

Bob Geddes is working on an 800-acre dump

By DAISY FITCH
 Staff Writer

Robert L. Geddes is the prize-winning architect of college campuses, city malls and cultural centers, as well as the dean of Princeton University's School of Architecture.

But nothing in his long and distinguished career has been quite like the commission he has now: to transform the weed and sludge-encrusted northern waterfront of New Jersey into 800 acres of an unparalleled park, one he says will stand in size and significance with Central Park when it is completed in the next decade.

Liberty Park today is a spectacular dump, "a derelict landscape of weeds, litter, rotting piers and the flotsam and jetsam of sea and city-life," says Ada Louise Huxtable, architecture critic of The New York Times.

It is a dump with a view across to the full drama of the New York skyline. An hour from Trenton, easily accessible from exit 14B of the New Jersey Turnpike, Geddes believes that "the image of New Jersey will change with this park — the whole harbor entrance will once again emerge."

IT WILL BE a major urban face-lift, one which Geddes predicts will someday attract as many people as does the prime cultural attraction of New York city today, the Metropolitan Museum, which last year drew more than 3 million people through its doors.

Liberty Park, Geddes said, has one of the most dramatic sites in the world. On the edge of a great harbor, the park will provide public access both to the waterfront and to new recreational facilities. A crescent-shaped harbor front walk, series of green parks, serpentine waterway, wildlife habitat, marina, restored historic railroad terminal, hotel complex, shops, restaurants, museums, are all involved in this far-reaching master plan that is sponsored by the N.J. Department of Environmental Protection.

So far, \$2.4 million dollars of Federal Title X grant money has transformed 32 acres into an area for picnic tables, benches and walks and will be used to clean up the harbor of abandoned piers, rusty ships, and sludge as well as the clearing of the natural salt marsh, so that this breeding ground for the canvas-back ducks will grow once again.

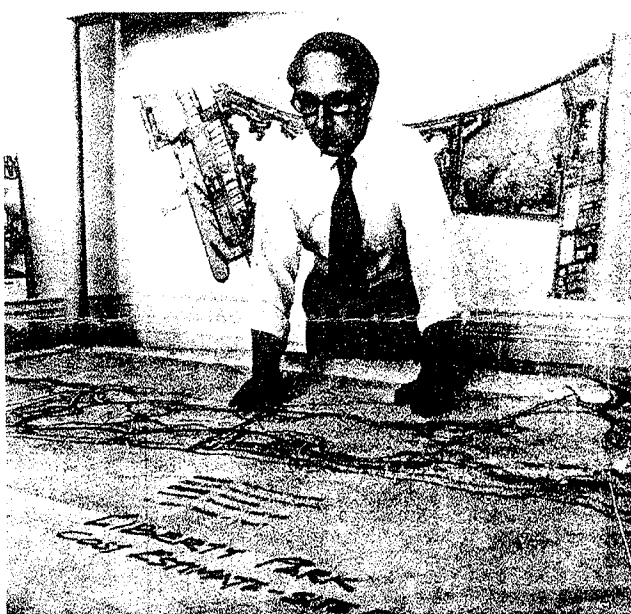
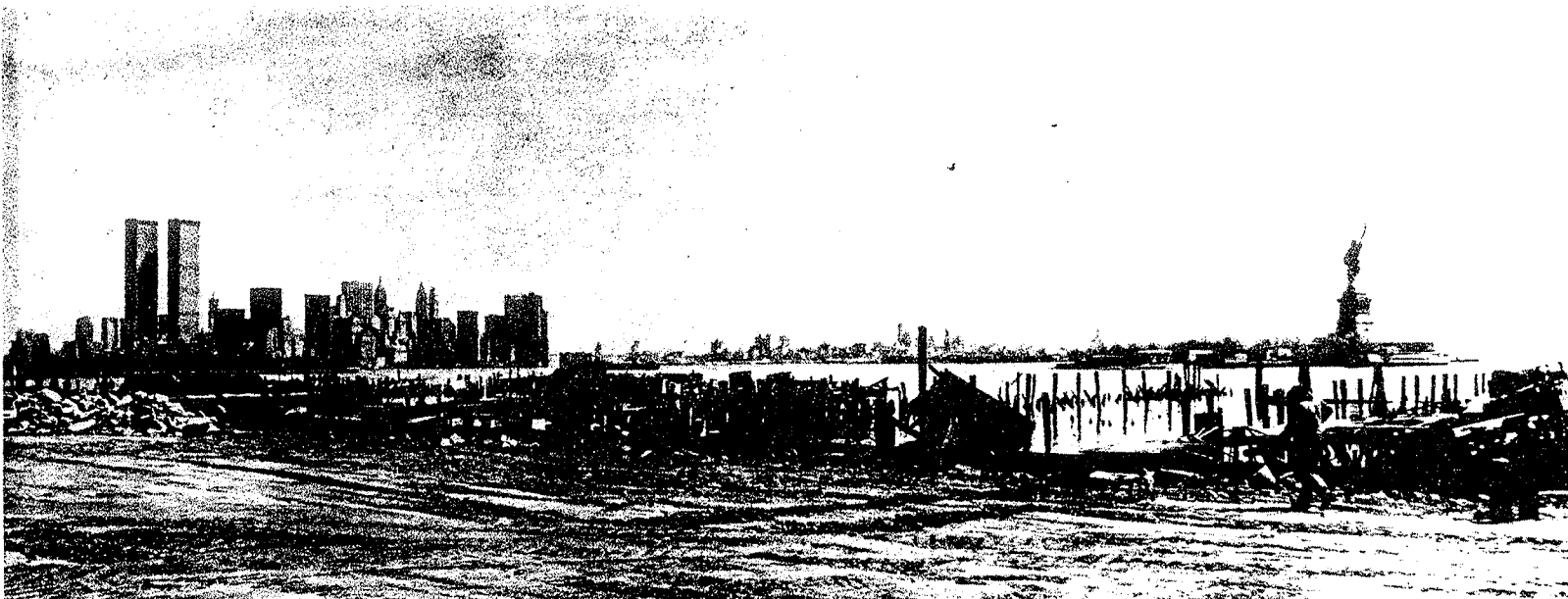
The eventual completion of the park will go well into the '80's. Estimates for the final cost have ranged as high as \$100 million.

