Staging Riis

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Landscape Architecture,

Harvard University Graduate School of Design

by

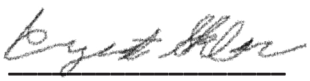
August Sklar

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

May 2025

The author hereby grants Harvard University permission to reproduce and distribute copies of this Thesis, in whole or in part, for educational purposes.



Student



Thesis Advisor







Staging Riis





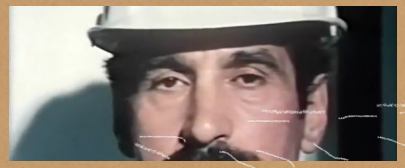


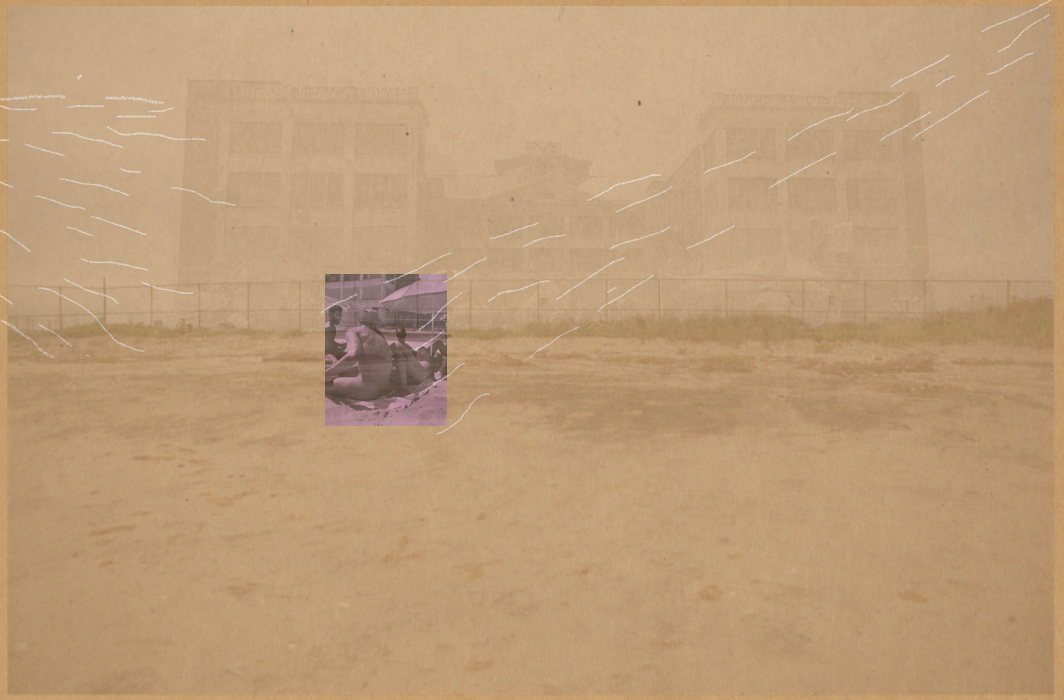


By August Sklar
(MLA 1)
Advised By Danielle
Choi

Staging Riis explores the evolution of "The People's Beach," a compact swath of shoreline at the end of Jacob Riis Park that queer New Yorkers have gone to since 1941. For nearly a century, this fragment of coast has been a public queer refuge, perpetually on the brink of erasure. This project stages Riis for the next century, as a site of coastal and cultural resilience.

The entwined calamities of swelling sea levels and rising persecution of queer people have, climatically and culturally, eroded the site. The existing and proposed gray infrastructures facilitate this erosion within a linear regulatory regime. Staging Riis, incrementally builds on the queer tradition of cultivating piecemeal spaces through acts of appropriation and deconstruction of existing systems. Through time, existing infrastructures serve as building blocks for hybridized systems that accept change as a means of resistance.







To begin to understand the tectonics of queer space, we must first understand queerness as uncategorizable sexual identity, one that extends to a culture that cannot conform to heterosexual normativity. The late theorist José Esteban Muñoz sees queerness not as a fixed identify in the here and now, but as fleeting moments in the then and there. Queerness is thus transmitted covertly to avoid being vulnerable to attack. Eve Sedgwick defines queerness as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning..." (8, Sedgwick)



The People's Beach has been a queer space since 1941. This is an anomaly.



Pier 51

Image Credit: Shelley Seccombe

This is an anomaly because Within the history of NYC, queer spaces do not last. They are capitalistically unproductive failing infrastructures, that become appropriated by the people. Once their value is seen beyond those seeking refuge on the margins, they become developed through official means. They rapidly shape shift in a political system bent on surveillance and are forced to move on in our capitalist system.

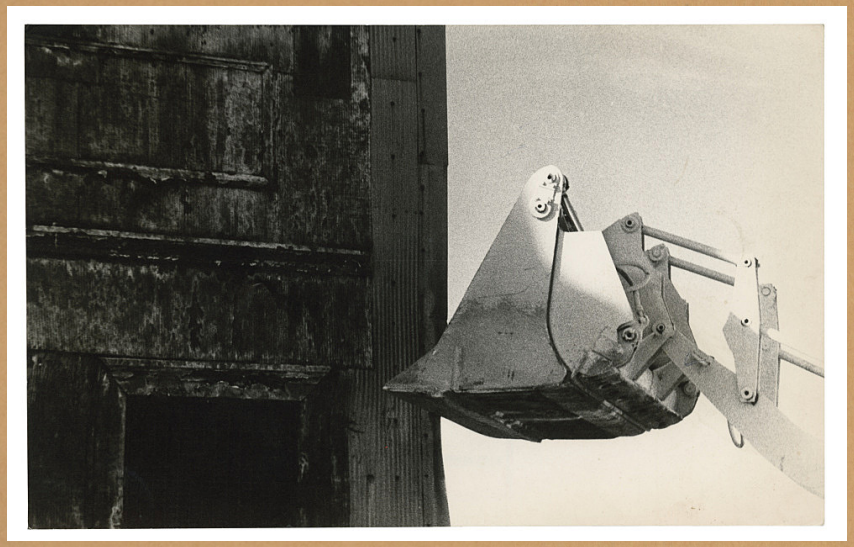




Image Credit: Alvin Baltrop



The Piers



The Christopher Street Piers

1



West Side Elevated Line

2

Christopher Street Piers, are a Queer Cruising Spot

1960's (ish)

The Abandoned Piers are Adapted and Reused

West Side Elevated Line Abandoned

1980

New York's abandoned industrial sites turned queer enclaves, like The Piers and the West Side Line, were ungovernable. With the decay of their physical and social structure came a relinquishment of control and an abstraction of function.

1 Alvin Baltrop

2 Joel Sternfeld

As Jack Halberstam has argued, artists like Gordon Matta-Clark found refuge in appropriating these failing infrastructures to create spatial collages.



Gordon Matta-Clark Constructing *Days End*

But these spaces were developed into what we now know as Hudson River Park, and the High Line.

"Gordon Matta-Clark: Anarchitect", The Bronk Museum



Photo by Hudson River Park Organization

Christopher Street Piers, are a Queer Cruising Spot

1960's (ish)

The Abandoned Piers are Adapted and Reused

2001

Piers Shutdown

2003

Hudson River Park Opens



West Side Elevated Line Abandoned

1980

2009

X

The High Line Opens

Image by Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro



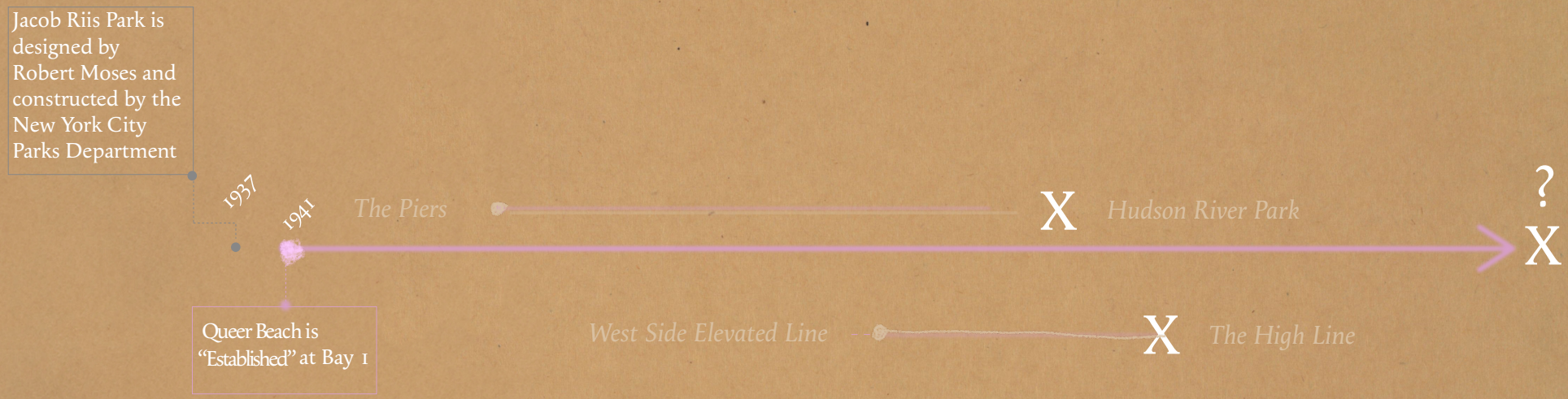
What was gained are public parks. Functional, open, regulated, civic spaces, that follows the rules of the culture it is most controlled by. A culture of heterosexual respectability.



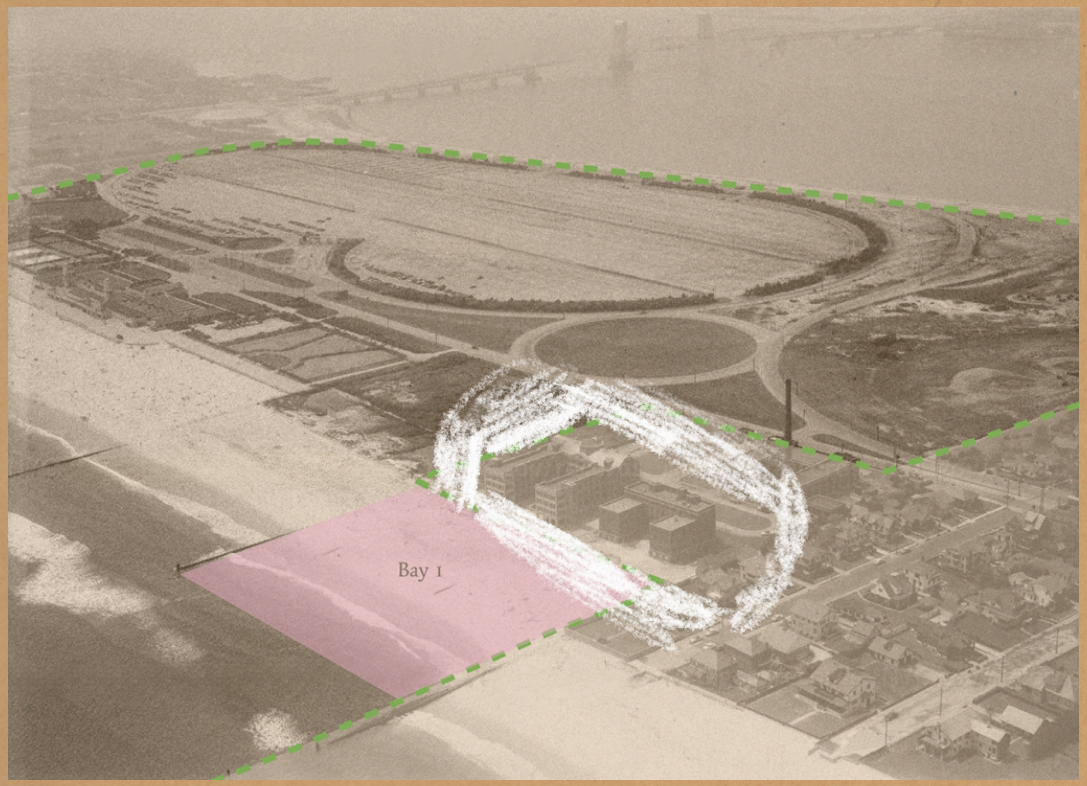
The Piers — X — *Hudson River Park*

West Side Elevated Line — X — *The High Line*

What has been lost is queer refuge.



Why is Riis a rare example of a queer space that has lasted since 1941?



Neponsit Hospital

Riis is far away from the city center and has for awhile housed derelict and undesirable infrastructure. It is flanked by the worn-down timber groins that designate Bay 1 and pressed against a now vacant lot, which was once the site of the Neponsit Beach Hospital, constructed in 1916 as a tuberculosis sanatorium and abandoned in 1998. It was later enveloped by Jacob Riis Park in 1937.

The beach in front of the hospital was claimed by queer beach-goers and activists. Its outward undesirability was a tool for thwarting unwanted outside attention.



G.L.I.T.S. Founder Ceyenne Doroshow

In 2022 the trans advocacy organization G.L.I.T.S. submitted a bid to formalize the space as a community land trust. But instead developers became interested in the land. The hospital building was demolished to make way for the construction of a playground. The demolition of the Neponsit Beach Hospital represented a cultural erasure of the queer community and brought the future of the site into question.

Photo by Chris Bernsten

Experts say rapid erosion on shorelines disrupts currents, creating the dangerous conditions the boys faced before they disappeared into the water. The Army Corps' ongoing work to build new jetties and bolster the shoreline along the city-owned Rockaway beaches farther east contributed, at least in part, to the quick disappearance of sand at Riis Beach, according to agency spokesperson Hector Mosely.



Bay *1, 2025*

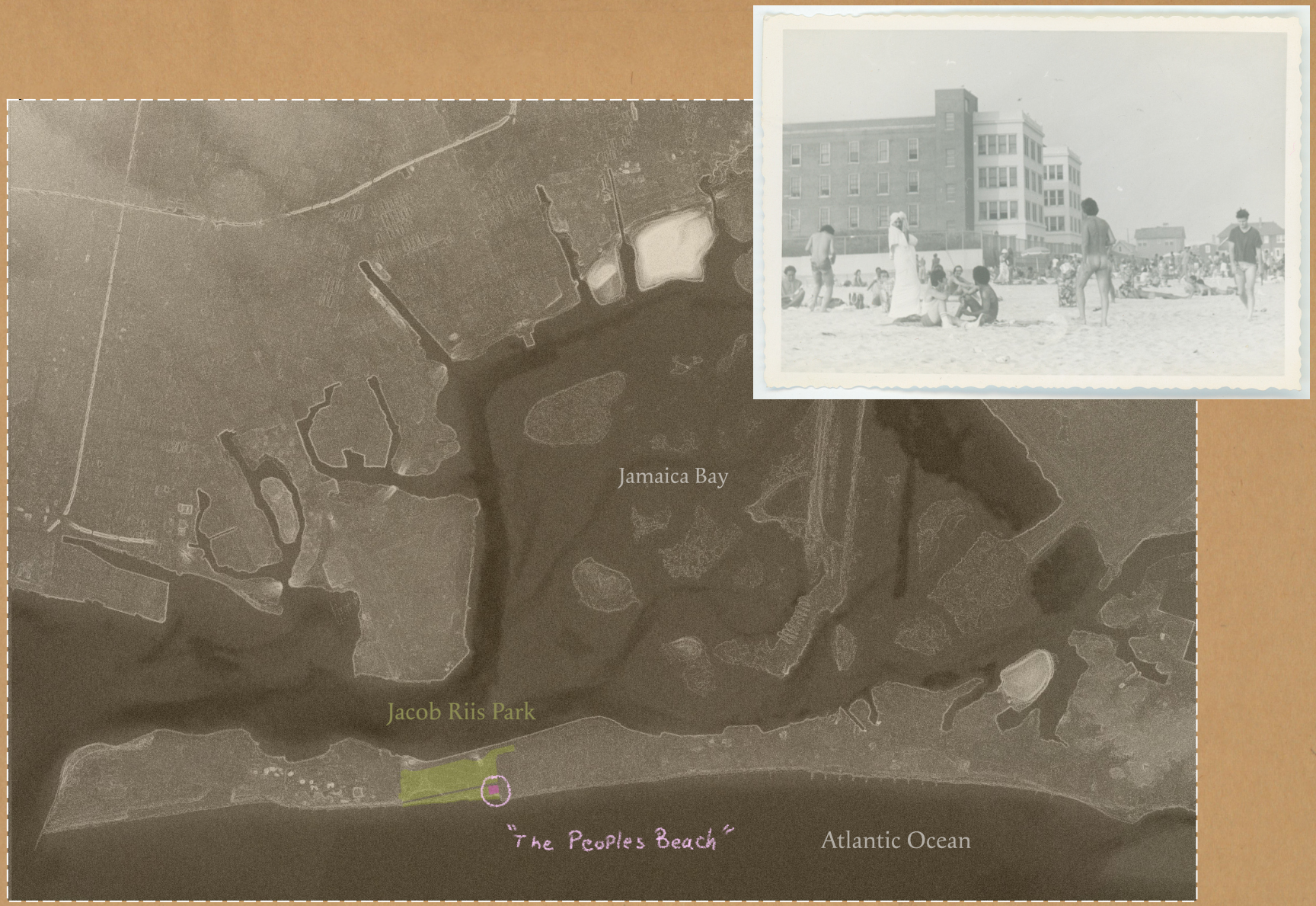
Currently, the playground project is stalled. Bay 1 and the adjoining lot remain in a state of destitution. Dangerous conditions caused by erosion on this portion of the beach, caused in part by jetties installed by the Army Corp of Engineers on the adjacent city-owned beach has resulted in Gateway National Recreation Area's decision to indefinitely close Bay 1 due to "dangerous neglect."



Riis
National Park Service

Army Corp Jetties

Rockaway Beach
NYC Parks Department



The Rockaway Peninsula

Image Credit: Richard Peckinpaugh

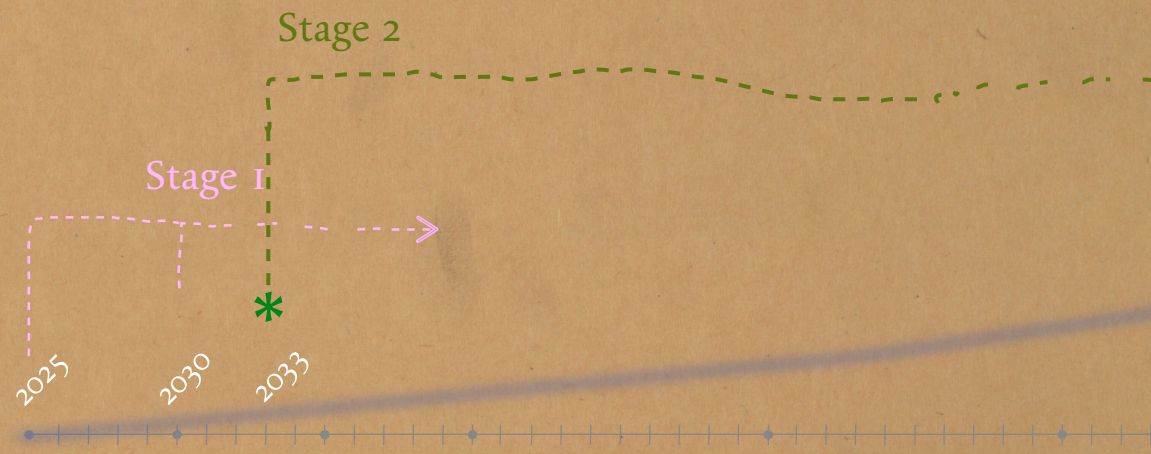
How do we carve out our space in the face of climatic and cultural erosion?

Staging Riis

Dune Dance
2025 - 2030 (ish)



Decon
Past into Fragr
2033 - 20



Excess and Overflow

2070 - 2100



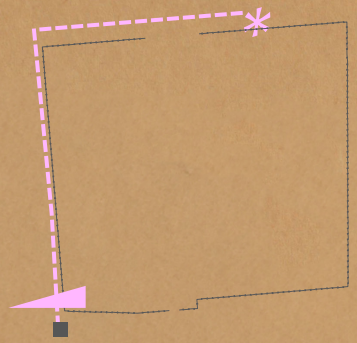


*

Dune Dance

2025 - 2030 (ish)



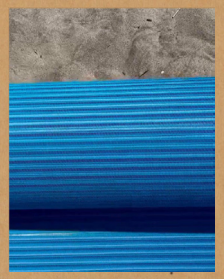


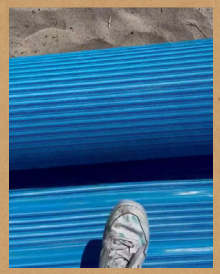
Dune Dance

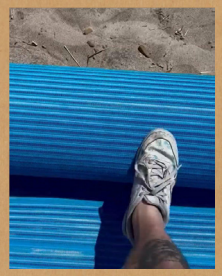
2025 - 2030 (ish)

We're at the concrete boardwalk. The sand that used to climb the steps has been loosely formalized into a ramp. It is laid over the existing structure and hugged with an aggregate rip-rap made of materials gleaned from the vacant lot, which is now an Army Corp staging ground. Their stock-piles are our material pallet.

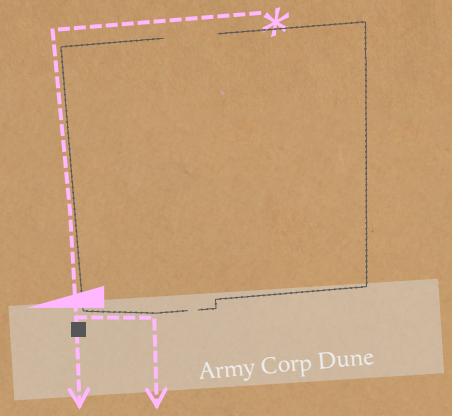
This ramp is built on the existing effort of local stewards in 2024 who created a more accessible entrance to Bay 1. The activist beach-goers lay their blue accessibility mats over the ramp, which lay over the steps.





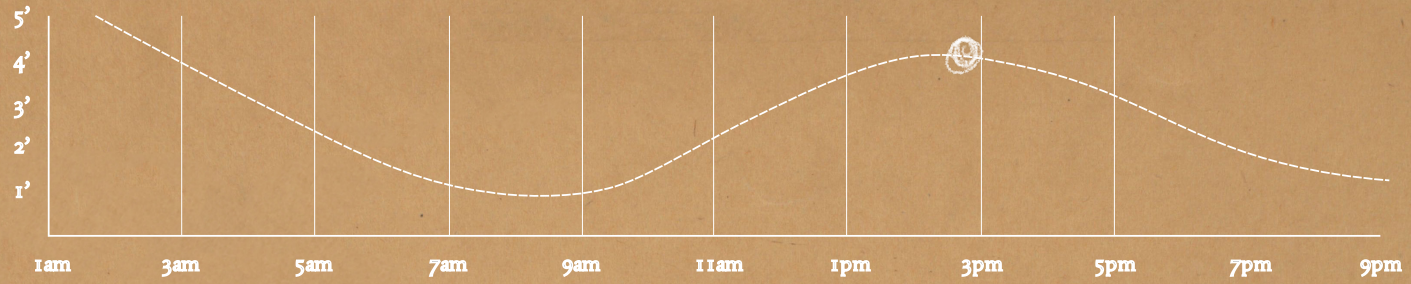






A desire path gradually forms from our collective will to disobey the dune and its preconceived order. It emerges from the assistance of treading feet, tamped-down planting, digging, the clearing of its internal structure, and the eroding forces of the wind and the sea. Gradually we cut the dune.







The armour stones that make up the structure of the dune become exposed. Informal nooks emerge. At low tide we can inhabit these crevices, and at high-tide we ascend.





We glean Bay 1's worm timber piles that were exhumed by the Army Corp. We make them into terraces on the dune.





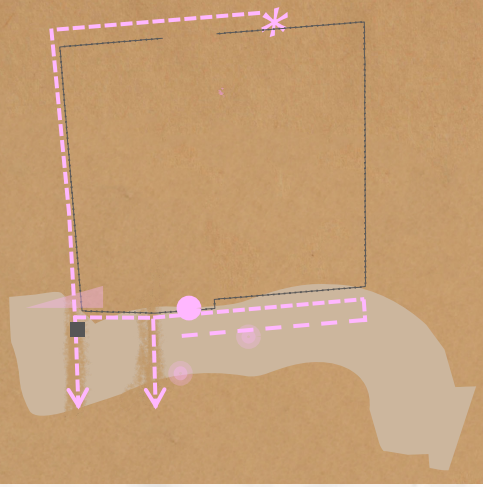
Then, it is 2027. As storms intensify and claim more of the coast, there is a growing determination to claim more space. We press against the fence line of the lot. The space becomes too tight, so we begin to break through.

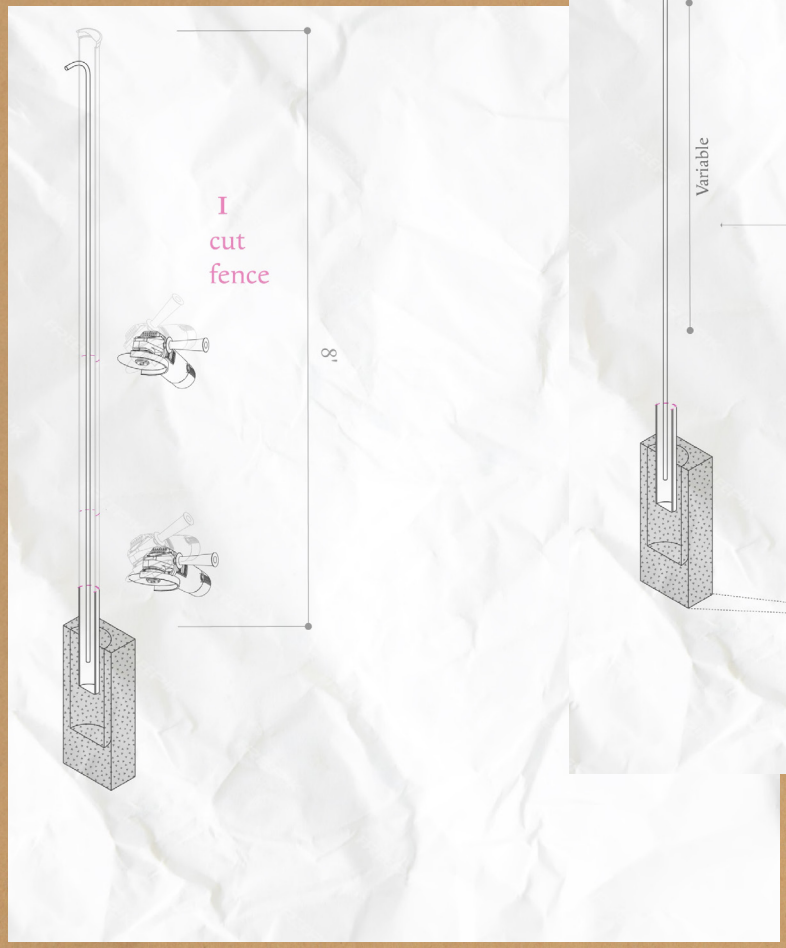


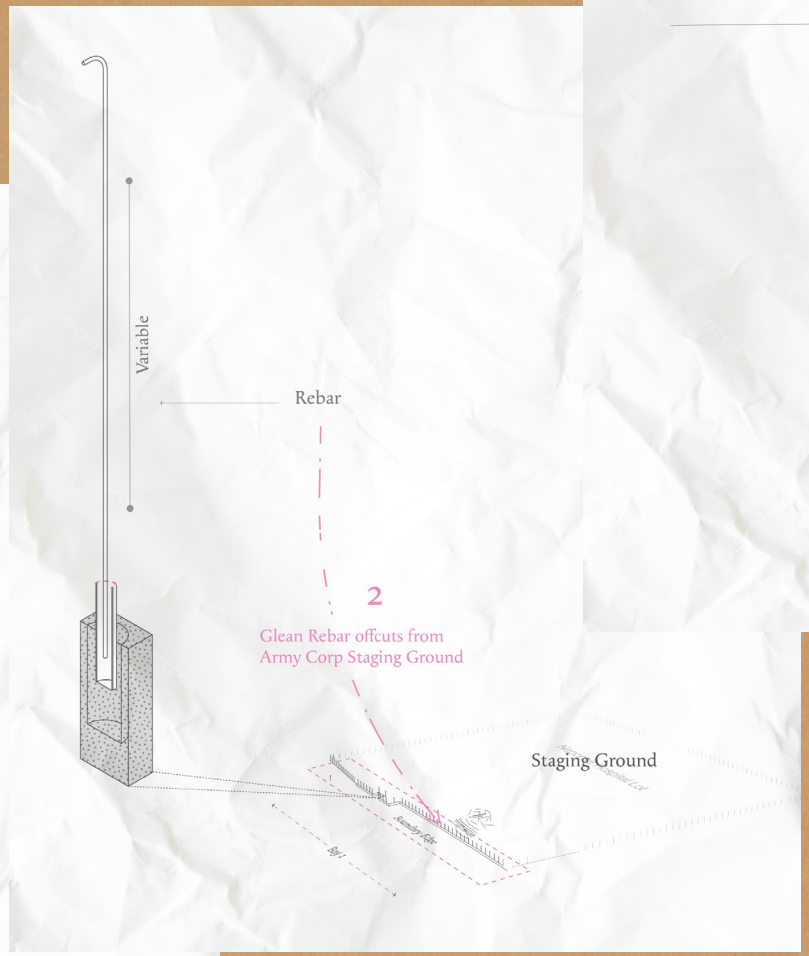
We look to the past through the history of the fence, an infrastructure that has historically been disobeyed and bent to our desires. In the 1950s, the Neponsit hospital transformed into a home for the elderly and contained its patients in a courtyard on the edge of its foundation. The permeability and low-grade quality of the chain-link enabled a porous relationship between beach-goers and the elderly. It has been said that the queer beach goers were known to slip cigarettes through the fence, to the elderly who reached for something more.

