

Little Island *SOCIAL IMPACT STUDY*



Heatherwick studio



This social impact analysis and report was completed by AEA Consulting, with valuable input and support from Little Island and Heatherwick Studio staff, and social impact study participants. We extend our thanks to everyone who contributed their time and insights.

We also acknowldge the Hudson River Park and The Diller von Furstenberg Family Foundation for their support and for their vision, contribution, and commitment to the ongoing operation of Little Island.

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WHAT is Little Island?



Founded in 2021, Little Island is an award-winning public park primarily funded by The Diller-von Furstenberg Family Foundation, located in Hudson River Park.

The park was designed as an entirely new type of public space for New York. Born from a collaboration of the UK-based Heatherwick Studio and the New York-based landscape architecture firm MNLA, led by Signe Nielsen, Little Island was designed to offer all New Yorkers and visitors a public space that is captivating and restorative.

Specifically, it exists to provide:

- A welcoming space for all, offering inclusive hospitality in an urban oasis
- Training and job opportunities to local residents and artists
- Access to arts events and creative activities for visitors

The park is run by an organization with five core values that inform the intended social impact:

Excellence
Hospitality
Collaboration
Problem-solving
Trust



A short history of the neighborhood

The land of Hudson River Park, where Little Island is located, was once home to the Lenape tribe during the early colonization of America. The Lenape used the park land as a seasonal encampment for hunting, fishing and conducting trade along the Hudson River.



The 19th and 20th centuries saw the Hudson River waterfront transform into a busy port of entry. Between 1910 and 1935, Pier 54 operated the British Cunard-White Star line, serving as a point of departure and return for trans-Atlantic ocean liner voyages.



In 1912, survivors from the famed Titanic disaster arrived to safety at Pier 54 while aboard the RMS Carpathia rescue liner.

In 1915, the RMS Lusitania departed from Pier 54, only to be sunk by German U-boats off the coast of Ireland five days later as a casualty of World War I.

The steel archway at the foot of Little Island's South Bridge entrance still remains from the Cunard-White Star building.

The pier eventually fell into disuse until the 1970s to the early 80s, when Pier 54 – along with other piers south of Chelsea – became a safe haven for New York City's growing LGBTQ community. Here, they could openly socialize without fear of harassment and discrimination. In 1986, Pier 54 became home to the annual Dance on the Pier event. For over 25 years, the event took place at the pier as part of the Pride festivities.

In 2012, Hurricane Sandy hit New York City's coastline, heavily damaging several piers along the Hudson, including Pier 54. A year later, Barry Diller of The Diller-von Furstenberg Family Foundation, in partnership with Hudson River Park Trust leadership, started imagining the repair and reactivation of the pier.