Geddes is an architect who believes that not only buildings are shaped by man, but landscapes as well.

"Central Park is an example. Many people think of Central Park as a leftover natural landscape. It isn't that at all. It was completely designed. Frederick Law Olmsted built the park. Every tree, every rock, every path, every pond, was a matter of conscious choice."

GEDDES, a slender man of medium height, incorporates, it has been said, the same principles of design that he applies to his buildings: spare, sensitive construction; orderly lines, no superfluous external ornamentation, a certain terseness and containment.

He was born in 1923 in America's first planned city, Philadelphia, and is a graduate of Yale University and



The dumping ground with a magnificent view that will someday be the 800-acre Liberty Park, and Robert L. Geddes, the man charged with the transformation.

Good design: what we need more of

Committed to the modern movement in architecture, Robert Geddes emphasizes not only design but the improvement of the quality of life. Architecture, Geddes says, should use a wide range of knowledge as well as logic in understanding how people live, and buildings must have a visual impact while encouraging a sense of community among their dwellers.

The real thrust for the architect today lies in bridging a world of space and light, of grids and graphics, to the world of housing developments Jane Jacobs has described as "marvels of dullness," the schools, institutions and public buildings that "are sealed against any buoyancy or vitality of life," the poor quality of china, glass, and furniture that swamp the marketplace.

WE ARE FAR BEHIND Europe in our standards of designs admits Geddes, "partly from the lack of leadership that comes from both the private and the public sectors. Neither industry nor government in this country either encourage or support the craftsmen's tradition."

Industry should encourage good design since, as Geddes points out, they make so many objects of our everyday world. "I am hopeful that industry one day will take the lead. We need to bring the arts and the crafts out of museums and into stores."

Architects should get involved, "especially in the public policies that determine landscape and housing

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the Harvard Graduate School of Design. He came to the architecture school here 12 years ago, after 14 years of teaching at the University of Pennsylvania. Today, under his administrative hand, the Princeton architecture school has been ranked by a poll of deans of architecture schools within the top five schools in the country.

His firm of Geddes, Brecher, Qualls, Cunningham has grown from the original four partners of 1953 to 13 partners. It employs a staff of 34 and last year was responsible for over \$178 million worth of construction.

Bridging the academic world with the commercial world presents no problems to Geddes. "In an ideal world I would be an architect in a university, but this is not possible. I

consider my outside world in the same manner that a university scientist devotes part of his time to experiments in the lab."

He often lunches in a dining hall of his own creation at the Institute for Advanced Study, a cloister-like atmosphere with a grove of white birches, a quiet space contained by buildings, trees and sun, an interior curving staircase of great impact, a place of transparency that allows you to be seen as well as to see, a place where many dine in surprising stillness through careful arrangement of acoustics.

TIME SPENT with Geddes is time spent away from the mediocre and the banal. Rooms and buildings take on new dimensions as he talks, forms attain new significance, textures

come alive. The listener is acutely aware of Geddes' concern for social as well as visual values.

"Aren't all architects by nature utopians? We all want to improve the world. An architect should be aware and critical, contributing to the betterment of the world. He should reflect society's values but also be an agent of change and improvement."

The first task of architecture, says Geddes, is to serve as "a social skin, an environmental filter for sound, heat, light. The body is really very frail; it has narrow limits of stress. If the environment is too hot or cold, we die; if it's too noisy, we can't work; if there's too much light or too much glare, or if it's too dark, we can't act effectively."

Many poorly designed buildings come, he says, more from "insen-

sitivity on the part of the architect than any incompetence."

Architecture, he feels, must also create an area for social interaction. Architecture is not just for individuals.

"In fact, it is the most public of all the arts," he says, "an art which is not only observed but experienced. You observe painting, sculpture, dance, but architecture you also participate in as a user."

The real issue today for architects, Bob Geddes believes, is how to produce decent housing for the greatest number of people at a reasonable cost.

"The traditional architect viewed the house as an isolated building in its private landscape; the modern architect should see the house as

related to the whole idea of housing and as part of a shared landscape."

HIS OWN HOUSE, which he built in 1966, he sees as a prototype to be used again and again as a model of privacy, occupying only a small amount of land, inexpensive to build and maintain, visually appealing.

Set as it is on the corner of two well-traveled roads in Princeton Township, his house was designed so that one can look out but not in through the addition of long, vertical concrete panels adjacent to the ceiling-to-floor windows.

The rooms inside the house were designed so that Geddes and his wife could entertain friends or students, while their two children, now college

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Staff photos by Calvin Soliday

The most public art

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graduates, could entertain simultaneously, yet apart, as teenagers. It is small but spacious, orderly and elegant, allowing for a wide range of interests and styles — contemporary furniture, old Italian prints, an English flower garden, an herb garden. The house is designed around a courtyard which contains a large piece of contemporary metal sculpture and three pots of golden chrysanthemums.

Geddes has a deep attachment to his home town. "The trouble with Princeton is that I like it so much I never want to leave." He also has a great concern for the cities of New Jersey. "Trenton needs attention and care. There is no simple panacea for Trenton to bring it alive. It's a continuing process."

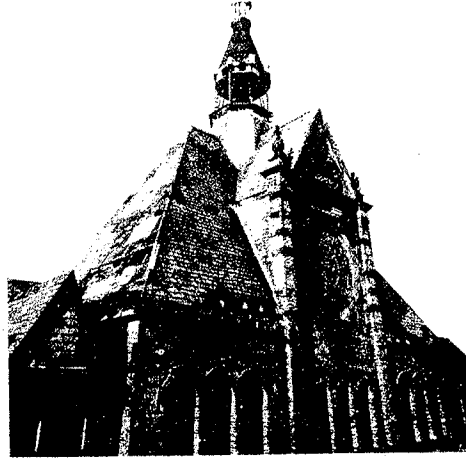
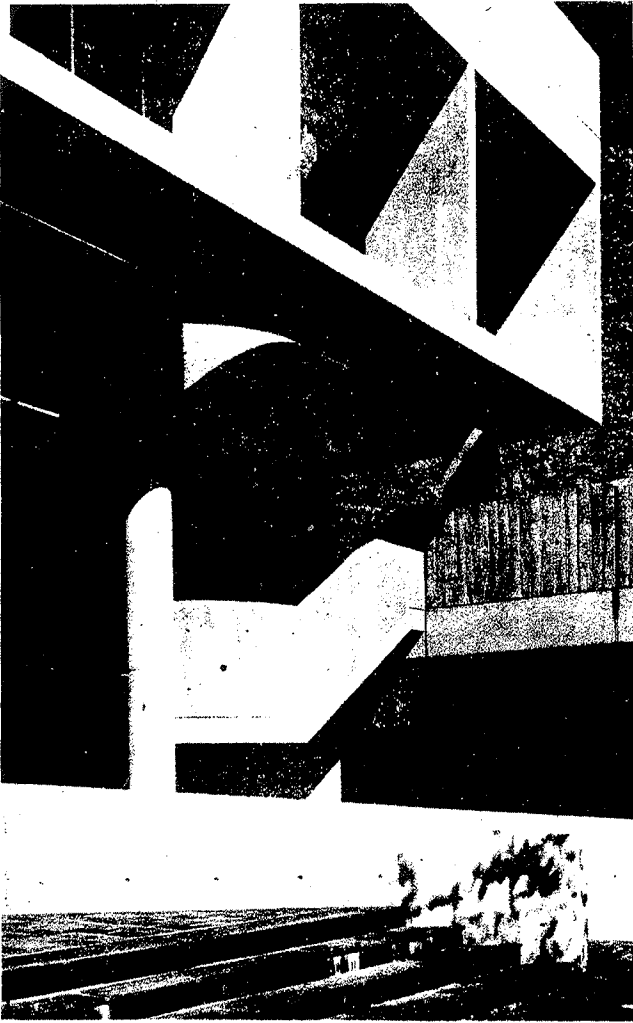
"Trenton's great shame was the covering of its waterfront, the Delaware River, by the state complex. What an insensitivity, this cutting off of the river from the rest of the city, which would not happen today."

