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## NANCY OWENS DESIGNING PARK IN MASSIVE AFFORDABLE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT



COURTESY NANCY OWENS STUDIO

## CARTE BLANCHE

Gazing upon an acre patch of brownfield scrub grass in East New York, Nancy Owens envisions nested marsh birds, landscaped berms, and families playing in the cool light of Jamaica Bay. Her firm, Nancy Owens Studio, is completing the conceptual phase of its design for a park in Gateway Estates, a mixed Nehemiah housing and retail development along Brooklyn's eastern border.

The park is the first of three in-fill projects the New York City Department of Parks &

Recreation has planned for vacant swaths in the housing complex. According to Owens, the result will be much needed green space. "It looks a bit like *The Truman Show*," she said, citing the 1998 movie in which Jim Carrey discovers that his idyllic small town is a movie set.

Specifically, Owens's reference is to Gateway Estates' neat row houses, uniform trees, and arterial streets, which, she says, are often empty, despite **continued on page 7**

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS CLAIMING NEW GROUND. SEE PAGE 34.



RR WHITEHOUSE

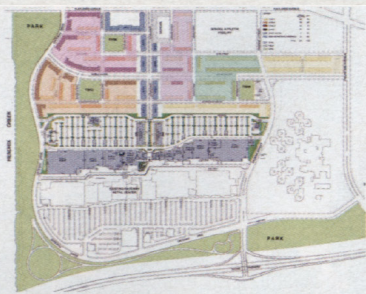
**CARTE BLANCHE** continued from front page the nearly-filled 2,385 housing units. As a young community, the estates still await inclusive areas for recreation and a place for families to gather; it is this program of active recreation and community use that Owens and her team are eager to sculpt.

"I like the carte blanche," she says. "You can completely imagine how the park will take shape. There is no pre-existing park or program you have to work within." The carte blanche model is one Owens is comfortable with. The studio's Estella Diggs Park in the Bronx is roughly the same size, and was another site where the design team wielded total conceptual freedom. At Estella Diggs the imperative was simply to build a beautiful space for the Bronx; in Brooklyn the needs of the site are more complex.

An RFP for the project, for example, asks for basketball courts, handball courts, volleyball courts, a playground, adult fitness facilities, and a comfort station—all on the lean budget of \$3,571,400. Such a host of active uses often means squares of asphalt and lots of fencing, but Owens' design resists that. Like the dunes along the shores of nearby Jamaica Bay, her planned mounded earth and manipulated topography will work in symbiosis with furling pathways and planted areas. The objective will be to separate and demarcate courts, reducing fencing while rupturing the horizontality of the surrounding facades.

"Maybe a series of rectangles projecting vertically would play off the facades of the houses and have a sculptural quality," Owens speculates, saying she is considering a strategy to bring fluid edges to square court games.

Still working on the conceptual level, Owens is keen to push herself. Adding



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**Above: Gateway Park will replace swaths of scrubgrass brownfield that surround this East New York housing development.**

something entirely new to the city's network of parks—instead of updating a Robert Moses-era inheritance, as is often the case—is a great responsibility, she states, and the question is how to fit the design to the history of the site and its context.

"Elevation" here is both literal and conceptual inspiration. Bounded on one side by Fresh Creek, a stone's throw from Gateway National Recreation area, yet also a former landfill and a one-time dumping ground for famous crime syndicate Murder Incorporated, the Gateway Estates has a mandate to wed its natural ecology to an ecology of community.

Indigenous flora, flyways, and drainage runs will interlace the landscape, choreographing its multiple functions in micro-habitats. "I'm excited to see how the park activates the site," said Owens. She says her firm hopes to give the Estates not only a playground and park benches, but also an opportunity to connect with nature, providing an education often absent in the city.

**CAITLIN BLANCHFIELD**

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