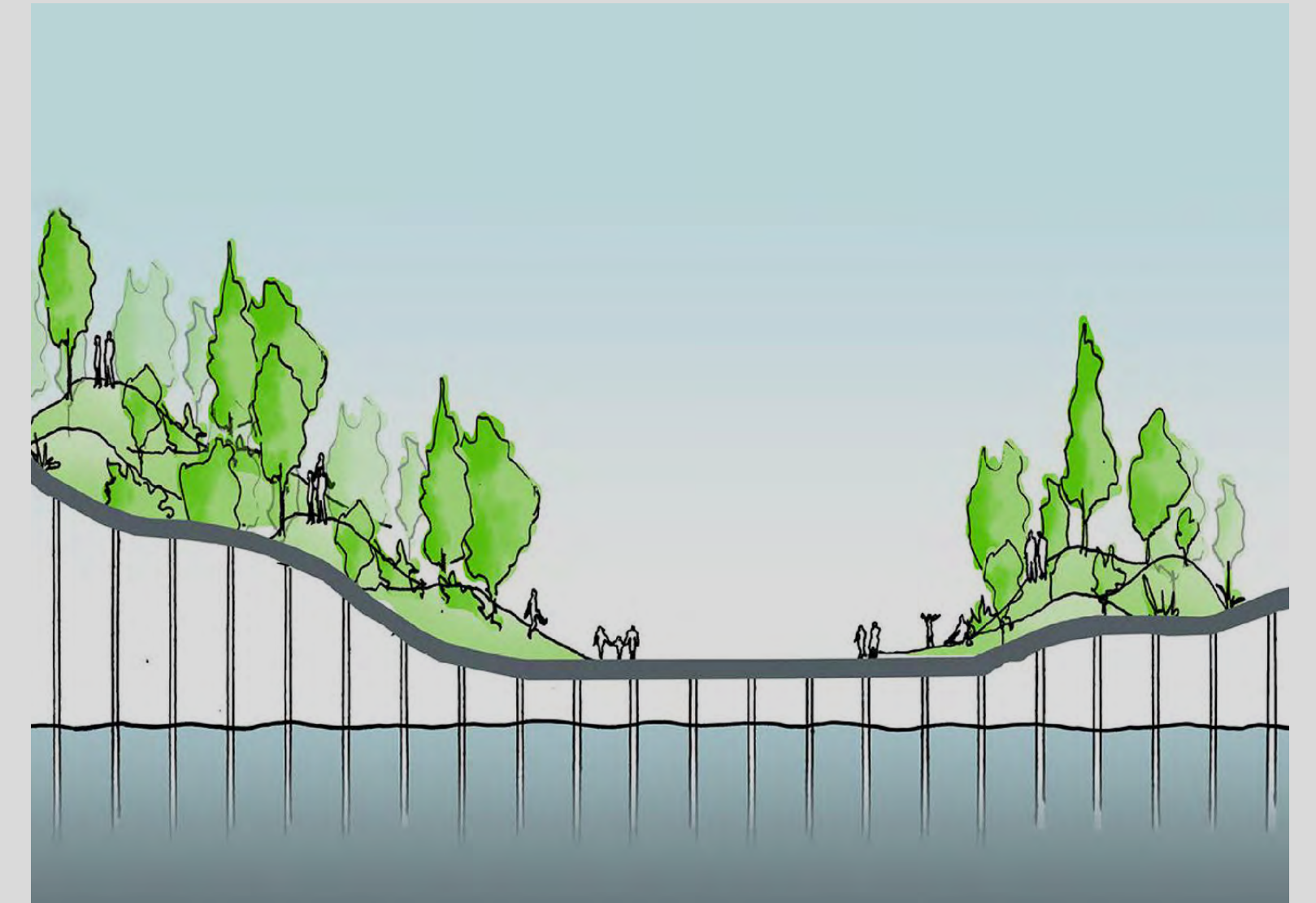
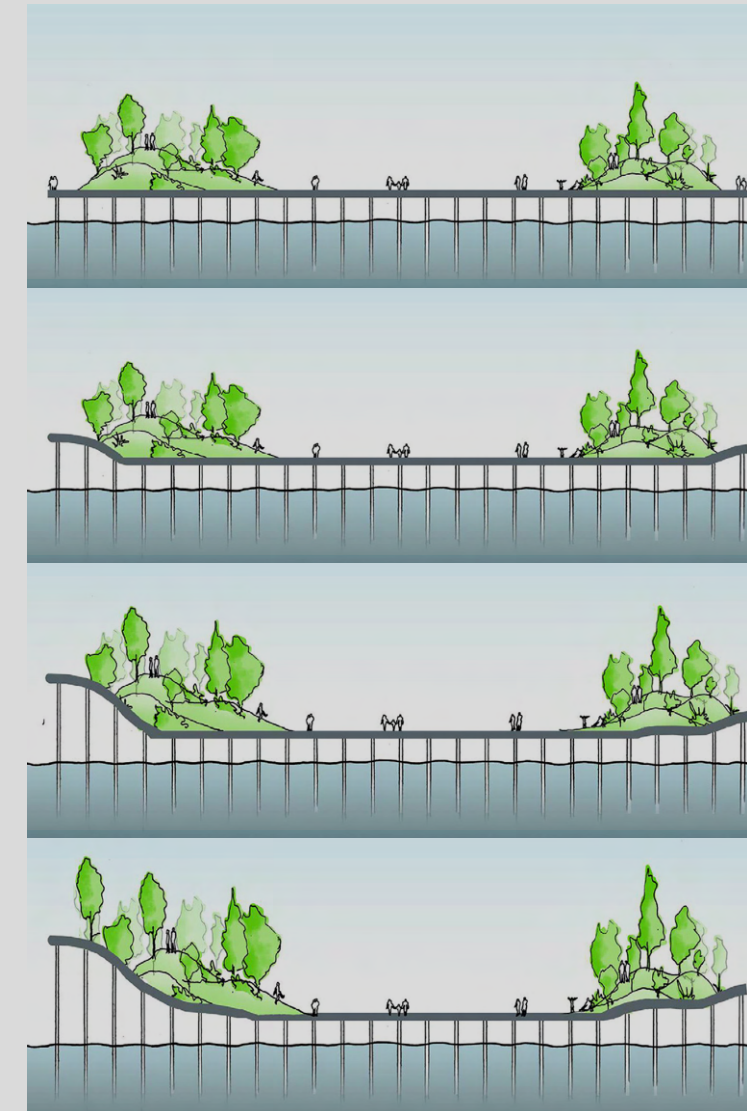
Little Island opened on May 21, 2021.