His only Trenton building is the parking garage on Broad and Front streets, although he also did a master plan for downtown Trenton which was never used. Construction will begin soon on a 120-apartment complex for the elderly near Mill Hill Park, a design which won the competition sponsored by the Central New Jersey Chapter of the AIA. Another Trenton connection is his students, several whom have worked for the city Planning Department.

HIS DESIGNS for Stockton State College in Pomona, the additions to the Institute for Advanced Study and to Southern Illinois University in Carbondale are the ones he mentions with greatest pride. All three have won national awards.

He has also been honored for his town plan for the urban extension of Vienna, Austria, an international competition which he says he was surprised that an American firm won. He has designed a circular police station in Philadelphia, a national opera house in Sydney, Australia, and redevelopment plans for Philadelphia's waterfront.

A the same time, Geddes has expanded the school of architecture at Princeton to become more than a



Good design

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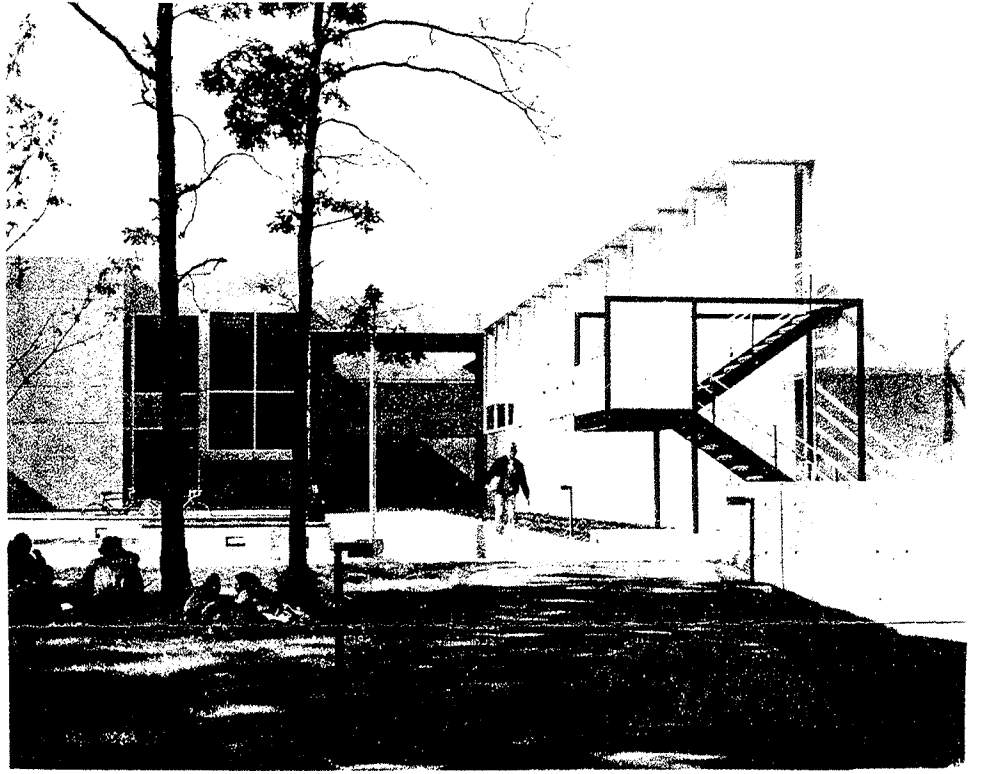
design. He must understand the government point of view in terms of their time pressures and their financing, and he must then seek to educate public officials about the quality of the environment.

ARCHITECTS NEED to emphasize design, texture, color and the human scale, he observed. "We need vivid buildings, not slick mirrored edifices, not peanut brittle concrete."

One reason for poor standards of taste, according to Geddes, is the fact that people use existing models for their frame of reference — "And what do they have? A drive down U.S. 1."

"We need to reinforce the good society through good design," a concept which goes back to the 19th century artist and reformer William Morris.

Architecture, according to Geddes, has always been affirmative about life. "Architecture has an integrating quality. There's never been a protest architecture. There's never been an architecture of the absurd."



Buildings of Geddes' past and future — the addition to the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, above; Stockton State College in Pomona, at right, and the old railroad terminal being restored as part of Liberty Park.

good department in the history of architecture. The school now offers landscape architecture and city planning, which, with architecture, Geddes considers three aspects of a single discipline, the discipline of design.

Princeton remains one of the smallest of the architecture schools — there are 68 graduates students at

Princeton as compared to Harvard's 600.

The younger generation of architects Geddes finds have "a great sensitivity to the environment. I'm not clear yet how this in-coming group of

students stand in their social and political awareness, but they are very interested in landscape and they are committed to widening the palette of visual stimulation for themselves and for the users."