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SEATTLE'S GAME-CHANGING WATERFRONT PLAN

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“WHAT DISTINGUISHES OUR WORK AND OUR APPROACH IS THAT WE’RE RATIONAL AND PRAGMATIC AT THE SAME TIME THAT WE SEEK POETIC WONDER AND UNUSUAL EXPERIENCES. WHEN YOU PUT THOSE QUALITIES TOGETHER, YOU CAN DO GREAT THINGS.”

—JAMES CORNER,
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

New York City-based landscape architect James Corner, founder of James Corner Field Operations, stands in front of the new Elliot Bay Seawall, currently under construction. Over the past six years, Corner and his multidisciplinary design team have collaborated on the Seattle waterfront project with a number of other firms, including the Miller Hull Partnership, Magnusson Klemencic Associates, Berger Partnership, Mithun, and Schemata Workshop. The project includes a new surface-level street, expanded parks and open space, and improved connections to the bay. »

JAMES CORNER FIELD OPERATIONS

Time and time again, grand infrastructure projects have proven their ability to capture people's imaginations and help them collectively envision the future of their cities. Consider San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, Chicago's Millennium Park, and New York City's beloved High Line. Seattle's ongoing waterfront revitalization project is the latest to join the ranks of high-caliber projects that strengthen urban identity through iconic and inspiring design.

Designed by James Corner Field Operations, the New York City-based firm responsible for the High Line (the elevated linear park developed atop an abandoned railway viaduct), the Seattle waterfront project eventually will stretch along Elliot Bay from Pioneer Square to Belltown, forging a stronger connection between downtown and the water's edge. The long-awaited removal of the Alaskan Way Viaduct—currently scheduled for 2018—and the rebuilding of the Elliot Bay Seawall, both seismically unstable, will open up more than 20 acres of people-friendly public space that will, upon completion around 2022, include a pedestrian promenade, sweeping elevated pathways, and a new habitat beach. Large works commissioned from renowned artists such as Ann Hamilton and Buster Simpson will act as constellation sites along the waterfront, drawing people in and through the new spaces. In a city facing immense growth and development pressures, this commitment to preserving the waterfront—one of Seattle's most valuable assets—as a civic park, one meant to be shared by the entire community, demonstrates that thoughtful design can positively influence and shape the life of a city.

Six years after the project officially launched, much of the conceptual design work is now complete, and various sites along the corridor are either under construction or slated for further refinement. Like many long-haul, large-scale projects, the vision for the waterfront is grand and meant to be implemented over time.

In the meantime, Corner's team and Friends of Waterfront Seattle (the nonprofit partner to the City of Seattle) have enacted a series of interventions to develop the corridor into a lively and dynamic public realm during construction. In 2012,

the city peppered Pier 62/63 with movable yellow lawn chairs. More recently, they've staged waterside games, activities, and performances. Corner calls these "quick win" projects: although temporary, they bring people to the water's edge and give them unique opportunities to watch the site evolve. "All of a sudden, the piers begin to be social, and people like the idea that the waterfront can be engaging and interactive. The chairs were a very cheap, fast investment, but a transformative one in terms of building a sense of positive aspiration for the project."

Building a community of people who truly care about a public project is critical to its long-term success. "Creating parks costs a certain amount of money, but even more citizen investment is required to maintain and operate these places," Corner says. "It's important to have people who are passionate and committed to a project even after it's built and opened. They become stewards for its upkeep." »



COURTESY THE MILLER HULL PARTNERSHIP



ABOVE: Pike Place MarketFront, designed by Seattle architecture firm Miller Hull, is expected to finish construction in early 2017. The expansion of the historic Pike Place Market will include a bustling public plaza, retail space, low-income housing for seniors, a neighborhood center, and a connection to the waterfront via the proposed Overlook Walk. **BELOW:** Public amenities are abundant in the plan, ranging from the whimsical (slides and porch swings along the walkways) to the functional (protected bike lanes with pedestrian crossings).





GRAY caught up with Corner during a Seattle site visit this spring to discuss his vision for the waterfront and the value of broad urban redesign.

What excites you most about the waterfront's future?

The socialization that will occur here. You'll see mixtures of people from all cultures, all ages, and all economic groups out sharing, enjoying, and participating in life at the water's edge—ultimately, that's what it is all about.

How do you decide which elements of a site's history to integrate into a redesign?

When we worked on the High Line, the first thing that I thought was "This is a magical site. Whatever we design here should not kill that charm but amplify it."

We tried to grow something that was authentic. In Seattle, we've picked up certain local elements—the views and vistas, the atmosphere, the sense of scale—and put them into the design. We're attempting more than just a representational invocation of history; we're not saying, "Because it's rusty, let's work with rust," or "Because it's built on pilings, let's use pilings." We're reaching for a more nuanced use of characteristics that are latent in the site itself. For example, we're not trying to represent Seattle weather; we're trying to amplify the effects of the weather by using materials that reflect in interesting ways when they're wet.

Tell me about some of the most intriguing features of the project.

There's the Overlook Walk, which connects Pike Place Market to the Aquarium and waterfront and was inspired by the Olympic Sculpture Park, with its dramatic pathways and terraces marching down to the water. I'd also point to the cantilevered sidewalk on top of the seawall, which is embedded with glass blocks that allow light to penetrate into the fish-migration corridor below.

I'm excited about the reflective kiosks, designed in collaboration with nArchitects, which feature large, faceted mirror panels that reflect sky, water, weather, people, and the city. Taken together, the redesign of the waterfront will create a whole new face for Seattle, a "front porch" where the city will meet the bay in a dramatically public and convivial way.

How do we implement long-term visions for our cities that are far-sighted yet also adaptable to their ever-changing nature?

To weather the pressures of time, a design needs to make very strong moves. Something about it must capture people's imaginations and build enough excitement that they say, "Those elements, *those* ideas—they're the things

we cannot lose. They're essential to the project." If a design doesn't have logical, coherent, compelling elements, it can quickly unravel.

There is a lot of talk in Seattle right now about growth, livability, and the city's future. What role will the waterfront play in creating a more resilient and sustainable Seattle?

It's recently been documented—in reports by the Urban Land Institute and the American Planning Association, for example—that investments in new public spaces—especially those that reshape an entire district or city, over and over again prove themselves to be well spent. In New York, Mayor Bloomberg's philosophy was that if you fund big, transformative projects, the economic yield you get from new residents, new businesses, and new visitors can go into the public coffers and be used to improve other programs in the city, such as libraries and social services. We called it a virtuous cycle, and you can see it playing out in the same way on the Seattle waterfront. Not only will the redesign have myriad social, ecological, and experiential benefits, but it will create significant economic gains—which can in turn be used to fix the city. ✱



Just south of the aquarium, Union Street Pier will replace the current Waterfront Park Pier, offering a larger public open space with an expressive water feature that, when empty, can double as an amphitheater for events and performances.

OPPOSITE FROM LEFT: The rebuilt Pier 62/63 will provide flexible-use green space and make room for activities such as impromptu sports and live concerts. A floating dock will provide moorage for visitors arriving by boat.

“WE’RE TRYING TO DESIGN, FURNISH, AND EQUIP THESE SPACES IN WAYS THAT ENCOURAGE SOCIALIZATION. THEY ARE NOT INTENDED TO BE JUST NICE SPACES; THEY’RE DESIGNED TO BE STAGES WHERE LIFE CAN TAKE PLACE ON THE WATERFRONT.”

—JAMES CORNER, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT