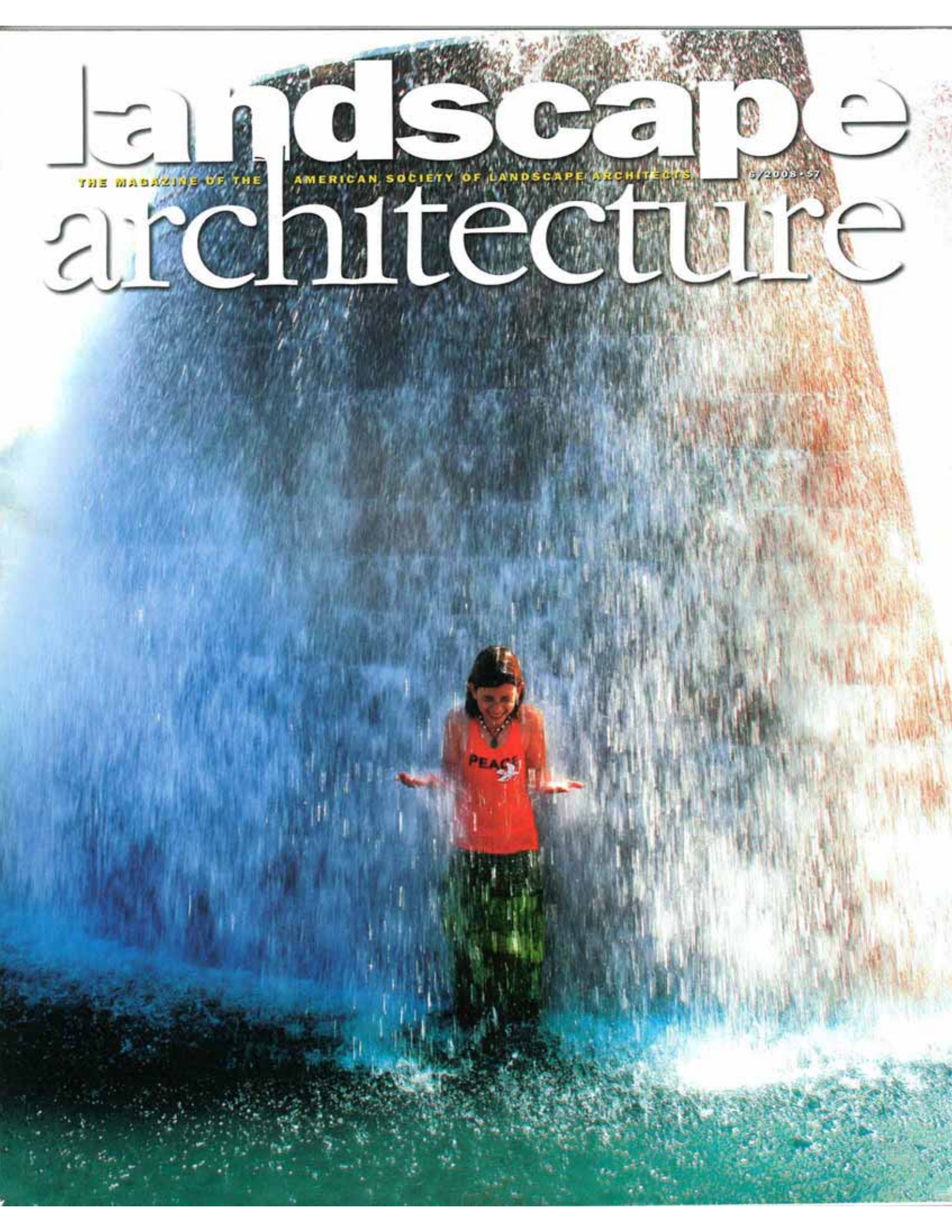


# landscape architecture

THE MAGAZINE OF THE

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

5/2008 • 57





## WATERFRONTS

### SOUND INVESTMENT

Shoehorned into a leftover site, this tiny waterfront park has helped revive a withered downtown on Puget Sound.

By Mark Hinshaw

**O**NLY A FEW YEARS AGO, the future of Bremerton, Washington, seemed pretty bleak. Like many American towns in the 1970s, it saw the start of a long, slow decline in its downtown, with department stores and shops decamping for suburban malls. Even the decades-long presence of a U.S. naval shipyard right next door to the downtown could not staunch the rapid emptying out of the center. At the beginning of the 21st century, Bremerton distinguished itself within the rapidly growing metropolitan region of Puget Sound as the only city to actually lose population. Those were tragic times for this waterfront community of more than 35,000. Despite being linked to Seattle by huge car-carrying ferries and sporting a waterfront offering spectacular views of snow-capped mountain ranges, Bremerton was a poster child for urban disinvestment. Several attempts to revive it fell flat.

Part of the problem was that the community was mired in the past, with no clear vision of the future. Many downtown properties were owned by the Bremer family, heirs to the city's founder, and those buildings and sites languished. There were no strong voices, and the city government was burdened by a "good of boy" culture combined with complacency and confusion—hardly a recipe for success.

Then leadership emerged from new sources: The ebullient head of the local housing authority saw his agency as more than merely a provider of below-market housing—he saw it as a tool for jump-starting reinvestment. The chief executive of the local transit authority was successful in helping build a new bus transit center serving

Open for less than a year, the park—with its mature trees—looks as if it has been around for years. The place is clearly well loved by local residents.

## WATERFRONTS

both ferries and buses. And a dynamic new mayor, Cary Bozeman, was elected. A big-picture politician, he surrounded himself with aggressive people and gave them the charge of changing the place—fast.

Bozeman's prior jobs as mayor of another city that turned itself around and as head of a well-regarded regional social service agency showed him that strategic public actions could make a huge difference. He was particularly attuned to how the building of well-designed, dramatic public spaces can transform a community's self-image and attract private investment as well. Through a public/private development partnership, he provided the city with its first-ever town square, leading from the city center to the waterfront and a previously built esplanade.

Working with the housing agency, he helped attract developers to build new, dense urban housing. He persuaded the navy to build a parking structure outside the



Children gleefully cavort in boisterous fountains designed to invite entering, above. The conical fountains rise out of a chain of alternating, shallow, football-shaped ponds, below, surrounded by accessible paths that allow many choices of movement through the park. Stairs descend from the adjacent ferry terminal.

shipyard gates so that city residents could make use of it in the evenings and on weekends. And he garnered funds from multiple sources to build a striking new waterfront park on a narrow strip of former federal property between the navy base and the ferry terminal. The intent was to create not only a new public gathering place but also a bold symbol of the city's revival.

The new park would provide an artful access to the water, interpret the city's heritage as a navy town, and serve as further evidence that Bremerton was on a completely new course. Funding for the park included \$10 million spent by the navy to clean up and cap the environmentally damaged site and another \$10 million from federal, state, and local sources.

Located on a 1.7-acre site deeded from the navy to the city, Harborside Fountain Park serves as a green esplanade linking the town center with the

water. At the north end, along First Street, a naval history museum occupies a Victorian-era structure that was originally built to house the base headquarters. At the other end, a plaza next to the water affords dramatic views of the harbor, ferry boats, and enormous warships in for maintenance and repair. A massive, muscular crane towers over the shipyard a few hundred feet away like an industrial campanile.

Landscape architects Walker Macy of Portland, Oregon, were retained to work with WET Design, engineering and environmental firms, and artists as an integrated design team. Gary Sexton, the city's

## Harborside Fountain Park serves as a green esplanade linking the town center with the water.

economic development director, had a strong hand in guiding the design, even down to seeking out sources of large native rocks and 80 mature specimen trees that were brought in for the park by cranes. Says Sexton, "We were trying to create a park that already seemed like it had been there for a while." Mike Zillis of Walker Macy credits Sexton with keeping the "big ideas" for the park intact through the unpredictable twists and turns of funding, politics, and design.

Completed just a year ago, the park was initially conceived prior to the tragedy of 9/11, and security concerns became a



An open plaza at the water's edge, here, affords views of the water and large car/passenger ferries as they dock and depart. Stone art pieces with geometric and smooth surfaces visually recall parts of ships—a reference to the adjacent naval shipyard. Although there is no actual play equipment, below right, children discover playful uses for the stone art pieces.





WATERFRONTS

prominent issue. Naval officials wanted to create a clear zone of separation between the park and the immediately adjacent shipyards. Rather than settling for a tall chain-link fence topped by razor ribbon and flanked with gravel along the edge of the park, the city insisted upon a more urbane fence of cast iron with a curved top and grass at the base.

The conical fountains, above, resemble conning towers of submarines or dorsal fins of whales. The animated water is programmed to change frequently. When the fountains are off, below left, they create an industrial monumentality. Large rocks, below right, some sliced and polished smooth, serve as benches, tables, or perches.

The dramatic centerpiece of the park is a set of five vertical fountains, their form vaguely echoing the conning tower of a submarine or the dorsal fin of a whale. The fountain forms are tapered, elliptical, and covered in horizontally ridged and curved copper. Water shoots out from cannons set into the top of each one and cascades down the sides, rippling and

COURTESY CITY OF BREMER-  
TON, WASHINGTON. TOP  
COURTESY WALKER MACY; BOTTOM: TAYLOR



splashing outward. Lighted, football-shaped pools surround each of the watery towers, giving them reflected drama at night. In a climate zone with lots of overcast days and dark winter afternoons, animated light is most welcome. Day or night, the sloping metal objects seem mystical, like eccentric, ancient forms marking an important site.

