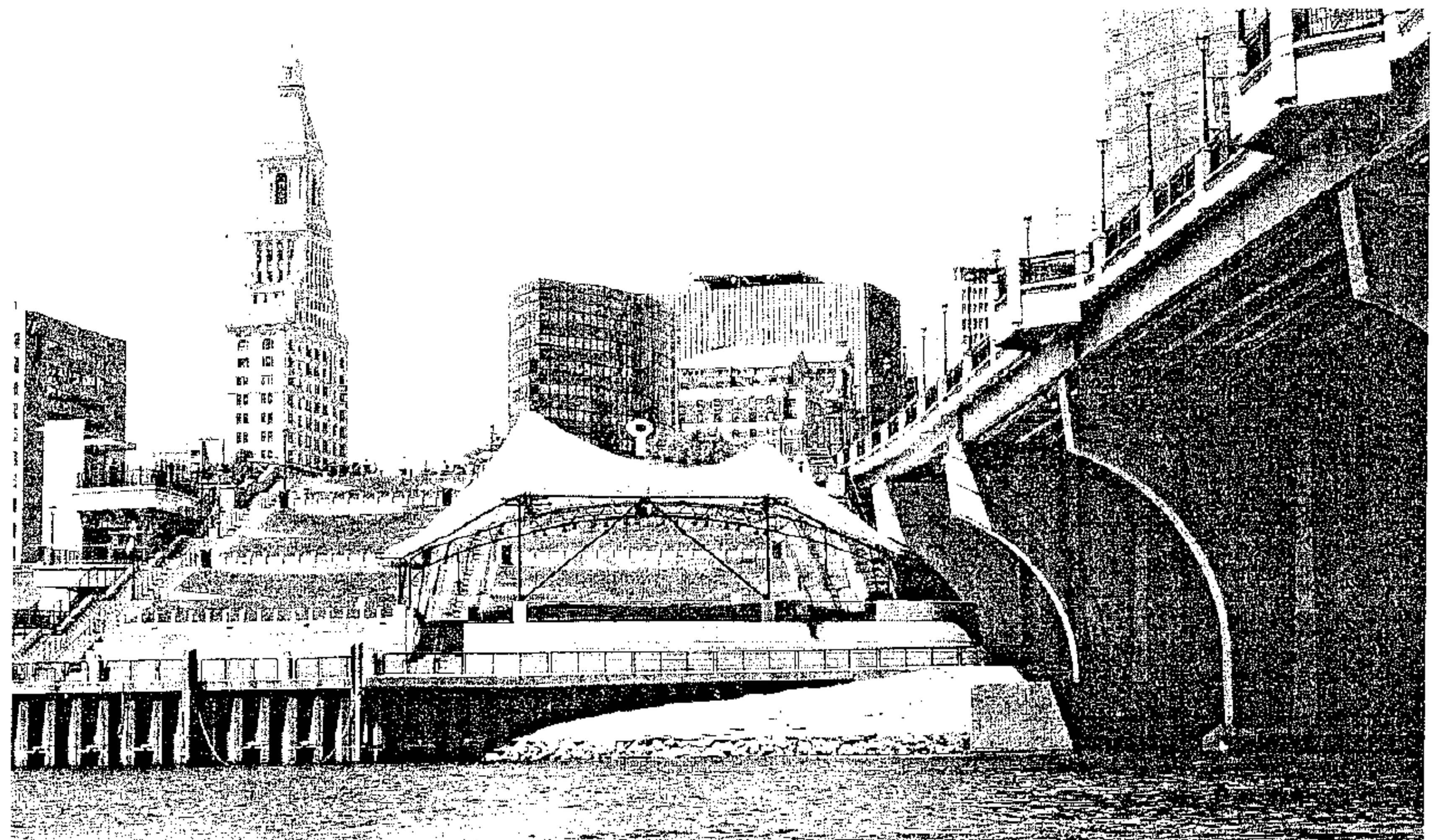


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Photographs by George Ruhe for The New York Times

Riverfront Park Now Beckons Hartford

By STACEY STOWE

ONE hundred years ago, Hartford's Riverside Park and its meandering riverbank walk were leafy escapes for families who lived in congested downtown tenements. But since the late 1980's, Hartford police said the area had become, among other things, a place for gay men to cruise.

A uniformed ranger now roams the area and a gate that closes promptly at dusk has been installed.

The 62-acre park is almost completely restored at a cost of \$2.1 million and a three-quarter-mile riverwalk is under construction, restoring pedestrian access for city families and workers to this waterside idyll with country views, running and biking trails, a playground and public boat launch.