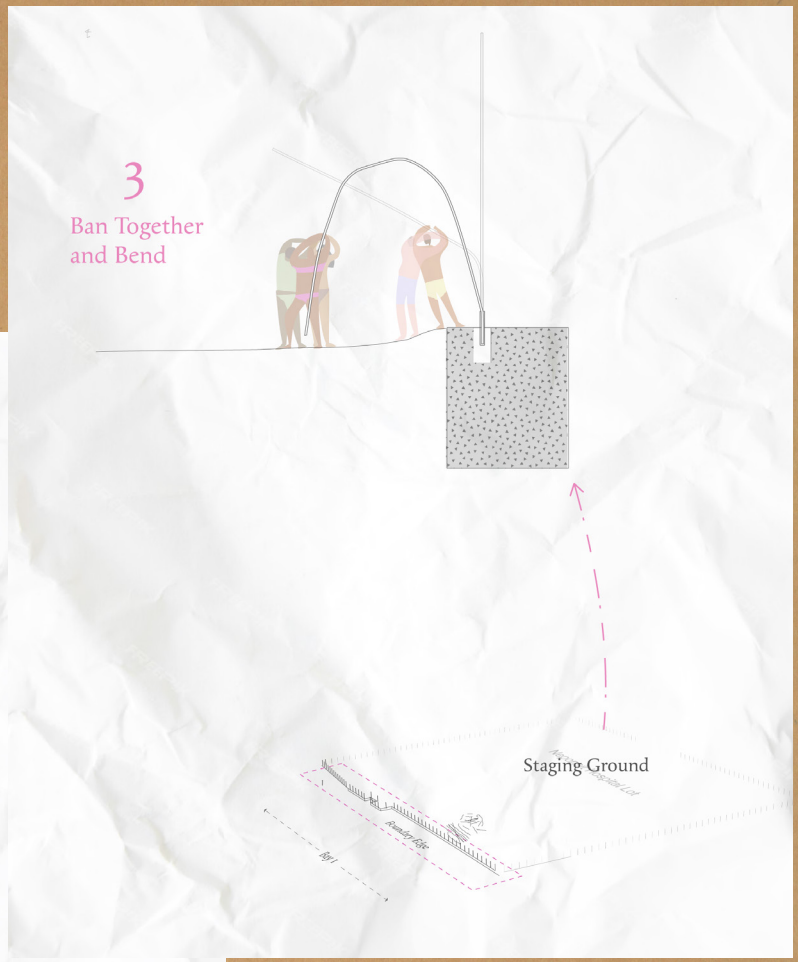


How to Break A Fence









So, The 64 fence posts that line the beach are overlooked opportunities. Fence posts are sawed off at their base. Rebar is inserted into the hollow center and collectively bent into reaching forms.

The fence transforms yet again.

The fence is:

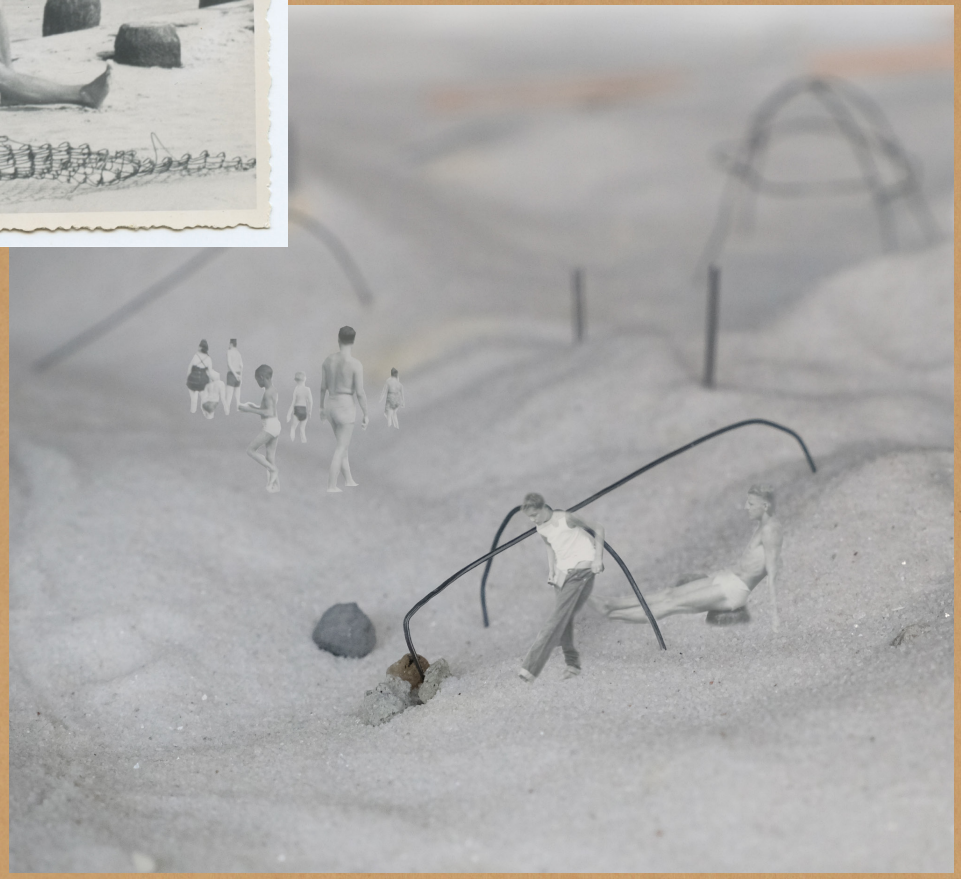


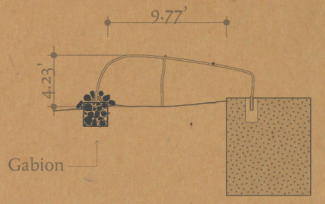


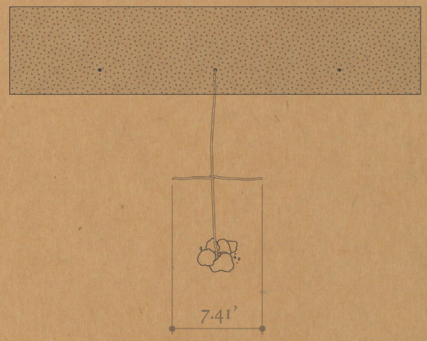
Ms. Columbia Memorial

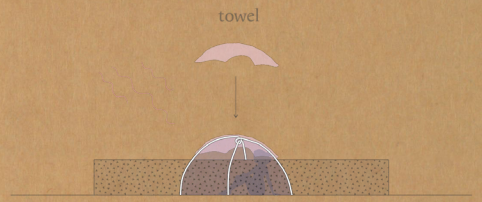
The fence is:









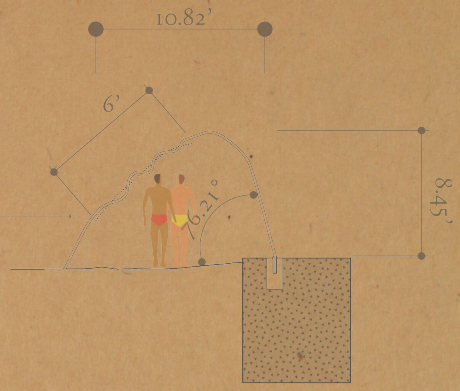


A Place for Repose

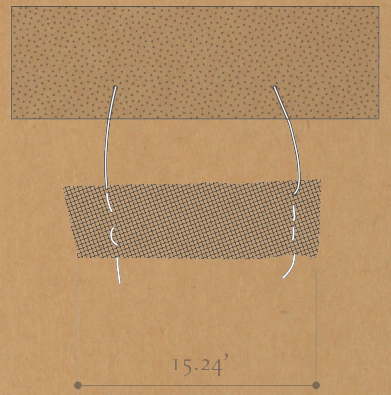
The fence is:



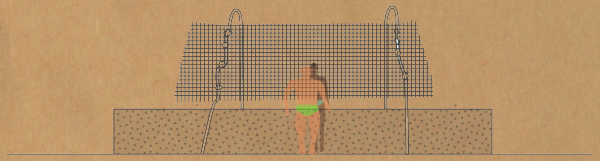
Chain Link Fence







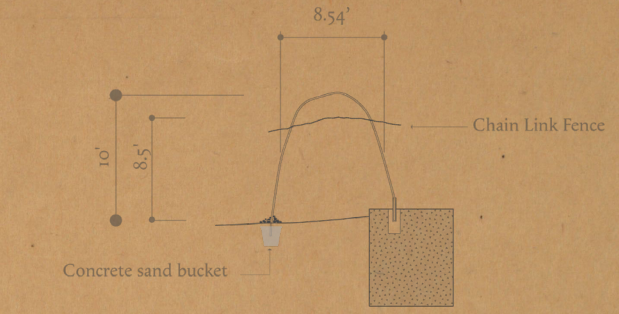
A Place to Connect

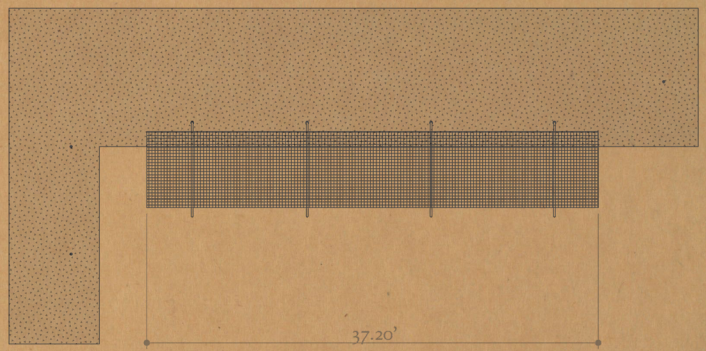


The fence is:

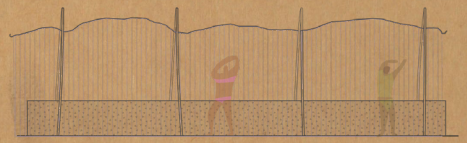








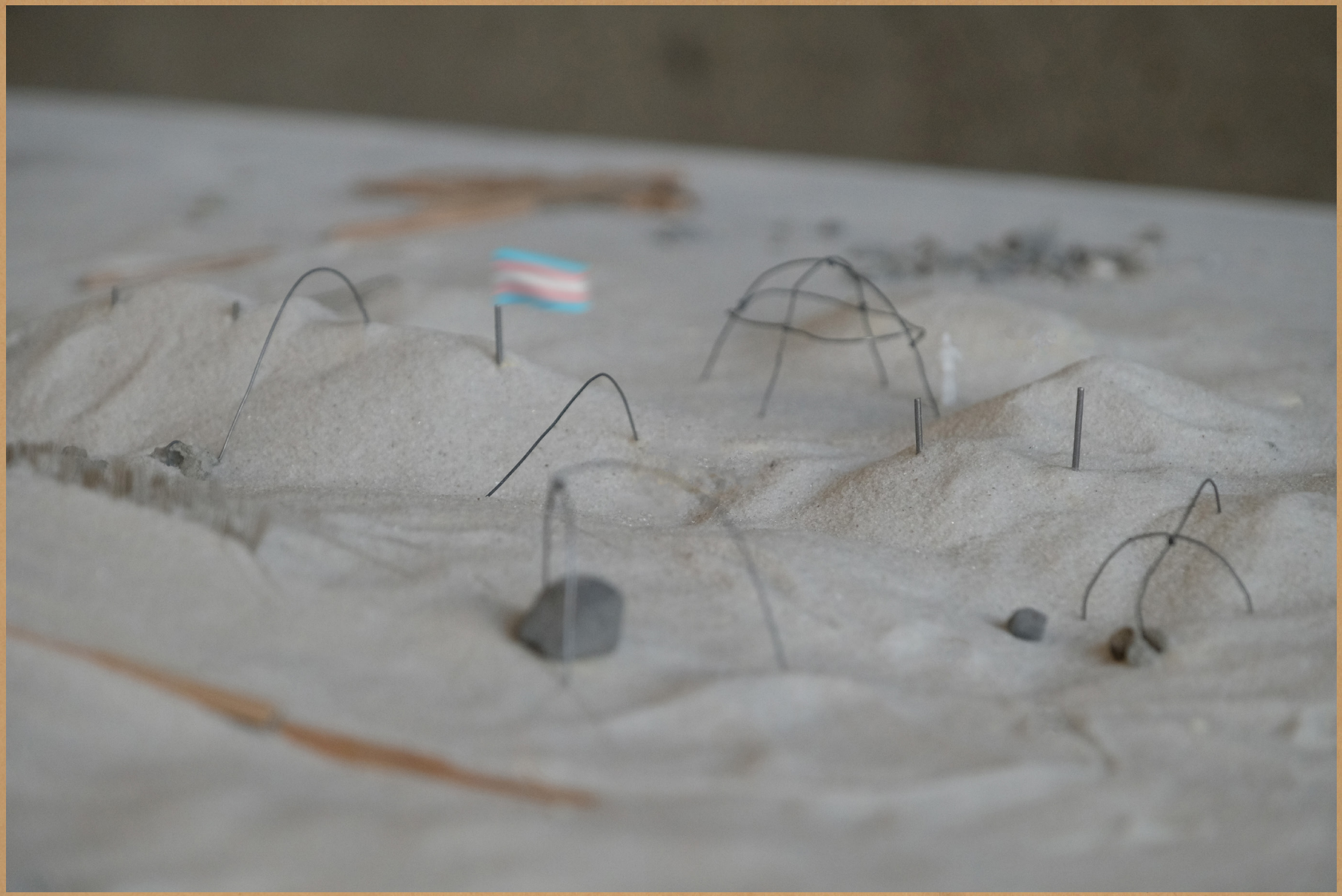
A Place to Gather



Beach Pin Weed
Lechea maritima



Ruderal vegetation takes over the homogeneous planting of the American Beach Grass Dune. Embryo dunes form from the process of drifting sediment and create more fertile ground for scraggly, back dune vegetation to take root.



Through the immediate interventions by the people, the boundary begins to blur into a pluggable system of repose and resistance.



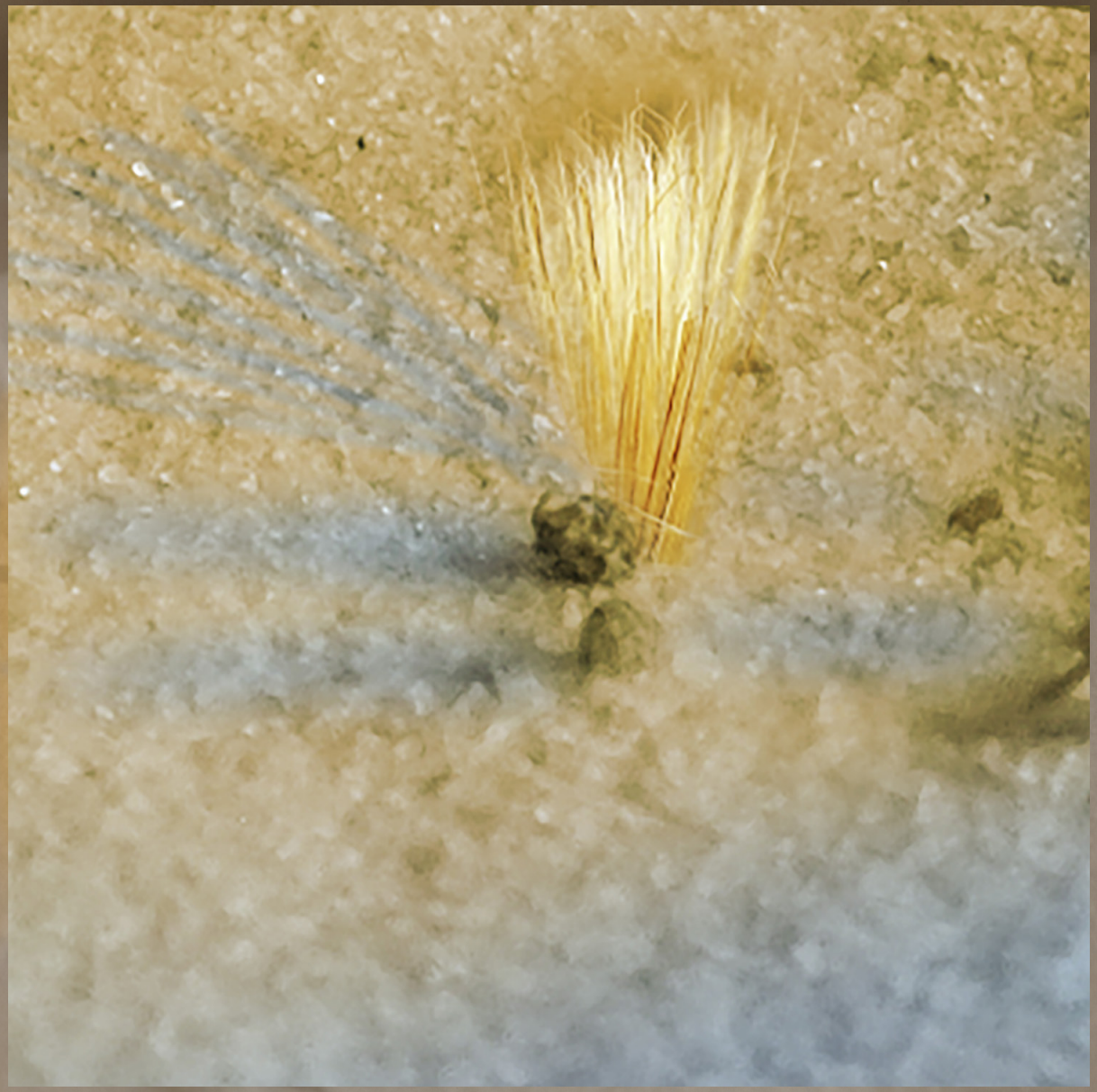
Now it is 2030. As the beach becomes harder to inhabit, we push ourselves onto the lot one last time. For one last dance. As the wind gradually moves sediment, we cut into the dune. Its structural fabric forms our dance floor.







As the wind funnels through the dune, the sand shifts and forms slumps on the seaward side of the steel retaining walls. At night, the space is lit by a downed streetlight, taken from the parking lot.

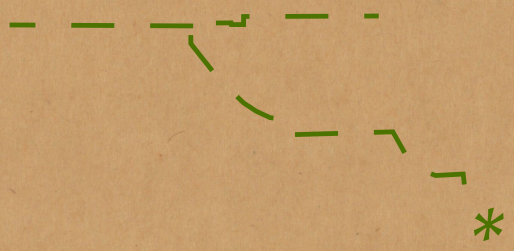


The downcast light casts shadows of the emergent vegetation, the rocks, the rubble, the dunes. We are protected in the shadows, even if for a brief moment.



