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Brooklyn Bridge Park

It was a long time coming, but the Brooklyn waterfront has finally gotten its park.

Up until the 1950s, the docks below Brooklyn Heights were rough-and-tumble. By the 1970s, cargo traffic was dwindling, and local activists clamored for the waterfront's owner, the Port Authority, to dedicate the piers to public use. After intense power struggles, construction for Brooklyn Bridge Park got under way in 2008. Today, the park is (almost) completed.

Stretching 1.3 miles from Atlantic Avenue to the Manhattan Bridge, the public grounds offer spectacular views of Manhattan and have many corners to explore. Locals enjoy the playgrounds, football fields and basketball courts, and a pop-up swimming pool in summer. Picnic Peninsula at Pier 5 has a barbecue area with hibachi-style grills that get a lot of use in the warmer months. After your feast, stop by the Ample Hills outpost at the same pier, which serves my all-time favorite ice cream.

Among the joggers and cyclists, tourists stroll up and down the walkway, snapping photographs of Manhattan skyscrapers and Lady Liberty in the distance.

Under the Brooklyn Bridge, the park is more urban and lively. Crowds board or disembark commuter ferries every few minutes. In fact, the city unveiled five new water routes in 2017, connecting parts of Brooklyn to Manhattan, Queens and the Bronx.

Between the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges is St. Ann's Warehouse, a performing arts theater behind an old brick facade. (According to David Walentas, interviewed on the following page, his Two Trees management company gave the venue free rent for 10 years to help it get started.)

A similar structure next to it—a former coffee-roasting facility built in the 19th century—was recently repurposed and is now known as Empire Stores. Unveiled last summer, the new complex houses restaurants like Cecconi's, an Italian joint from the Soho House team. Retailers such as West Elm have joined the property, as has Brooklyn Historical Society Dumbo, a museum where visitors can learn more about the neighborhood's past.

In front of these two warehouses, Jane's Carousel shines bright. The Walentas family bought the carousel at auction in 1984 from a park in Youngstown, Ohio. When Jane Walentas set out to hire someone to restore it, she found she didn't agree with the approach espoused by the people she was interviewing. "The trends in those days were to dip all the horses chemically and strip them, and it's really bad for them," she explains.

With the help of a carpenter, she took on the restoration herself, hand-scraping more than 60 years of paint off the carousel to reveal the original colors and wood carvings from 1922. Jane spent 20 years restoring the carousel while plans for the park's construction trudged along.

In 2011, Jane's Carousel opened to the public, encased in a Jean Nouvel-designed acrylic structure. I see the carousel on my daily commute, when my train goes over the Manhattan Bridge. It's a welcome and long-awaited addition to Brooklyn's waterfront, as is the park itself. □