In June, a \$3.6 million boathouse opened, financed through donations. When the river overflows in the spring, the park is underwater but the concrete boathouse on pylons is unaffected. The architects accepted this seasonal evanescence, much as the early park planners did.

The park is one of several waterfront projects that Riverfront Recapture has seen actualized. Twenty-one years ago the private, nonprofit organization envisioned linking the Connecticut River to Hartford and not even a massive dyke and the tentacles of Interstate 91 that gripped the river bank and walled off the city from the river, were considered insurmountable.

Indeed, I-91 was actually lowered in the late 1990's to make way for a plaza and better river accessibility.

"Riverside Park was originally created as an outdoor living room along the water for the people of Hartford," said Joseph R. Marfuggi, president and chief operating officer of Riverfront Recapture. "We're putting people right on the water in an even more dramatic way today."

Mr. Marfuggi was referring to the network of parks, three in Hartford and one in East Hartford that border the river and have undergone varying degrees of renewal. A raised concourse called Riverfront Plaza spans 852 feet including the pedestrian bridge over Columbus Boulevard. The plaza ultimately connects to a footbridge, the Founders Bridge Promenade, that leads over the river to East Hartford.

The riverwalk will be built in three phases, including the completed, \$3.4 million Bulkeley Bridge Walkabout, Riverwalk Downtown, a new \$1.5 million park between Founders Bridge and the south side of Bulkeley Bridge is under construction and is expected to be completed in December 2002. Next summer, the riverwalk connection from the north side of Bulkeley Bridge into Riverside Park will begin and expected to be completed by the end of 2003.