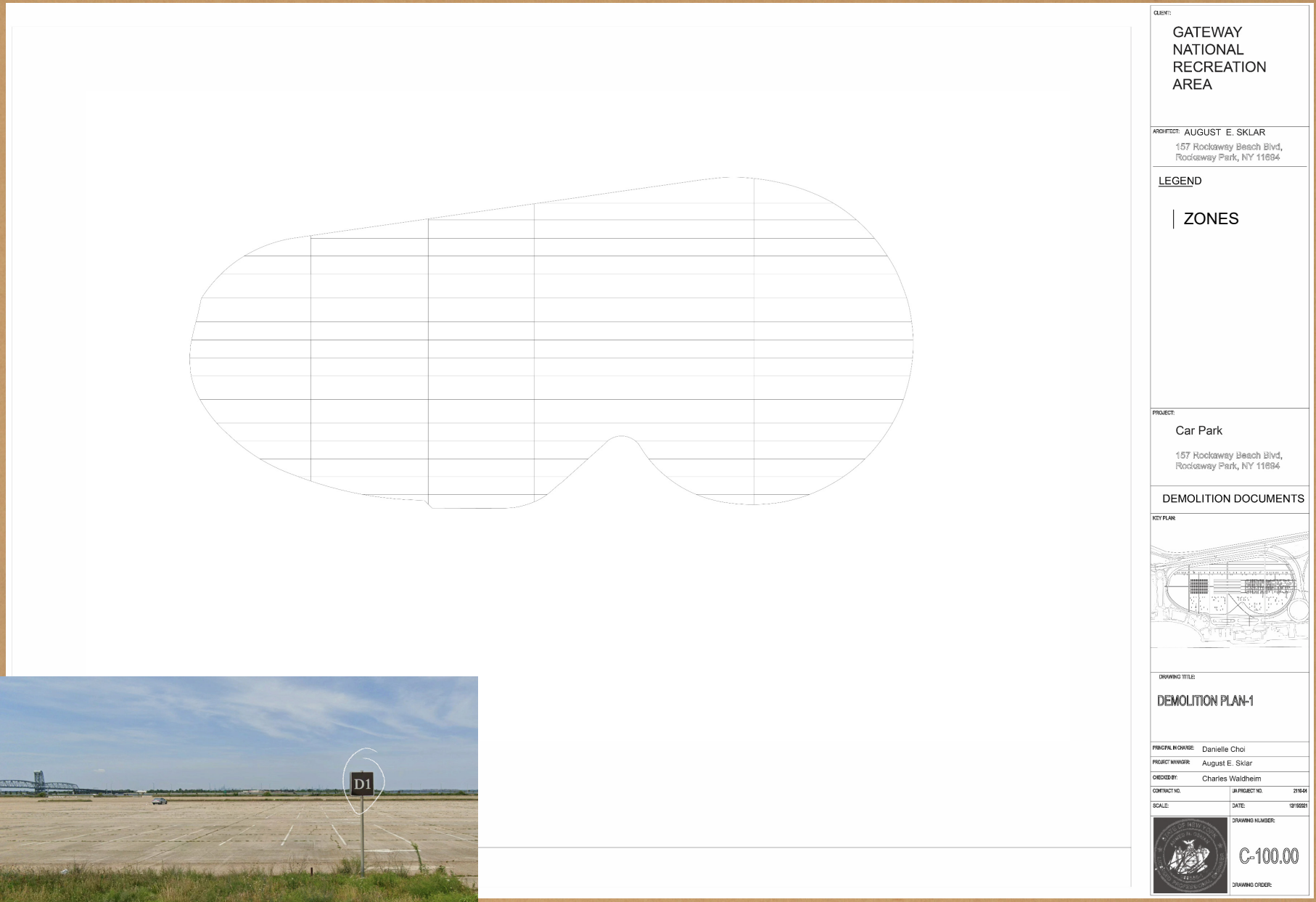
Deconstruct:
Past into Fragmented Future
2033 - 2070 (ish)



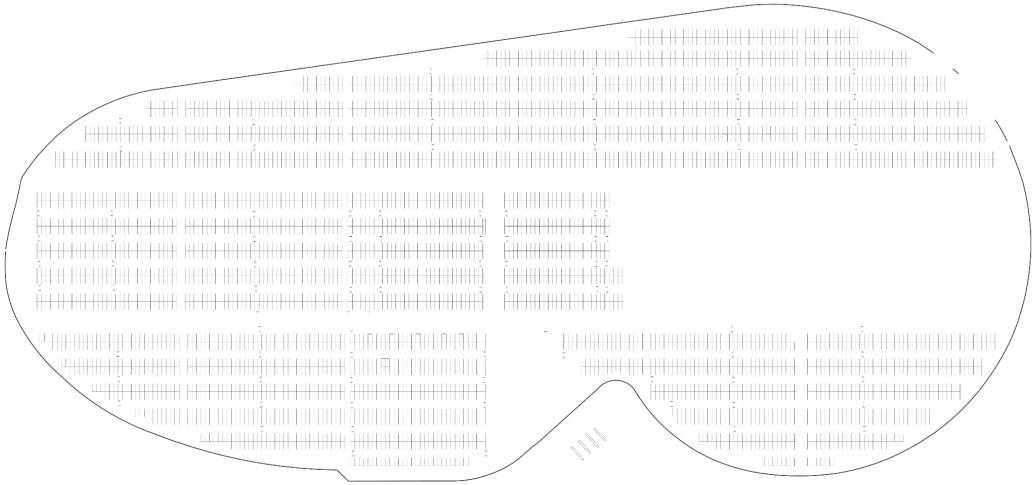




The Riis Parking Lot was once the largest parking lot in the U.S., designed by Robert Moses, who birthed an infrastructural system that prioritized cars over people This concrete sprawl was deemed so culturally important for its association with Robert Moses, that since 1984 it has been protected by historical preservation law. To this day, despite perennial storm water flooding and infrequent use, it remains unchanged. The Army Corp of Engineers plan to implement a Levee wall that cuts along the western edge of the lot. The juxtaposition of the Army Corp infrastructure and the continuously paved parking sprawl, signify a necessary change of past/present/future infrastructure.



The park is reorganized following it's previous order.
Existing parking areas are rezoned, for deconstruction.



CLIENT:
GATEWAY NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

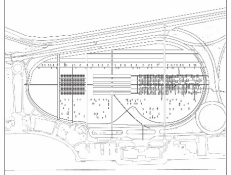
ARCHITECT: AUGUST E. SKLAR
157 Rockaway Beach Blvd,
Rockaway Park, NY 11694

LEGEND
PAINT

PROJECT:
Car Park
157 Rockaway Beach Blvd,
Rockaway Park, NY 11694

DEMOLITION DOCUMENTS

KEY PLAN:



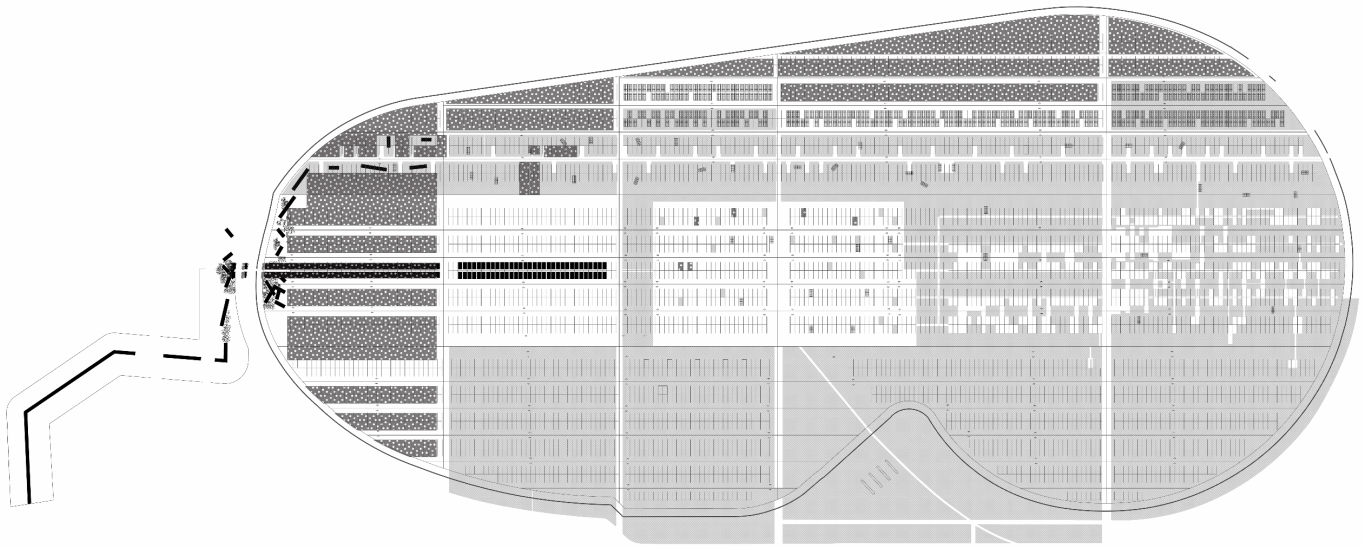
DRAWING TITLE:
DEMOLITION PLAN-1

PRINCIPAL IN CHARGE:	Danielle Choi
PROJECT MANAGER:	August E. Sklar
CHECKED BY:	Charles Waldheim
CONTRACT NO.	JA PROJECT NO. 2110-04
SCALE:	DATE: 12/15/2021

DRAWING NUMBER:
C-100.00
DRAWING ORDER:



First, the strips of paint that delineated how cars move through the space, and where one can park, are broken up, and planted.



GATEWAY NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

ARCHITECT: AUGUST E. SKLAR
157 Rockaway Beach Blvd,
Rockaway Park, NY 11694

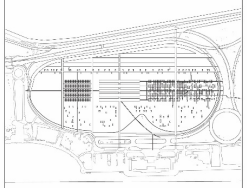
LEGEND

- LEVEE
- RUBBLE ROW
- DECONSTRUCT-ION AREA
- GABIONS

PROJECT:
Car Park
157 Rockaway Beach Blvd,
Rockaway Park, NY 11694

DEMOLITION DOCUMENTS

KEY PLAN:

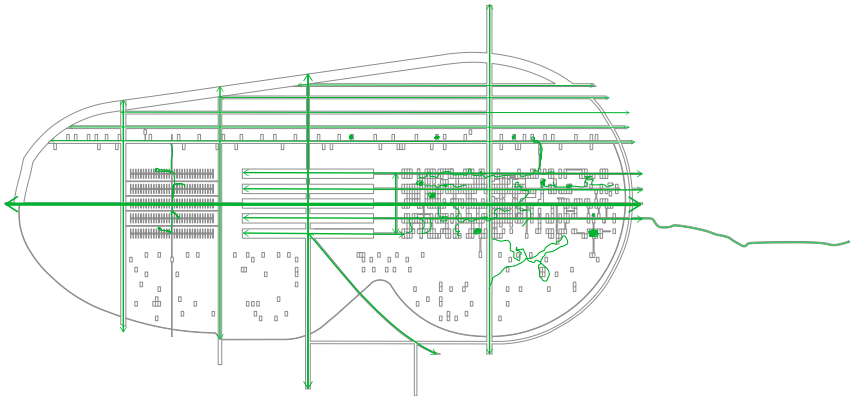


DRAWING TITLE:
DEMOLITION PLAN-1

PRINCIPAL IN CHARGE:	Danielle Choi
PROJECT MANAGER:	August E. Sklar
CHECKED BY:	Charles Waldheim
CONTRACT NO.	JIA PROJECT NO. 2110-04
SCALE:	DATE: 12/15/2021