How the design was formed

The design team at Heatherwick saw this as an opportunity to rethink what a pier could be.

The starting point was not the structure itself, but the experience for visitors: the excitement of being over the water, the feeling of leaving the city behind and being immersed in greenery.

The idea of raising the park on its foundations came from the existing wooden piles in the water, remnants of the many piers that used to extend from the shoreline of Manhattan.

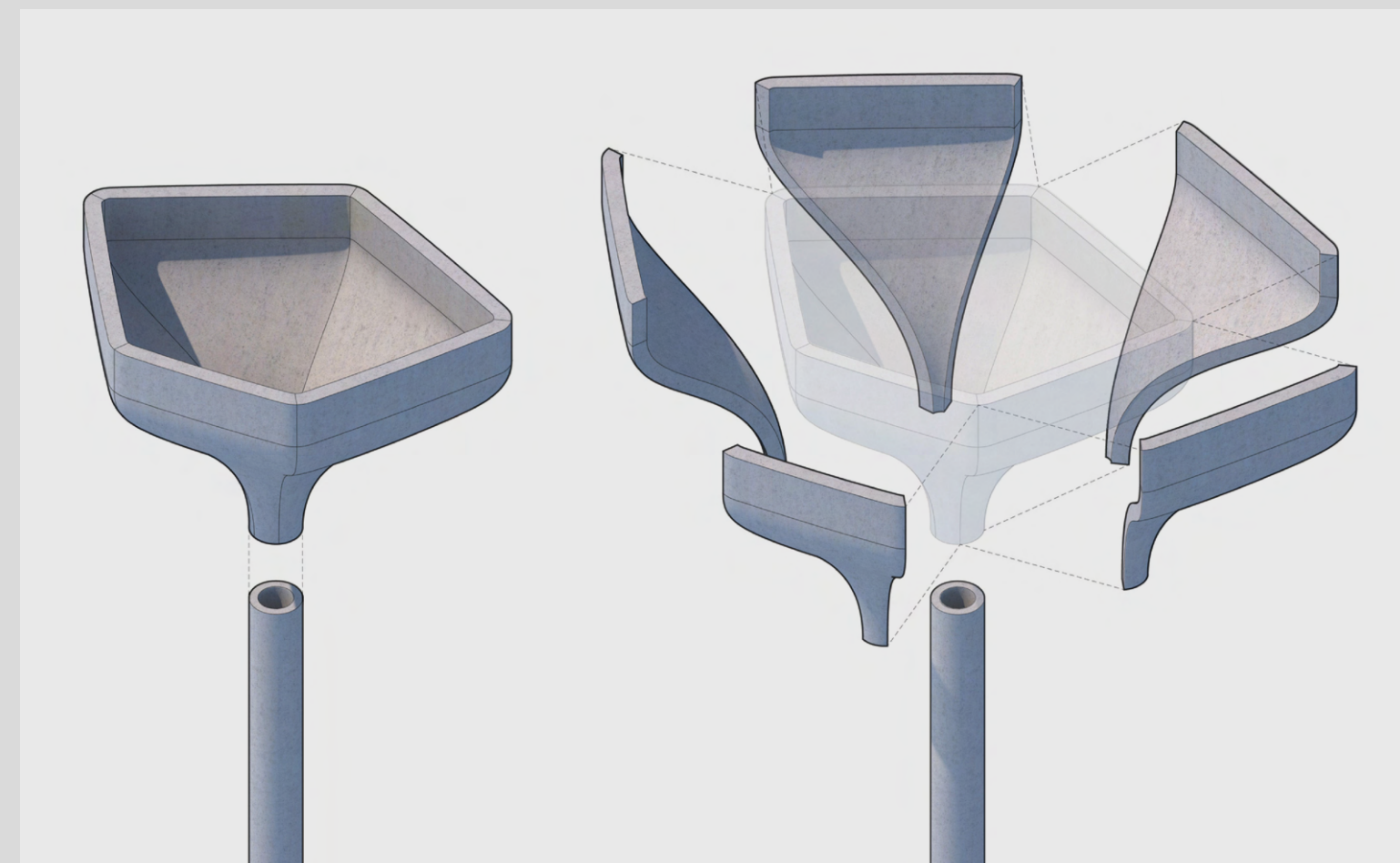


The planters and planting

New piles were necessary to support any type of pier. The design team felt that instead of sticks holding up a deck, the piles could become the deck; extending into planters that join to create the park's surface. The form of these is inspired by the mosaic of ice that forms around the original wooden piles when the river freezes.