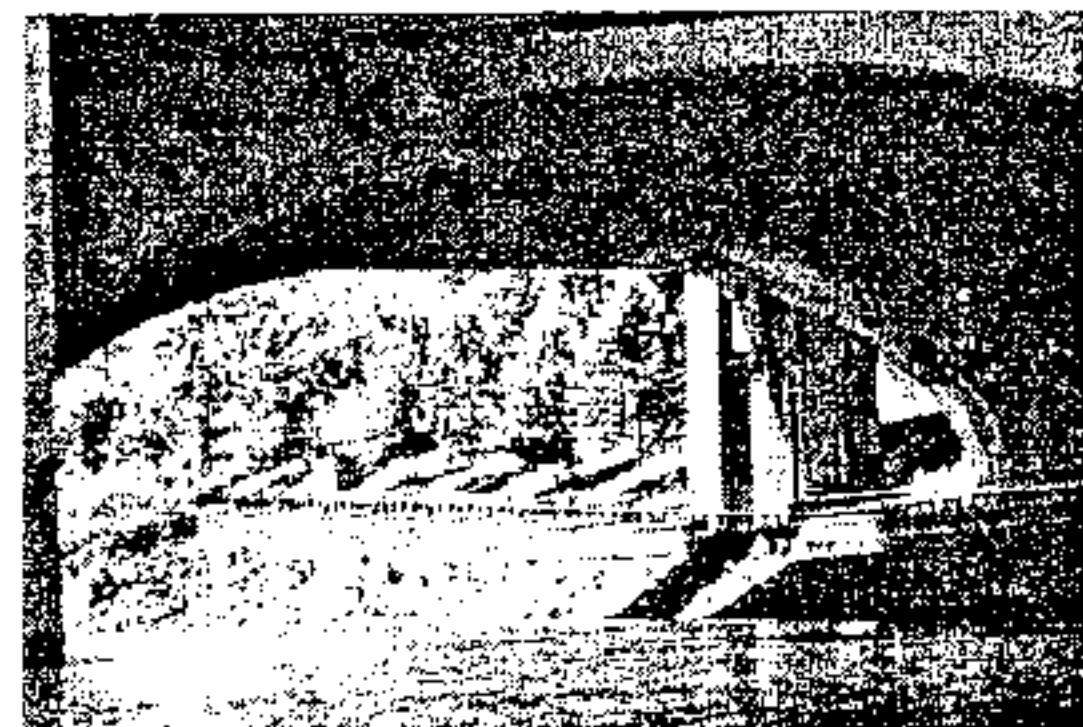
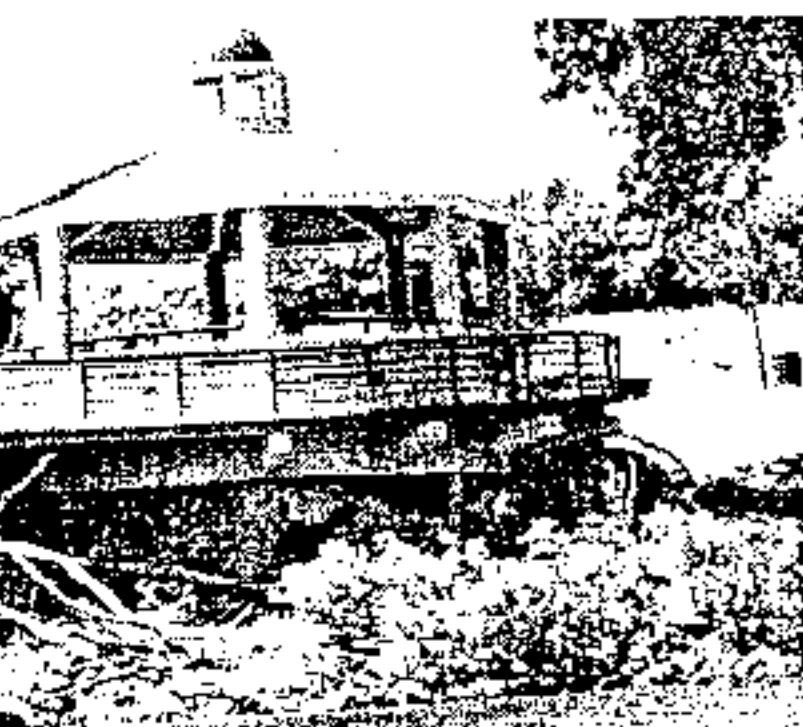
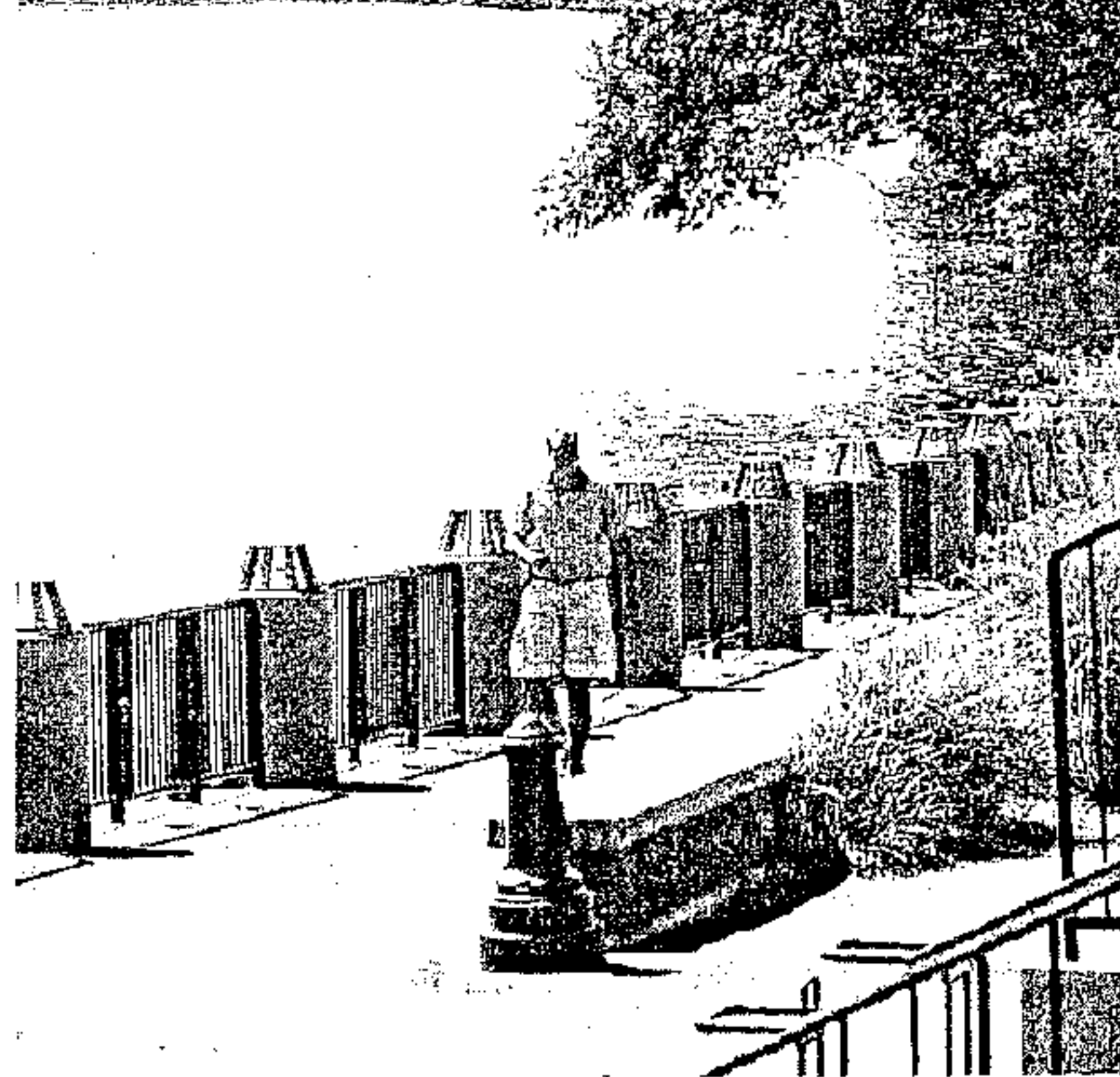
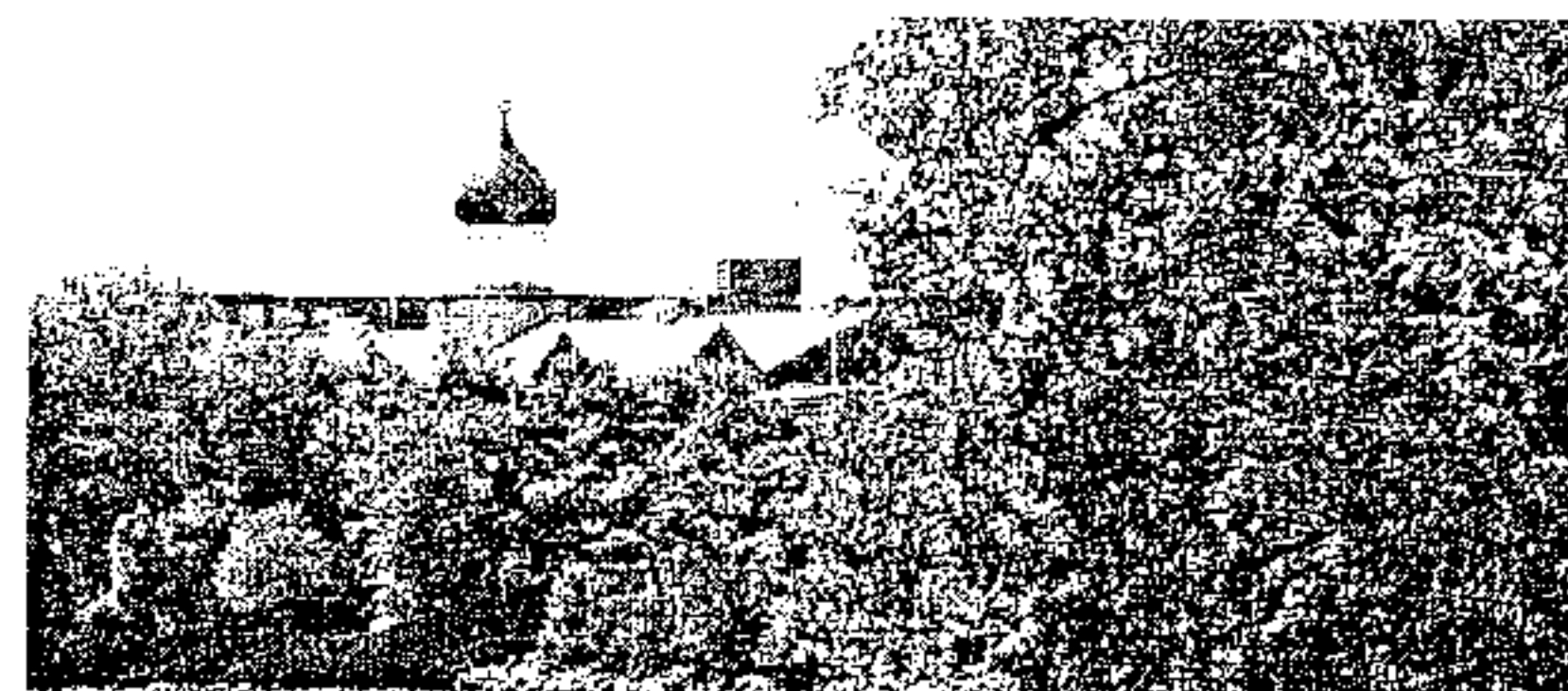
Kristin Beth Ferris, director of events and marketing for Riverfront Recapture estimated that 850,000 people boated, picnicked or attended fishing derbies, triathlons or concerts at the park in 2001.