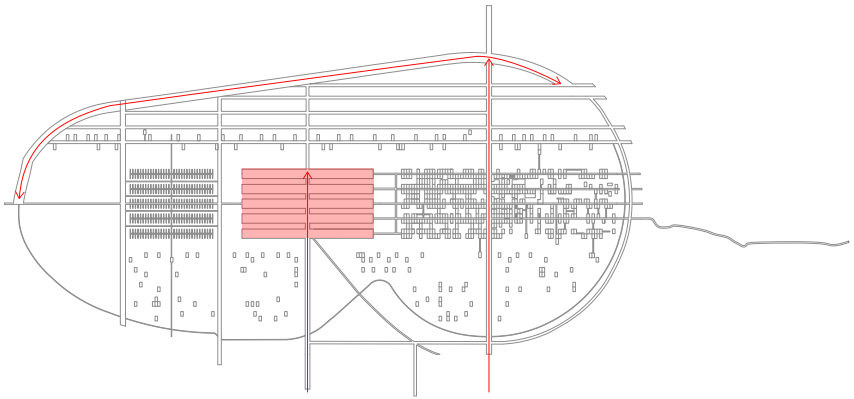
DRAWING NUMBER:
C-100.00
DRAWING ORDER:

The remainder of the Car Park is deconstructed



Pedestrian Circulation

The car park prioritizes people over

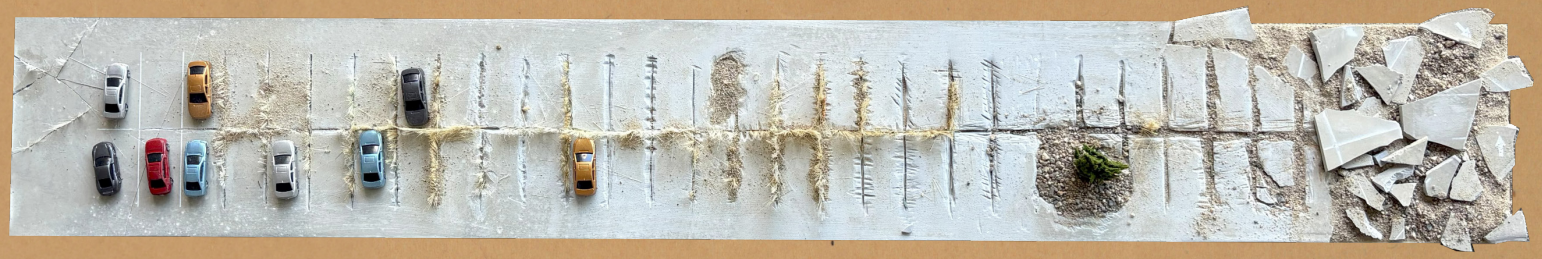


Vehicular Circulation and Parking



Parking Lot (2024)

The cracks in the pavement serve as inspiration and guide



2030

time

2100

Switch Grass
(Panicum virgatum)



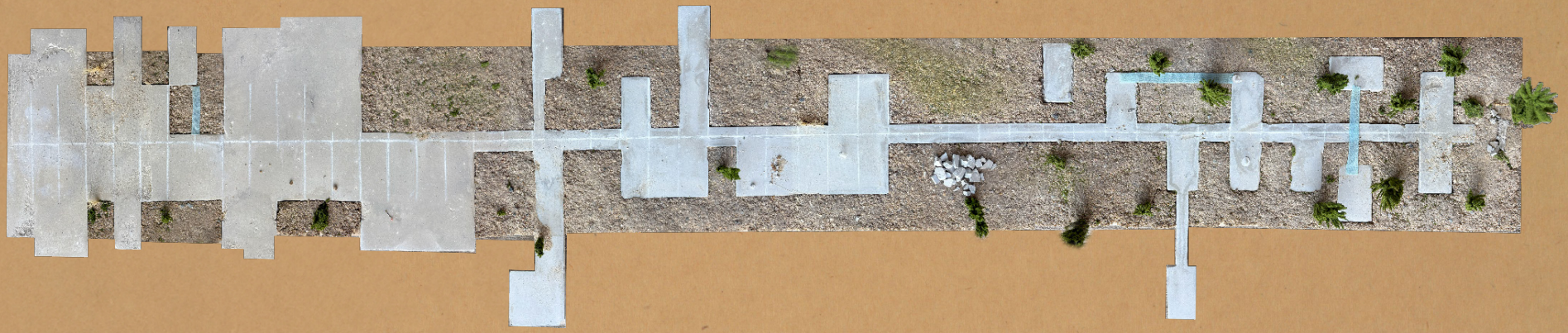
Through the breaking of these strips, grass emerges and creates more intimate rooms of planting.













As we move east the parking lot paving begins to dwindle. Parking pockets are carved and successional forest emerges. These are spaces to stumble upon. A processional path to seek out intimate moments, in a new kind of ruderal refuge.









Traces of the road that defined the extents of the lot, exist as a busted remnant of Robert Moses Order.



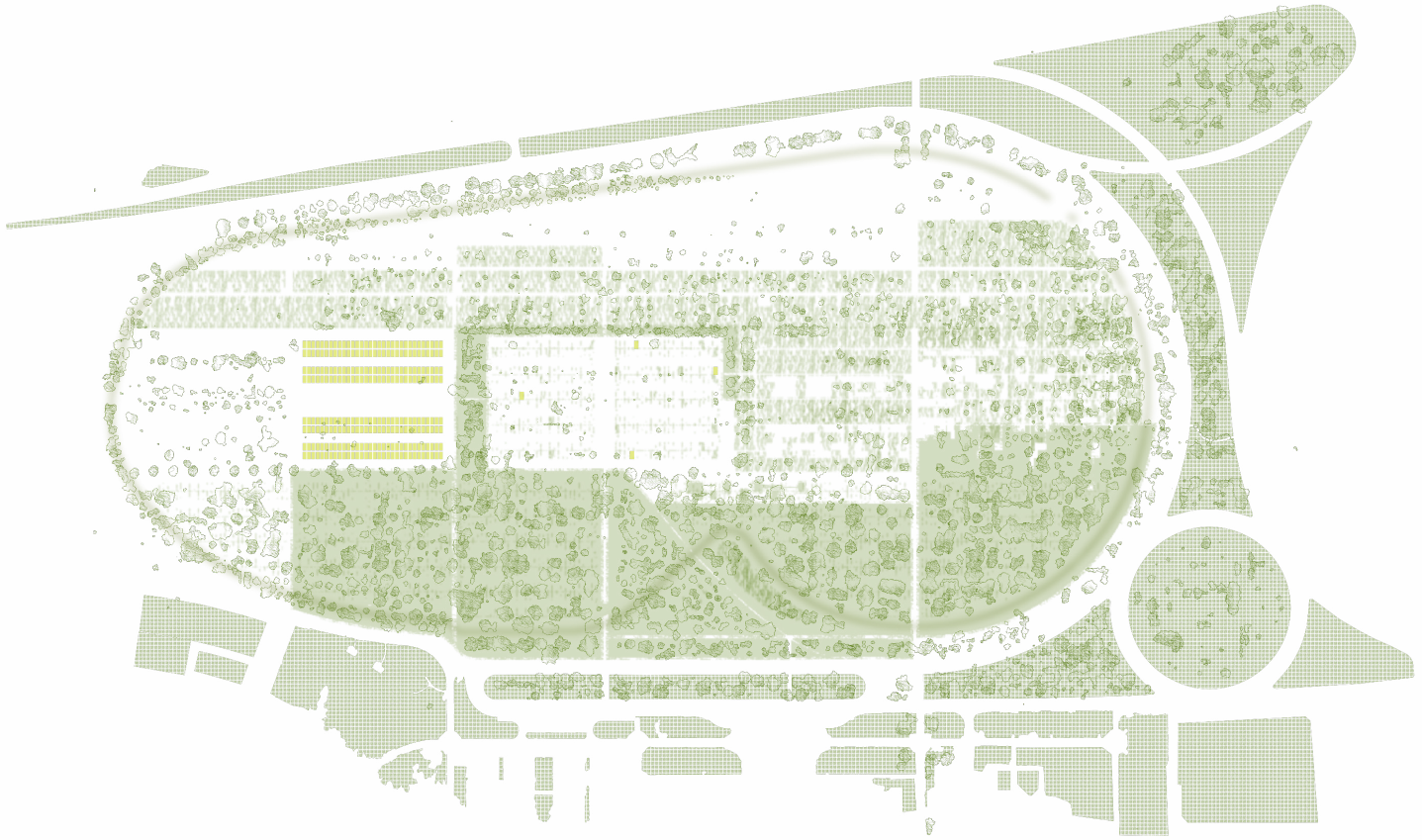




Moving to the western edge of the car park, through time, deconstruction forms a new substrate.







CLIENT:

GATEWAY NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

ARCHITECT: AUGUST E. SKLAR
157 Rockaway Beach Blvd,
Rockaway Park, NY 11694

LEGEND

- POLINATOR GARDEN
- MEADOW
- SUCCESSIONAL VEGITATION
- COASTAL PLANTING
- ROBERTS REMNANT ROAD

PROJECT:

Car Park

157 Rockaway Beach Blvd,
Rockaway Park, NY 11694

DEMOLITION DOCUMENTS

KEY PLAN:

DRAWING TITLE:

DEMOLITION PLAN-1

PRINCIPAL IN CHARGE:	Danielle Choi
PROJECT MANAGER:	August E. Sklar
CHECKED BY:	Charles Waldheim
CONTRACT NO.	JA PROJECT NO. 2110-04
SCALE:	DATE: 12/15/2021

DRAWING NUMBER:

C-100.00

DRAWING ORDER:

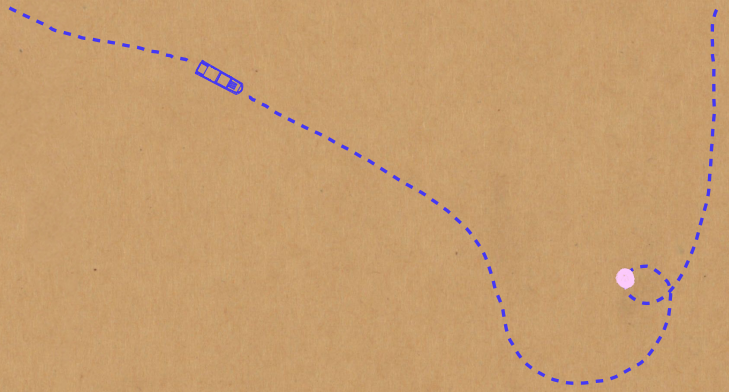
As time moves on, the succession of the landscape takes over. A coastal forest is planted in underutilized shrub land around the highway, and in grass lots and abandoned sports fields on Riis.

