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A Grace Note for a Gritty Business

Efficient Machinery and Elegant Architecture to Sort and Crush a City's Recycling



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CLIFFORD COMPTON/AERIAL AND ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOS OF NEW JERSEY

Sims Municipal Recycling Facility This processing plant on the waterfront in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, was designed by Selldorf Architects and is expected to be fully running in a few weeks. It is an ensemble of modernist boxes squeezing art, and even a little drama, from a modest design budget.

Recycling in New York is a scrappy business. Billions have gone toward building water tunnels, power plants, subways and sewage treatment facilities, but little toward an infrastructure of recycling. In turn, New Yorkers have been slow to separate bottles and cans the way they flip a light switch or swipe a MetroCard: Recycling remains less an everyday fact of life than a do-good option, like tipping the mail carrier at the holidays.

**MICHAEL
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ARCHITECTURE
REVIEW

But a Sims Municipal Recycling Facility will

open shortly at the South Brooklyn Marine Terminal in Sunset Park. The city's first big, state-of-the-art plant for processing discarded plastic, metals and glass, it promises jobs to nearby residents and, as the cost of exporting garbage out of state rises, some savings for the city.

Did I mention that it's an architectural keeper? No, it doesn't resemble a giant egret or stegosaurus skeleton, or sport flying titanium panels. And its designer didn't cost some obscene premium. The facility is understated, well proportioned and well planned — elegant, actually, and not just for a garbage site. It is an ensemble

of modernist boxes squeezing art, and even a little drama, from a relatively meager design budget. Sanitation projects are usually the ultimate NIMBY flash point. This one makes a good case for the social and economic benefits of design — and for old-fashioned industrial waterfront development as an abiding urban virtue.

Barges loaded with metals, glass and plastic from the five boroughs will converge on the site, cutting, Sims estimates, about 250,000 miles that sanitation trucks now travel around town, a

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Turning Sleuth, With Reliable Dog in Tow

Theresa Schwegel is an Edgar-winning crime writer whose Chicago police stories are more nuanced and impassioned than most books of their genre. None of that has brought her much attention, and neither

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BOOKS
OF THE TIMES

will the nondescript title of her fifth novel, "The Good Boy" — until readers figure out what it means. The story is well-woven enough to contain three contenders for "Good Boy" honors.





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On the Waterfront, a Grace Note for the Gritty Business of Recycling

From First Arts Page

windfall for city air quality and traffic congestion. The project started a decade ago. The Sanitation Department was seeking a long-term recycling partner. Sims Municipal Recycling won the job. It proposed to build a plant on an 11-acre decrepit pier, a former police tow pound, at the Marine Terminal. The facility would handle most of the city's recyclables, up to 20,000 tons a month, and include an education center that wasn't just a repurposed closet with an instructional video to torture captive school-

children. The city committed to fixing up the pier. Sims, in turn, reviewed projected sea-level rise — this was years before Hurricane Sandy — and decided to elevate vulnerable parts of the site by up to four feet above city requirements (using recycled glass and crushed rock from the Second Avenue subway project). Spending the additional \$1 million for that purpose kept the pier dry last year when Sandy's 12-foot surge flooded nearby streets and crippled other waterfront businesses.

And instead of letting engineers design the plant, as often happens at an industrial site, Sims hired Selldorf Architects, a



Top, solar panels on the Sims Municipal Recycling Facility. Above, barges will deliver recycling.

glamorous New York firm known for doing Chelsea art galleries and cultural institutions. This was not an unprecedented move. The city enlisted Ennead Architects to design the Newtown Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Even so, it was something akin to A&E getting Pierre Boulez to compose a soundtrack for "Duck Dynasty."

The idea? Partly to game the public review process, but also to build a well-designed plant — welcoming to the public, beckoning from the waterfront.

Recycling is a high-minded although notoriously low-margin,

capital-intensive, volume-based industry, dependent on increasing public participation. So the plant needed to be a good citizen and neighbor. At the same time, it had to function as an advertisement for itself.

Selldorf was, in retrospect, an inspired choice. The German-born Annabelle Selldorf runs the firm, which stresses crisp lines, elegant volumes and a clean, formal vocabulary in which nothing goes to waste.