"There is something scheduled every day of the summer for Riverwalk Downtown," she said.

Next year, \$3 million of improvements will be made to the area around the boat house and boat launch and an access road will be installed for pulling the shells.

Some \$80 million has been spent by the Metropolitan District on improving water quality, Mr. Marfuggi said. The water is rated "Class B" on a scale of A to D but the problem of untreated sewage mixing with storm water runoff in heavy rains hasn't been entirely solved, said Sally Nyren, a staff engineer of the Metropolitan District Commission.

"The redevelopment of the river



has, without question, spurred other downtown projects, most specifically, Adriaen's Landing," he said, as he gestured to the massive area under construction adjacent to Riverfront Plaza. The Landing will include a hotel, science center and retail and housing units.

Gov. John G. Rowland, described Riverside Park and the new boat house as "huge attractions for all downtown development projects and one of the great catalysts in generating interest in revitalizing the city."

One of the most visible examples of the river's revitalization is the community rowing program that introduces Hartford teenagers to crew, a sport that has traditionally been the province of prep schools. Some 64 shells can be stored on the first floor of the new boat house. Upstairs are

The revitalization of Hartford's riverfront includes the 62-acre Riverside Park, a three-quarter-mile riverwalk running and biking trails, a playground and a public boat launch. Riverfront Plaza includes a pedestrian bridge, which leads to East Hartford.

locker rooms with showers and a reception room with views of the river that can be rented for fundraisers and weddings.

There is also the Mark Twain and Lady Fenwick, two boats that seat 150 and 120 respectively and are docked under Riverfront Plaza, where many city workers eat lunch in mild weather.

At all five riverfront parks, ranger

Running and biking trails, a playground and a public boat launch.

patrol and the park maintenance is paid for by the Metropolitan District Commission. Hartford Police Sgt. Maura Hammick said Riverside Park was never dangerous but the former cruising activity, enhanced by a sex shop and cheap motels just one mile away, reduced its appeal.

It costs \$5 to launch a boat at Riverside Park; 13 boat trailers sat in the lot on a weekday afternoon.

Marclion Shilleh-McMikie took her lunch hour on the river bank.

"I used to look at the park from afar and finally decided to start coming at lunch," she said. "It is sort of cozy sitting here but they could use a few benches."

The five-mile bike trail that winds along the river through the woods was quiet but for the maple leaves that rustled like silk skirts in the slight breeze. One city resident, Gerald Waite, who stood under the canopy of trees, was digging for worms but registered some concerns.

"They're recapturing the river for people on the outskirts to come back into Hartford," he said. "Like they put in a boat ramp. How about a boat rental for people who can't afford their own?" Kayaks may be available for rental in the future, Mr. Marfuggi said.

The recent restoration of parks has a historical antecedent in Hartford. By the 1930's, it had amassed the largest park acreage per capita in America, according to John Alexopoulos, author of "The 19th Century Parks of Hartford: A Legacy to the Nation." (Hartford Architecture Conservancy, 1983). Bushnell Park was created in 1853, the same year as Central Park, both being the first in the nation to have been planned from the start as urban parks.

When it was completed at the turn of the 20th century, Riverside Park was a break for residents of the gritty Front and Market street tenements. Created by the firm of Frederick Law Olmsted, the Hartford native who designed Central Park, the park featured an outdoor summer school, school vegetable gardens, and indoor infant nursery, play equipment and pools. The "Little Folks Lawn," a broad play area, was adjacent to a wading pool and bordered to the north by the railroad. A riverwalk, framed by trees planted to prevent erosion, extended the entire length of the park.

But by 1957, the tenements were gone, demolished to make way for Constitution Plaza, an uninspired plane of concrete completed in 1963 with office towers as sentinels. Park attendance started to dip. The immigrants, primarily Italians, relocated to the city's South End, leaving a still gaping hole in the city's downtown residential population. The original plan for Constitution Plaza called for a mix of office, residential and retail but ultimately retail was diminished and residential abandoned.

"It's too easy to say that plowing down the tenements was the wrong idea," said Tyler Smith, whose firm SmithEdwards Architects has a long history of building and renovating in the city. "Hartford did need to move forward. The mistake was in taking housing out of the mix and separating it from the downtown."

Part of the city's redevelopment includes enticing people to live in the city by restoring neighborhoods. City advocates say a river vista just may sweeten the revitalization.