



# GOVERNORS ISLAND PARK

NEW YORK, NEW YORK, UNITED STATES

*Winner: 2021 ULI Americas Awards for Excellence, Urban Open Space and Resilient Development Categories*



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After serving as a military base for over 200 years, the 172-acre (70 ha) Governors Island in the borough of Manhattan in New York City remained unoccupied for almost 10 years before reopening to visitors in 2005. Twenty-two acres (9 ha) are designated as a national park managed by the U.S. National Park Service. The remaining 150 acres (61 ha) are overseen by the Trust for Governors Island, including a 40-acre (16.2 ha) public park that exemplifies sustainability and space slated for future commercial development. Now, after over a decade of development and improvement, including the park's construction, Governors Island is a beloved destination serving New Yorkers and visitors from around the country and the world.

**Owner/developer:** Trust for Governors Island

**Designers:** West 8, Mathews Nielsen Landscape Architects, Magnusson Klemencic Associates, AKRF, Hart Crowser Inc., Pentagram, WXY architecture + urban design, Tillotson Design Associates, Dagher Associates, Pine and Swallow Environmental, Northern Designs, Code Consulting Inc., Faithful & Gould, ETM Associates, Langan

**Size:** 40 acres (16.2 ha)

Cover Image: Hammock Grove pathway. (© *Julienne Schaer* 2019)



Picnic Point. (© *Julienne Schaer* 2020)

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## Park Overview

**Located in New York Harbor between Manhattan and Brooklyn, Governors Island had a military presence from the late 1700s until 1996, for the U.S. Army and the Coast Guard. In 2003, the island came under control of the city and state of New York. Redevelopment commenced in 2010 when design firm West 8 won an international competition and presented the resulting Governors Island Park and Public Space Master Plan. Construction on a 40-acre (16.2 ha) public park began in 2012 and the park opened in 2016.**

With over 1 million annual visitors, Governors Island consists of the park—which includes lawns, playgrounds, sports fields, food vendors, and a series of earthwork hills that provide panoramic views of the harbor and surrounding skylines—and education, nonprofit, and commercial facilities. In partnership with local organizations, Governors Island is intended to engage, excite, and educate the public in every aspect of urban agriculture, green infrastructure, and sustainability.

A major goal of the redevelopment project was to increase Governors Island’s resilience to the impacts of climate change. Many features of the park’s design address these issues, including raising the site out of the 100-year floodplain, implementing a sustainable planting strategy, and including elements that mitigate wave action.

One of the main principles in the creation of the park was holistic sustainability, which led to the creation of 40 acres (16.2 ha) of new public open space and the preservation of much more, combined with making the area and its active and passive recreation choices accessible to millions of New Yorkers, many of whom lack easy access to high-quality park space.

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## Social Equity and Community Engagement

Car-free and easily navigable on bike or by foot, Governors Island is considered an oasis for city residents, many of whom live in public housing developments in nearby neighborhoods and are underserved in terms of access to open space. For an affordable fare, visitors can access the park via ferry.

To ensure that the park is accessible to all, Governors Island has partnered with various agencies to offer free ferry rides to many visitors, including all residents of New York City Housing Authority housing, seniors 65 and over, children 12 and under, current and former military servicemembers, and anyone with an IDNYC (a municipal identification card for New York City residents).

As a result, 40 percent of all visitors in 2020 accessed Governors Island for free. Overall, 99 percent of all New York City zip codes are represented in the annual visitors to Governors Island.

Many of these visitors were also involved in planning the park; between 2008 and 2010, the community was engaged through surveys, exhibits, tours, presentations, meetings, and hearings. The Trust for Governors Island continues this engagement today as it plans for future phases of the island's development and transformation.



Play lawns seen from Outlook Hill Scramble. (*© Julienne Schaer 2019*)

The park at Governors Island also serves as a venue for local organizations to host public events and community retreats. The island's food and beverage program, which exclusively supports New York-based small businesses, created jobs for over 150 New Yorkers in 2020.

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## Resilience and Sustainability

Resilience strategies were critical to the design of the park, especially since Governors Island is poised to be a demonstration site to showcase new ways of developing and implementing climate resilience measures.

To protect the island from sea-level rise, the site was raised based on flood data projected for 2100. To reduce stormwater runoff, rainwater capture systems and permeable paving were implemented. The permeable pavement and native plantings replaced acres of impervious asphalt, which also helps decrease the urban heat island effect.

These resilience measures are especially important for equitable open space access, given the proximity to low-lying areas in Manhattan and Brooklyn that will rely on Governors Island for park access and more as the climate crisis evolves.

In fall 2020, Mayor Bill de Blasio and the Trust for Governors Island announced plans to establish a center for climate solutions on Governors Island, which will bring together interdisciplinary research focused on developing, testing, and scaling new tools for climate solutions with meaningful public engagement through educational and cultural experiences. The forward-thinking approach to resilience

strategies coupled with this new center ensures that the park and the island not only will survive many future climate threats but also will help create even better solutions than those that exist today.

## Funding

The cost of the park space development on Governors Island, which was paid for with a mix of public and private funding, totaled \$197.3 million—design costs came to \$25.7 million and construction costs amounted to \$171.6 million.

For operations and maintenance activities, the aforementioned nonprofit Trust for Governors Island was created by the city of New York to oversee the planning, redevelopment, and ongoing operations of the 150 acres (61 ha) of Governors Island under its purview, including the 40 acres (16.2 ha) of public parkland.