The height of the piles varies to create the park's contours. The corner of the pier is lifted to allow sunlight to reach the marine habitat, and the edge falls to define hills, viewpoints and to carve out a natural amphitheatre for performances.

Working with landscape architects MNLA, the planters, or 'tulip pots', have been filled with more than a hundred different species of indigenous trees and plants, which encourage biodiversity and are able to thrive in New York's climate. Each corner of the island represents a different microclimate.



Powered by people

Little Island is non-profit organization funded by the Diller-von Furstenberg Family Foundation and operated by a dedicated team of 50 year-round staff. It has a 3-part constituency that forms its community: Visitors, Artists, and Staff.

Here are some of them.

Doris Mare
Neighborhood Resident



Eganam Segbefia
Trumpeter



Shanequa Coleman
Custodian



Orrin Sheehan
Head of Horticulture



Nancy Goldring
Neighborhood Resident



Jingji Gao
Neighborhood Resident





DOES IT work
as a place?

The ambition of Little Island and Heatherwick Studio was to create a park that is welcoming to all, and that offers free access to culture and green space.

This Social Impact Study was commissioned to measure whether we achieved those objectives.

We sought to answer the following questions.

WHO
are the current
visitors and how do
they perceive it?

WHAT
impact does the
workforce development
program have on the
education and career
trajectories of the
staff?

HOW
do the
demographic
characteristics of the
visitors compare to those
of the New York City
population?

WHY
do people come here?

HOW
do our staff
and artists
experience
Little Island?

HOW
does the physical
design of Little Island
shape user experience
and what emotions does
it evoke?



WHAT research
did we do?

THEORY OF CHANGE

Social Purpose

What is our core purpose?
What needs are we addressing?

Impact

Long-term desired (intended)
and unintended effect

Activities

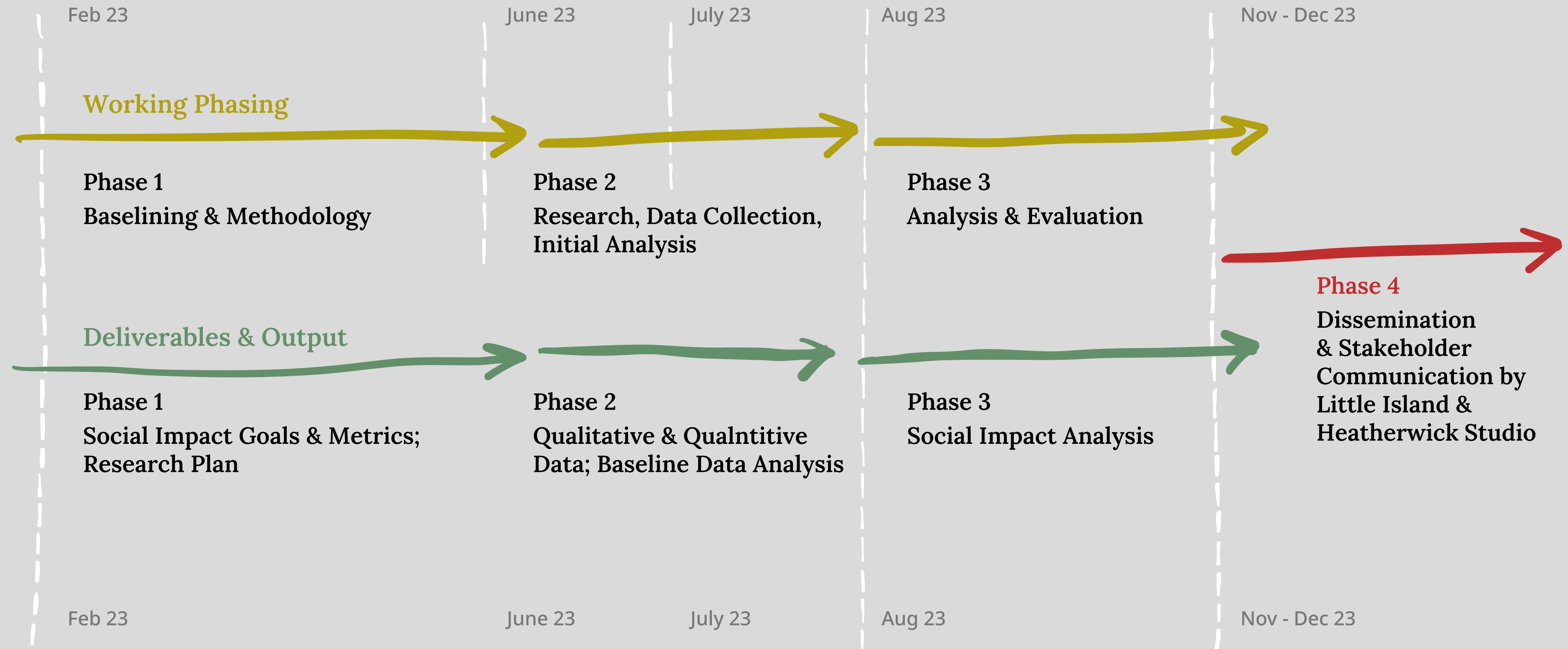
Programs, spaces, resources
to deliver our mission

Outcomes

How will the world be different
as a result of our activities?



How we went about it



WHAT we tracked

Desired Outcome	Metric	
Provide a safe environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-reported perception of safety	<div></div> <div>WELCOME + INCLUSION</div>
Provide an environment of welcoming hospitality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-reported perception of welcome	
Inclusive and accessible	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Visitor demographics (age, ethnicity, gender)• Visitor place of residence (Locals / New Yorkers / Tourists)• Ease of access, feeling of belonging (self-reported)	
Inclusive to visitors of all abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accessibility self-evaluation by people with disabilities	
<div></div>		
Public park for all New Yorkers & visitors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Park attendance• Dwell time• Repeat attendance	<div></div> <div>VISITATION + COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT</div>
Provide a safe environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of local school/community partners• Number / proportion of local visitors• Self-reported level of engagement and satisfaction by neighbors and community partners	
<div></div>		

Desired Outcome	Metric
Develop skillset, improve ability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of former staff / fellows in employment / education• Education / career progression by former fellows / staff• Training hours offered per year
Employ local New Yorkers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of locally based employees
Provide job opportunities for young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of fellow / intern placements offered per year
Engaging public space, an urban oasis	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-reported perception of park's design features• Self-reported satisfaction level with quality of park's public realm
Improved sense of wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-reported emotional & physical state while and after visiting the park
Provide the public with art	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attendance at free & ticketed events• Number of free & ticketed public events
Support artistic work and innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of performances presented• Self-reported satisfaction levels by artists
Employ local artists	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of NYC based artists commissioned

EMPLOYMENT +
EDUCATION

QUALITY OF PUBLIC SPACE

HEALTH + WELLNESS

ARTISTIC

Our approach to data collection and analysis

In our analysis of the survey results, we looked separately at the results of an online survey (people already familiar with Little Island), an onsite survey (first time and repeat visitors), as well as the data specifically for New Yorkers from both samples, to observe the differences.

2,797 PEOPLE CONTRIBUTED TO THIS STUDY.

Organizational Materials	Primary Data Collection Tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visitor data • Programing data • Workforce development program data • Staff demographics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online visitor survey • Onsite visitor survey • Individual interviews • Group interviews • Staff questionnaire • Neighborhood residents' questionnaire • Onsite observation by independent research team

Stakeholder Group	Data Collection Methods
Staff & Fellows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational data • Staff questionnaire (online) • Individual & group interviews
Artists & Creative Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational data • Individual & group interviews
Visitors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational data (2021 - 2022) • Survey (administered onsite and online) • Group interviews • Observation
Neighbor, Community & School Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational data • Individual & group interviews • Online questionnaire



WHAT were our
findings?

Who are the current visitors to Little Island?

Little Island attracts over 1.5 million visitors and growing every year from a very diverse range of backgrounds and locations.

70%

came from outside New York City and 30% were New York City residents.

7%

come from the local neighborhood.*

*This refers to visitors residing in NYC zip code areas 10011 and 10014. The 7% figure represents approximately 110,000 visitors. This is a high catchment rate and indicates repeat visitation from local residents who clearly care deeply for the park.

58%

of the visitors surveyed onsite were under the age of 40.

63%

identified as a woman.

How do visitors perceive Little Island?

The park is perceived as a safe public space, enhanced by the visibility of visitor services staff and the well-maintained quality of the public realm. Visitors reported feeling welcomed.

They described Little Island as a place where they feel comfortable and found it easy to navigate. Visitors who identified as having a disability found it more difficult to navigate the park than other respondents.

"ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS IS THE STAFF, THE PROGRAMS AND THE OFFERINGS ALL LOOK LIKE NEW YORK."

Survey respondent

93%

of onsite visitors and survey respondents said they felt safe when visiting Little Island.

95%

of onsite visitors found Little Island easy to access and navigate.

94%

find that Little Island is a place "for people like them".

62%

of the onsite survey respondents who identified as having a disability found Little Island easy to access and navigate.

15% did not.

92%

felt comfortable at Little Island.

As visitor demographics indicate, it is a diverse group of people, coming from New York City (with a larger proportion coming from Manhattan), from New York State and other parts of the US, as well as visitors from other countries.

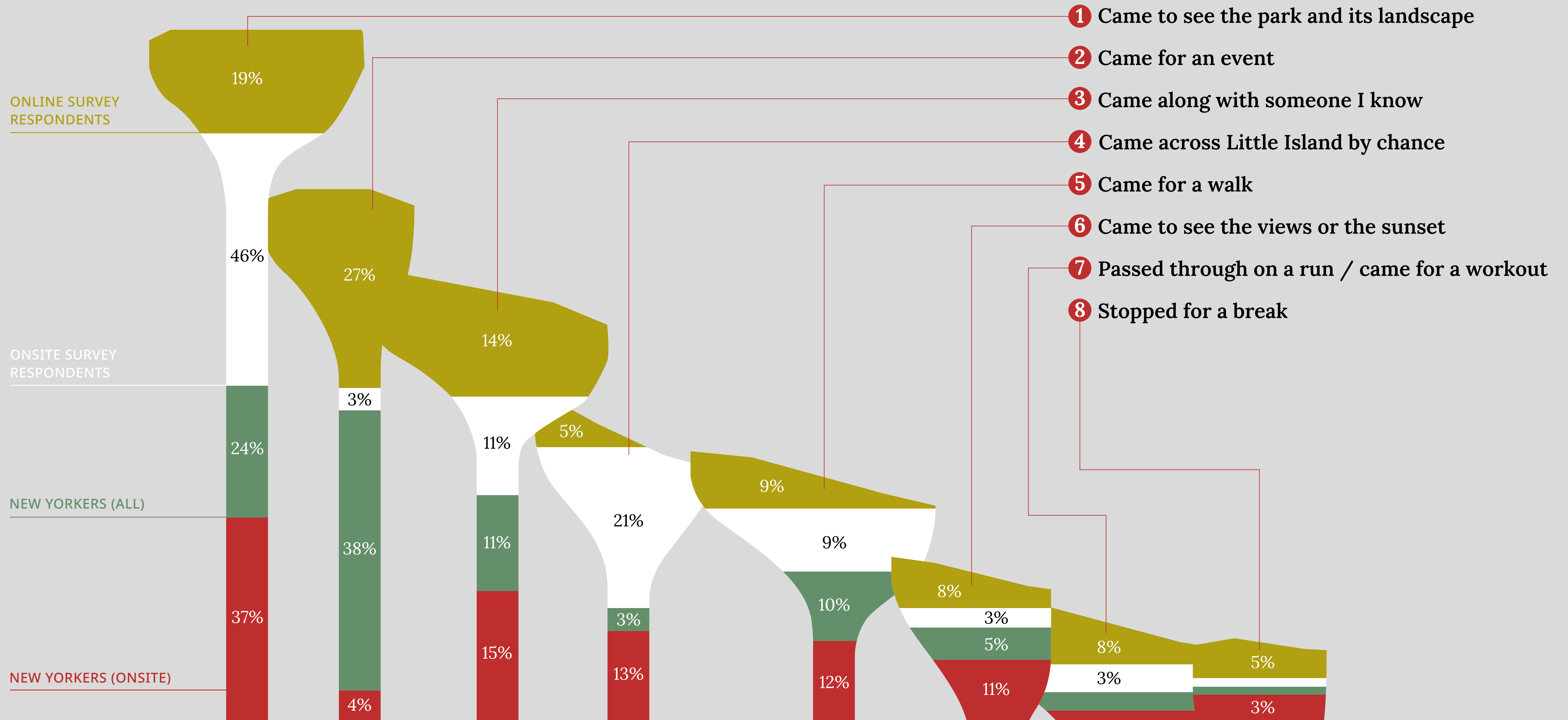
- A majority indicated they would like to come back to Little Island again.
- Local residents who had been to the park see it as a positive addition to the neighborhood and value the quality of the park's public realm and being able to access the park and its programming for free. They viewed Little Island as bringing cultural enrichment and entertainment and a place to gather, contributing to the renaissance of the area.
- Local partner community organizations appreciated early engagement and want to see a continuation of this effort and staying engaged.



Why do they come?

- The design and the programming.
- With Little Island being a relatively new public space in New York City, many visitors are coming to Little Island to see the park itself and its landscape.
- For first-time visitors, “coming to see the park and its landscape” and “coming across Little Island by chance” are the two most common primary reasons for visiting.
- Those more familiar with Little Island and New Yorkers tend to come to Little Island for a specific event; and coming along with someone they know.
- Interviews with visitors also showed that first-time visitors were driven to Little Island by their interest in seeing the park while repeat attendees tend to come for a short break and to enjoy the views.

Top 8 *REASONS* for attending Little Island based on survey responses





How does the physical design of Little Island shape user experience?

Visitors highlight the beauty and serenity of the natural landscape, the playfulness and uniqueness of the concrete tulip structure, and the enjoyment they get from exploring the walkways and the scenic views.

- Many enjoy being able to rest or socialize in the Amph and on the lawn.
- Visitors highlighted their enjoyment of the seasonality and “clever” and “playful” design.
- Some found the park’s landscape encourages thoughtfulness and feeling of connectedness to nature and to others.
- Visitors appreciated the high quality of the maintenance, cleanliness, and facilities.

"I'M CONSTANTLY INSPIRED TO FIND LITTLE CORNERS OR LITTLE THINGS THAT I NEVER DISCOVERED BEFORE."

Survey respondent



Health and well-being

- Visitors expressed having positive emotions during their visit to Little Island: feeling relaxed, peaceful and calm, inspired, cheerful, and happy; as well as feeling connected to nature and the community.
- They commented on the role of the landscaping, the views, and availability of different spaces and interactive elements around the park contributing to an enhanced emotional state.
- Neighborhood residents commented on the unique design features, scenic views, and the landscaping and plants. They said they enjoyed the seasonality, beauty, and “clever” and “playful” design. Some found the park’s landscape encourages thoughtfulness and feeling of connectedness.

"IT GIVES ME A SENSE OF ESCAPE."

Survey respondent



How do artists experience Little Island?

In 2022, Little Island presented over 200 free public arts and creative events and over 30 ticketed arts events. In 2023, it commissioned 44 individual artists based in the city and presented 69 unique performances.

- Arts and creative programming is seen as important in bringing visitors to the park, especially repeat visitors, and providing accessible arts programming in a unique outdoor setting.
- Artists want to return to present work at the park. It provided them with high-quality outdoor performance infrastructure and technical support.
- The artists value the scenic environment and availability of different formats and characters of performance spaces.
- The artists highlighted the importance of receiving fair pay for developing and presenting work and the coherence in curatorial approach to future programming.



"I THINK THE BIGGEST THING FOR ME IS THE AMPH. IT'S JUST A PERFORMANCE SPACE UNLIKE ANY OTHER IN NEW YORK."

Survey respondent

**"I FEEL APPRECIATED AS AN ARTIST,
THE WAY THEY TAKE CARE OF US."**

Survey respondent



How does the workforce development program shape staff education and career trajectory?

Little Island employed 42 full-time staff, 13 part-time staff, and 9 seasonal staff at the time of this study. All of them are New York City residents.

About the Program

Little Island's Workforce Development Program expresses their commitment to engage, educate and employ talented New Yorkers. Their relationship with local community-based organizations and schools, including the City University of New York (CUNY), provides college students and recent graduates with professional development and pathways to employment through paid opportunities with Little Island.

Working at the park, college students and recent alumni gain exposure to the daily operations of a dynamic public space while supporting administrative and programmatic projects. In addition to gaining hands-on work experience, Workforce Development Program participants also receive workshops and professional development in Communications, Financial Capability, Leadership, Public Art and Public Space.

Members of Little Island's staff and workforce development program say they have benefitted from developing self-confidence and interpersonal skills, in a collaborative, supportive work environment.

Since it opened, Little Island has continued to offer workforce development placements to young people who live in NYC (currently 28) and at least 26 of our 47 workforce alumni are currently employed (including 10 by Little Island and 16 elsewhere) while 7 are pursuing full-time education.



A group of approximately ten people are gathered on a paved overlook with a metal railing. They are looking out over a body of water towards a city skyline under a cloudy sky. The overlook is surrounded by lush greenery, including tall grasses and various trees. A white, hand-drawn line starts from the bottom left, loops around the text, and extends towards the top right, ending near a group of people on a set of stairs. The text "WHAT did we observe?" is written in a white, stylized font across the middle of the image.

WHAT did we observe?



The AEA Team did an observational study on a busy summer afternoon in June 2023. The temperature outside was mid-80s (F), so as we walked onto the Island from the main entrance many people were sitting huddled on the edges of the walkway where they could take advantage of patches of shade.

There were multiple people getting their photo taken with Little Island in the background as we walked across the bridge, mainly families with young children. When we walked onto the park, two children were jumping along the musical ground instrument.

We were able to enjoy some of the food from the Kiosks in the playground, and we sat under the shade and ate while we people-watched and heard the piano playing in the background.

The grass hill was full of teenagers filming TikToks and laying around in the sun. As we sat in the playground, there was always someone consistently playing the public piano. A woman in her 80s sat down to play and when she finished, the entire playground erupted into applause.

There were many families at Little Island that day. Some seemed to be tourists, given the time of day (around 2:00-2:30pm). There were people on all of the spinning chairs, adults and children alike, spinning and laughing and having fun.

We appreciated and commented on the landscaping and plantings, which were very beautiful and added color to the park. We also noticed how perfectly manicured the lawn was and were glad to see that people were sitting and playing on it.

Walking up to reach the Amph, we found there were a few people sitting and talking. At the southwest overlook, there were a lot of people taking pictures. There were also groups of two sitting in some of the benches on the way up, under the shade.

We noticed that there were people standing under some of the areas with shade created by the plants, but there weren't many near the overlooks.

Down at the Glade there were many people sitting, reading, eating sandwiches and just hanging out. At the southeast overlook, there was a couple taking a selfie with the view, two people recording a video, and two others taking pictures of the yellow flowers. Walking down towards the south bridge, there were people jumping on the musical ground instrument.

As we exited the park through the south entrance, there was a group of people purchasing ice cream from one of the carts – we too were drawn to it by the cool names for the popsicles.



In conclusion

Little Island is described as a beautiful uplifting place, and a place to gather. Visitor comments center on the playfulness and ingenuity of the park's design, the vistas it offers, the high quality of the public realm, and the landscaping and planting.

Visitors say it makes them relaxed and happy, and that they feel safe, welcomed, and comfortable.

Visitors are often initially driven to the park to explore its landscape. Many came specifically to visit the park. Others stopped by when visiting other places in the area.

Little Island's artistic program is seen as important in offering a distinctive platform for Artists and catering to a very broad mix of visitor groups. Repeat visitors (primarily New Yorkers) return for programming.

Little Island provides a supportive and learning working environment for its Staff (who are all New Yorkers). Members of Little Island's staff and workforce development program benefit from a collaborative, supportive working environment.

1.5 million

The number of the visitors that the park attracts each year from a diverse range of backgrounds and locations.

30%

New Yorkers

70%

Visitors from outside NYC



THIS MEANS Little Island is largely delivering on its intended social impact:

- ✓ as a public space
- ✓ as an employer and workforce development provider
- ✓ as an outdoor arts presenter
- ✓ and as a community partner



WHAT happens next?

Little Island & Heatherwick Studio

Our primary focus is to use this research to amplify the social influence of Little Island and gain deeper insights into its role within the city. Using this data as a foundation, we aim to measure our impact consistently, acknowledging there is no guarantee that public space will get better over time. We recognize the vital role of community input and aim to decipher what aspects work best, listening attentively to both New Yorkers and global visitors who frequent the park.

Sharing Success Stories

Our commitment extends beyond our local context, aspiring to share these invaluable insights with fellow practitioners involved in developing parks and public spaces worldwide. There is a pressing need to integrate greenery into every city and offer people space to relax, recover and connect. This report serves as a means to disseminate these ideas, fostering an international discourse on the optimal approaches to crafting and managing 21st-century urban parks.

Next Steps

We intend to review the study's findings with our stakeholders, fostering discussions to enhance Little Island's social impact. Addressing recommendations for improved accessibility, communication, and engagement with New Yorkers and local residents is a key priority. Concurrently, our commitment to ongoing data collection and analysis, coupled with soliciting visitor feedback, will inform our continuous efforts to understand and better serve the park's diverse community.

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with AEA Consulting

Designed by Studio EYC

Find out more at heatherwick.com and littleisland.org



Heatherwick studio