Excess and Overflow

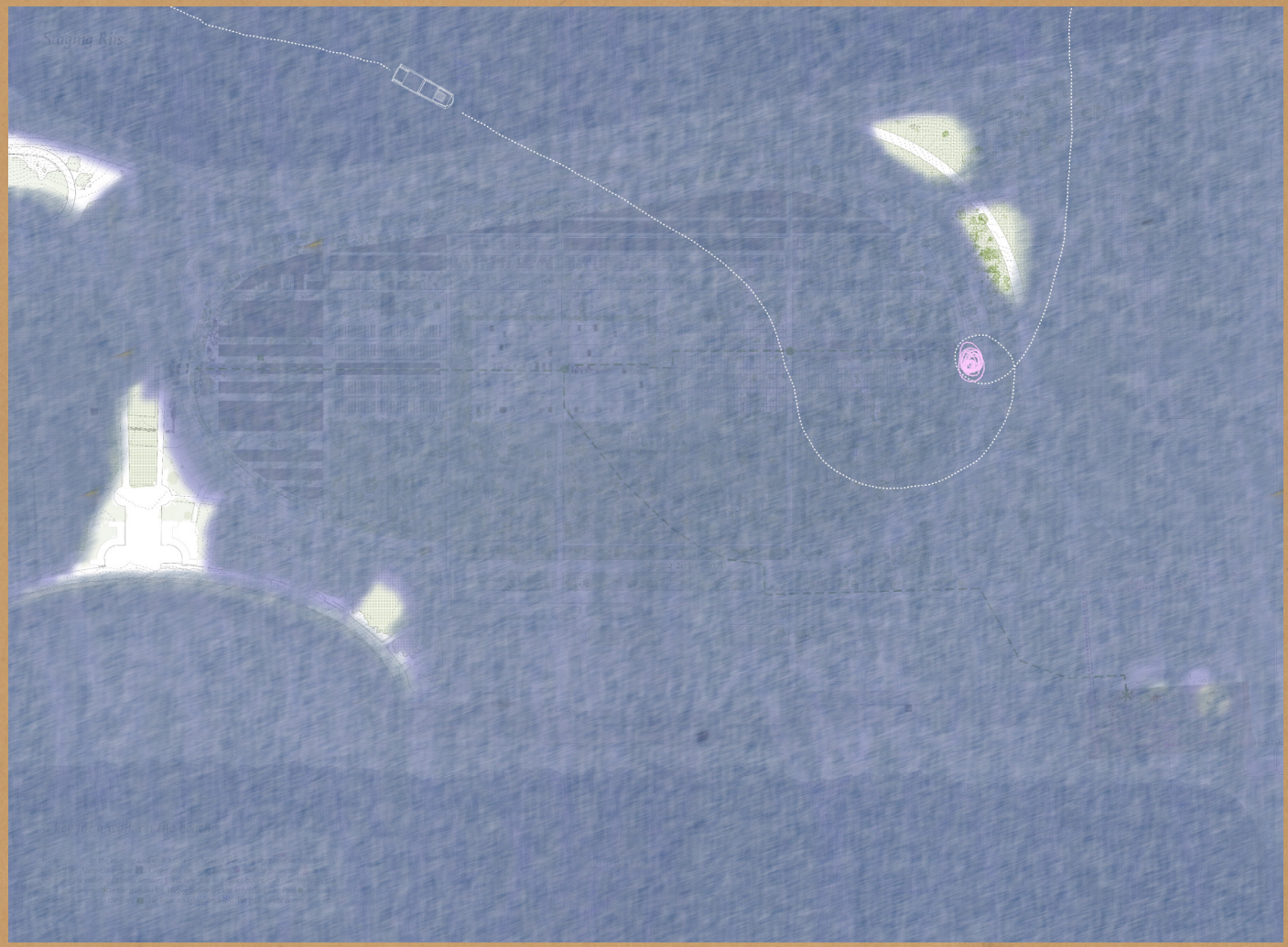
2070 - 2100



2100

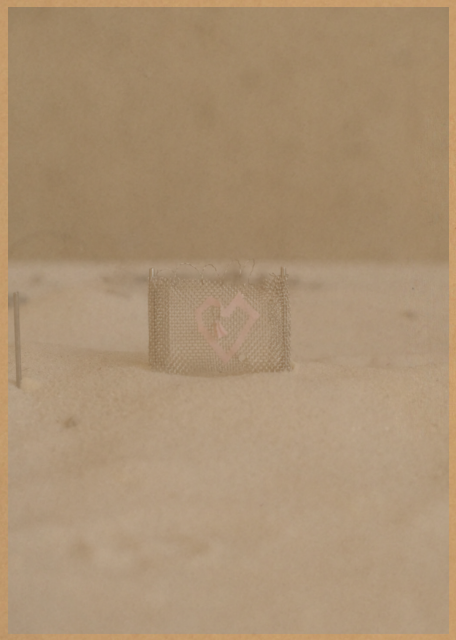


The beach is encased by the Atlantic. The parking lot turned successional landscape becomes submerged by the Atlantic. We go back one last time.



2100
+10’ Sea Level Rise

Stage 1



Stage 2



Stage 3



Evolution of the Riis Memorial





Piping Plover



Ms. Columbia Memorial



We revisit the parking lot. The fence that is a memorial is now encased and protected by the ocean. This bent infrastructure of the past, takes on new life for those who have been here before us: The piping plover, the Atlantic sturgeon and many other threatened species. We leave our mark.

We float back.

We visit the traces we left on the landscape. The ribbon that wove through the fence, a memorial to lost queers that loved the beach, can now be seen peaking out from a buoy.

We leave Bends that hold our resistance to the system. Hold our willingness to break free and afford the uncontrolled forces to shape what is no longer ours.

Queer space breaks free of formalization. Its fortification is in its fragility, which is it's ability to adapt in any climate. Riis is not meant to last, but accepts the reality of constant evolution, as a means of resistance.

Staging Riis was made possible through the generous support of the Open Gate Foundation



Acknowledgments:

Amanda Liljegren
Alistair McIntosh
Charles Waldheim
Danielle Choi
Dean Labowitz
Donna Maione
Emily Kim
Francesca Benedetto
Griffin Snyder
Hayden Bernhardt
Issam Azzam
Jack Sklar
Kiki Luigi
LGBTQ National History Archives
Maggie Musante
Marc Sklar
Milo Sklar
Nolan Boomer
Dr. Rosalea Monacella
Zachary Slonsky




Staging Res


EXIT

Sources

Castrejon, Ilse. “Pier 40 at Hudson River Park: A Multihued Maritime Destination.” Secret NYC, September 6, 2024. https://secretnyc.co/pier-40-hudson-river-park-nyc/.

Chauncey, George. Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940. Basic Books, c1994.

Delany, Samuel R. Times Square Red, Times Square Blue. Sexual Cultures. New York ; London: New York University Press, 1999.

Episode 304: Fenced Out, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kn9gHUwhAEQ.

GAYLETTER. “Alvin Baltrop’s Days on the Piers,” August 8, 2019. http://gayletter.com/alvin-baltrops-days-on-the-piers/.

G.L.I.T.S. INC. “The People’s Beach.” Accessed October 27, 2024. https://www.peoples-beach-land-trust.org.

Goh, Kian. “Safe Cities and Queer Spaces: The Urban Politics of Radical LGBT Activism.” Annals of the American Association of Geographers 108, no. 2 (March 4, 2018): 463–77.

“Jacob Riis Park : Development Plan | Queens Public Library Digital.” Accessed March 9, 2025. http://digitalarchives.queenslibrary.org/browse/jacob-riis-park-development-plan.

Labowitz, Dean. “Turning the Tide.” Urban Omnibus, June 1, 2023. https://urbanomnibus.net/2023/06/turning-the-tide/.

“Riis Beach: Then, Now, Forever - GO Magazine,” July 27, 2023. https://gomag.com/article/riis-beach-then-now-forever/.

Rosado, Ana. “When Art and Sex Met on New York’s Waterfront.” CNN, June 19, 2020. https://www.cnn.com/style/article/manhattan-piers-new-york-waterfront-art/index.html.

Sheidlower, Noah. “The Abandoned Tuberculosis Hospital in Rockaway, Queens.” Untapped New York, April 7, 2020. https://untappedcities.com/2020/04/07/the-abandoned-tuberculosis-hospital-in-the-rockaways/.

“The Avery Review | Toward a Queer Arboreal Heritage.” Accessed November 30, 2024. https://averyreview.com/issues/69/infrastructural-trees.

“The City Record Online (CROL) | Notice Details.” Accessed October 12, 2024. https://a856-cityrecord.nyc.gov/RequestDetail/20211223102.

The New York Times. “NEW HOME FOR AGED DEDICATED BY CITY.” September 1, 1961, sec. Archives. https://www.nytimes.com/1961/09/01/archives/new-home-for-aged-dedicated-by-city.html.

Quigley, Liam. “Erosion Is Causing ‘Extremely Hazardous’ Conditions on Riis Beach, Where 2 Teens Were Swept to Sea.” Gothamist, June 26, 2024. https://gothamist.com/news/erosion-is-causing-extremely-hazardous-conditions-on-riis-beach-where-2-teens-were-swept-to-sea.