When the long rainy season ends, people in the Northwest tend to immediately find reasons to spend time outdoors in the sun. The city wanted shallow pools to invite children to walk into them and play with the water. Even on a cool, sunny day in March, kids were stripped down to shorts and cavorting in the water, their parents keeping watchful eyes from a nearby seating area.

An early design concept had the five water features lined up in a precise row. Doug Macy, FASLA, gave them a staggered spacing to allow for a geometrically curving path to meander between them. The path allows disabled users to reach all portions of the park. According to Sexton, "The design tries to appeal to all types of users. It has places where you can be off to the side in a quiet area or right in the middle of all the action." Taking a page from Holly Whyte's observation of how people like to manipulate public space to serve their social needs, the city provided movable tables and chairs throughout the park. They are extremely sturdy and heavy to minimize vandalism or easy theft.

A lot is packed into this relatively small park that seems almost shoehorned into a leftover plot of land. Scores of large, unique trees and understory are marked with small signs, not unlike an arboretum. Local history is interpreted in didactic museum displays, naval artifacts, and symbolic shapes. Regional geology is displayed in rocks—both untouched and sculpted. Hydrology is dramatically expressed. And the place is designed for concerts, weddings, meetings, and civic events, as well as singular, quiet contemplation.

With so much asked of this park, one might wish for some editing and a bit more focus on fewer programmatic elements. Nonetheless, it all seems to work and is clearly a hit with people of all ages who can be seen enjoying it. And that, after all, is what counts.

LAM

In addition to serving as director of urban design for LAMN Architects, Mark Himshaw is the author of several books on cities and a frequent contributor to Landscape Architecture.

**PROJECT CREDITS** Project name: Harborside Fountain Park. Client: Gary Sexton, City of Bremerton. Landscape architect: Walker Macy, Portland, Oregon (J. Douglas Macy, FASLA; Mauricio Villarreal, ASLA; Chris Jones). Fountain designer: WET Design, San Valley, California (Patty Lundeen, ASLA). Stone sculptor: Will Robinson, Bremerton, Washington. Civil: Exceltech, Portland, Oregon (Choomeng Chin). Structural: KPFF, Portland, Oregon (Craig Totten). Lighting design: LUMA, Portland, Oregon (Mark Ramsby). General contractor: Synergy Corporation, Woodinville, Washington (Jamie Creek).

COURTESY CITY OF BREMER-  
TON

## PERSPECTIVE

### A Park Townspeople Love

BY VIRGINIA B. CROMWELL, STUDENT ASLA  
PUGET SOUND RESIDENT

I LIVE ON HOODS CANAL, Washington, roughly 13 miles from Bremerton, where I often go to shop. While there, time permitting, I go to the park. The Bremerton area has other parks, of course, from small neighborhood parks to large parks with sports fields and playground equipment. Waterfront Park is different—hardscape instead of green grass—but it really draws the residents of Bremerton. Part of the attraction is the waterfront location where you can enjoy the seagulls, the ferry to Seattle coming or going, and the sunshine. Last

Saturday when I visited, there was a sailboat regatta in progress. Bremerton is a navy town, and many residents either work in the naval shipyard or are in active service on a ship or a submarine. The fountains represent submarine conning towers heading to sea; thus they honor Bremerton's navy connection.

I visited several times last summer and found the park to truly be a family gathering place. It rang with the squeals of kids as they played in the fountains while the water spouted and climbed with abandon on the stone sculptures. The adults enjoyed sitting at the tables or on the huge boulders that dot the planted areas, just enjoying the sun or conversation. One of the greatest things is there are no "Do Not" signs any-

where. The fountains are to play in, the sculptures are to climb on, and the tables and chairs can be moved.

In March, while waiting for the ferry to come in, I walked from the terminal to the park to see if anyone was about. The fountains were turned off and, due to the really raw weather, no one was there. In April, however, I stopped in to see if a cold spring day had brought any visitors. There were about three couples and two families enjoying the fountains and the serenity of the park. I spoke with most of them. The mother of one group said they try to go there when the weather permits, and during the warmer weather they go as often as possible. She works in downtown Bremerton, and she and her coworkers often go there on their lunch break. Two shipyard workers were there enjoying the park on their break. Two other couples said they like to walk in the park even in chilly weather. The last gentleman I talked with was a father of four who had just gotten off the ferry from Seattle and had about 45 minutes before their bus arrived, so he took the children there to play. They were having a great time climbing on the boulders and sculpted rocks. It was great to hear the pride in these people's voices as they talked about the feelings they have for this park.