot chocolate and a live band while dozens of children put the Playscape’s new features to the test. As the ribbon was cut before the granite slides of the Bluff zone to cheers and applause, the true proof of the success of the Playscape project was evident all around the dignitaries: children climbing, running, rolling, and jumping throughout the park. 🦋





About the Author

Salim Short, CCM, Resident Engineer at Hill International, Inc. has helped to deliver resiliency, recovery, transit, and parks projects throughout the New York City metro area. On his assignments, Salim's responsibilities include project management, resident engineering, contract management, inspection, and reporting. He has been with Hill International, Inc. in the firm's New York office since 2015.

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