Devising a site plan, Ms. Selldorf knew that the main, shedlike L-shaped building with all the recycling equipment had to hug the southern edge of the pier, where barges would unload. That meant

the northern edge could become a public-friendly zone, with the education and visitors center, trees, bioswales, a grassy entrance and parking for school buses. The center, including offices, a cafeteria, classrooms and a terrace with a killer view over the harbor, became a light-filled, three-story shoe box, parallel with the pier.

The geometry of buildings produced a satisfying suite of courtyards, a mini-cityscape. The broad pitched roof suspended over the main building creates a clerestory for light and air. For visitors, the drama of the architecture unfolds moving through it: a sky-high catwalk linking the

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More images of the Sims Municipal Recycling Facility: nytimes.com/design

visitors center to the main building leads to a bird's-eye view of the mountain of recycling machines. Cranes, trucks and barges disgorge the city's discards below; the machines sort and crush the maelstrom.

It's bound to be an awesome spectacle.

In its stripped-down aesthetic, the plant brings to mind factories in Germany or Norway, where recycling is routine and good design integral to the social compact. An enormous rooftop solar array that Sims says is the largest in the city, helps power the facility. Mussels dangle on ropes from the pier, birds patrol the shore, a wind turbine is on its way.

Will it inspire people to recycle?

That's the \$110 million bet. New York City taxpayers invested \$60 million in the site; Sims, \$50 million. Eventually, the city will own the whole kit and caboodle. Architecture added 1 percent to the final bill, estimates Sims's general manager, Tom Outerbridge, a pittance considering the fees for many public projects in-

volving front-rank architects. Ms. Selldorf told me that she appreciated the tight fiscal leash, as all good artists want constraints.

She used recycled steel. Materials are off-the-shelf. Instead of a clunky corrugation, the default skin for warehouses, she opted for a thinner, rounded paneling (modest extra cost), which shimmers in the light. She grouped downspouts to synopate one facade and flipped the skeleton (the beams and struts) from inside the walls to the outside on part of the main building to give its flesh some bones.

Urban waterfront projects these days foretell a better quality of life. They boast parks and kayak launches, bike paths and luxury apartments.

But the waterfront still must serve the city's infrastructure, otherwise even more industry moves by truck through the streets. Keeping industry on the waterfront improves quality of life, too.

That the new Sims plant was built at all is testament to decades of perseverance by environmentalists, and to the power of local government in this era of Washington gridlock. That it adds an improbable grace note to a gritty stretch of Brooklyn waterfront can be chalked up to enlightened industry harnessing the power of architecture.

Glittery Prelude to Oscars' Big Night

From First Arts Page

keting at Warner Bros., who was on hand at Saturday's event. "Everyone is still in the race."

On Saturday, in front of a giant Hollywood ballroom that will hold the official Oscar night reception on March 2, a parade of toastmasters made up for decades of near misses and recognition deferred.

In a speech by Tom Hanks, for instance, Mr. Martin was compared favorably to the likes of Voltaire. But after working on more than three dozen movies, including "Sloggirl" and "Roxanne," this actor-writer-producer-musician had never won an Academy Award.

Neither had the costume designer Piero Tosi, nor the actress Angela Lansbury, who also got honorary Oscars, though Angelina Jolie — who was given an award for humanitarian work — had been named best supporting actress in 2010 for her work in "Girl, Interrupted."

Ms. Lansbury, who received an Oscar nomination in 1945 for her first film appearance, in "Gaslight," described having given up on the movie: to work in theater and television. "What an 11 o'clock number," she said of an award that could only be seen as very late arrival.

were everywhere.

Bruce Dern, suddenly in the limelight for his performance as a single-minded coot in pursuit of a lucky break in "Nebraska," was planted squarely in front of the main entrance. Wispy-haired, with a glowing smile, he stood next to June Squibb, who plays his long-suffering wife in the film.

"I'm just thrilled to be put in this category," said Ms. Squibb, who has labored mostly in television or as a character actress in films like "Meet Joe Black" and "The Age of Innocence."

At the CBS Films table, Oscar Isaac, the not entirely famous

Showing your face might be a good idea.

star of "Inside Llewyn Davis," kept company for a while with the CBS chief executive Les Moonves. Mr. Isaac then hustled off to another Oscar campaign stop: an official academy screening of his film that was taking place elsewhere.

During the cocktail hour, Ben Stiller, a hopeful for "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," was in aw-shucks mode. "I've been to the

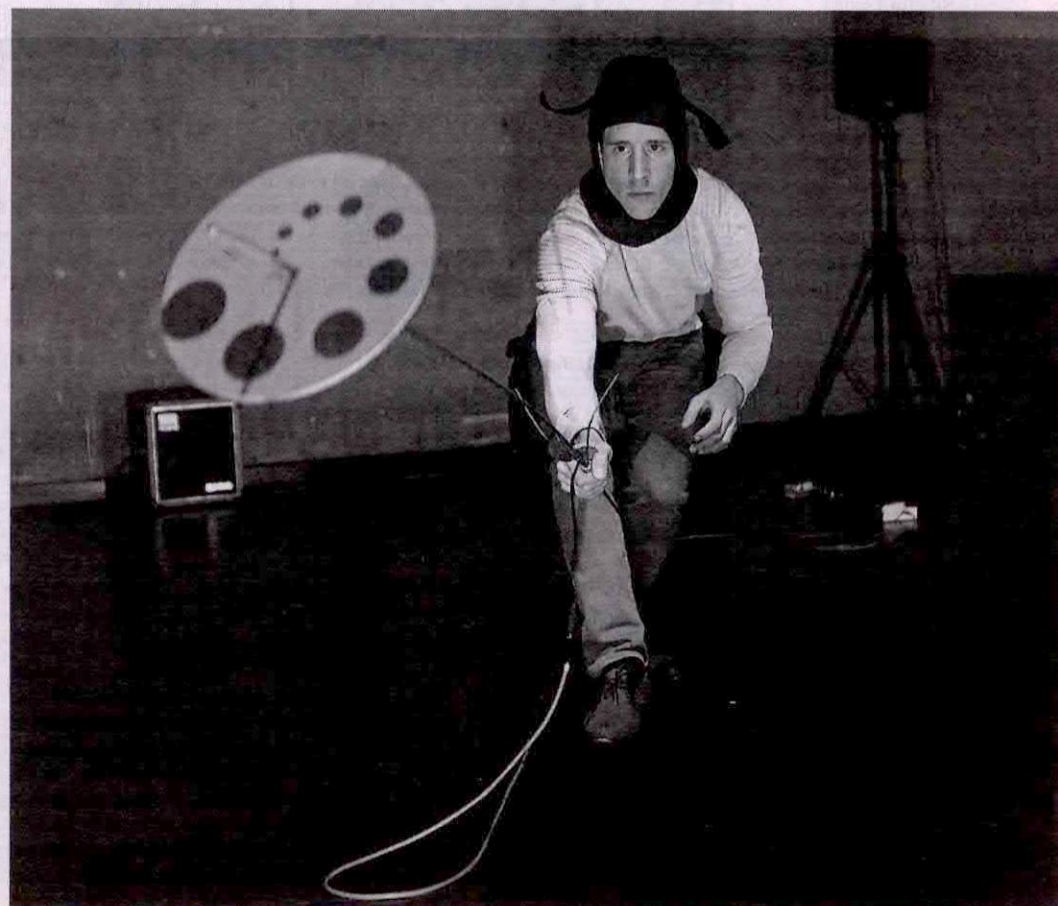
was so funny."

Certainly, it was clear who was running and who was not. The producer Kathleen Kennedy, last year a hopeful for "Lincoln," stayed glued to her seat across from a similarly stationary George Lucas. Octavia Spencer, who campaigned heavily two years ago for "The Help," this time was not interested in lingering chitchat. "I'm sorry, I'm looking for my date," she said, cutting a conversation short during the cocktail hour.

The evening also served as a type of coming out party for Jeff Shell, who took over as chairman of the Universal Filmed Entertainment Group two months ago after a career in television. "All of this is new to me," he said, shaking one hand after another near the entrance to the ballroom. "What's your advice?"

Most of the presentations this year were canned speeches that scrolled by on teleprompters, pre-empting the occasional obscenities and missteps that warmed past events. But with old dogs on the stage and ambitious underdogs in the crowd, the weird side of show business was bound to leak through.

An old friend of Mr. Martin's, apropos of not much, did an awkward magic trick on the stage. Emma Thompson, who costarred



ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

142241 Arturo Vidich employed novel contraptions in his performance at the Abrons Arts Center.

Tapping Unseen Forces in the Dungeon