

## Teardrop Park

Battery Park, New York, NY

Teardrop Park, the collaboration of landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh and artists Ann Hamilton and Michael Mercil, is in construction at the corners of North End Avenue and Warren Street in Battery Park City. On two and a half acres of a landfill from the building of the World Trade Center, the site has been fenced in as a storage yard. Luxury apartments surround it on two corners with plans to build on the remaining corners. This makes for a very tight space that needs to squeeze out between these buildings and announce its publicity. Slopes, plantings, stairways, and winding paths invite an experience guided by its own movement as opposed to the imagined consensus of an open public space. But Teardrop Park is no return to nature as a phenomenological truth that culture withholds from us. An individual's interest and wanderings have priority over public gathering, but it is also understood that relations between one person and another arise from the shared publicity of embodied experience.

This emphasis is forcefully determined by a design that, as any good park should, allocates spaces for specific age groups and their forms of play. On one side of the park there is a fenced-in area for sand play and an open brook where one can hop from stone to stone. On the other side of the park is a high outcropping of rock designed for reading alone and together, and beyond this a sunny hillside for somersaults and picnicking. On a small patch of land, each area is kept distinct by a rolling topography so that no more than one entry will be visible from any one place. The scale of the park is not determined by its boundaries, but in the experience of an artifice of nature.

Despite Robert Smithson's insistence otherwise, we are today accustomed to thinking of "land art" as something abstract and autonomous by virtue of its being remote from social life. It may be symptomatic of this in that Van Valkenburgh's previous collaborations with the artists Martin Puryear and Judith McKie resulted in park benches. Hamilton and Mercil insist on emphasizing neither autonomy nor function and are immersed in the landscaping of an urban public space.

Visitors to the park are likely to ask, "Where is the art?" and given the conventions by which we usually measure it, this is a serious question. I can't answer that question directly, but I can place the site in a historical context that may suggest an answer.



Complete with a tunnel, the design of Teardrop Park self-consciously pays homage to Frederick Law Olmsted, the great 19<sup>th</sup>-century designer of Central Park. Olmsted is here scaled down for what green space remains in New York City. This shift in scale necessitates that Teardrop play up its artificiality, emphasizing not the natural sublime of 19<sup>th</sup> century space but the sublime

of modernism's technological ruins. Which leads me to the obvious: Only a few blocks away from a hole in the ground where the World Trade Center once stood, and built on the debris from the Trade Center's original construction, Teardrop Park may not be able to avoid its historic, national importance—despite that the project began in 1999. The question shifts from being a matter of the park's status as a work of art to whether and how landscape architecture can function as a memorial.

Landscape architecture belongs differently to historical time than other art forms. When a project is completed, it is a barren and spindly offering waiting to be realized in and by future generations. The maintenance of landscape requires continuous destruction and renewal so that what it can hold as memory can never adequately be the historical preservation of a defined community (as the recent and nearby *Memorial of Irish Hunger* piteously and boastfully claims to be) but of the collisions of necessity and chance that are indifferent to the establishment of identity.

The name of Teardrop Park existed prior to September 11<sup>th</sup> and is not the result of any reverence for human events. It refers to the myth that the source of the Hudson River is from the tears of a deity representing the distant time of an inhuman geological past. Teardrop Park intends to elaborate the structure of this memory as something that occurs between artifice and raw materiality. In his notes for the project, Michael Mercil writes, "Can time be pictured? Is this where we enter the 'picturesque'? Are we faking geological processes? But we are not trying to reproduce them. We are trying instead to remember, or remind ourselves, of them. We are trying to mark the linkage between this (now, present) and that (then) time." This linkage to the past comes not from a memorializing sense of loss, but of a longing without reverence and no less committed. ●

Catherine Spaeth, our NYC bureau chief, covers the activities of Heartland artists in the Big Apple.

Teardrop Park installation (l to r) artist Michael Mercil, landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh, and site supervisor for stonework Betsy Hoffman