

# Building a Beacon for a Kingdom by the Sea: Siah Armajani, a public ...

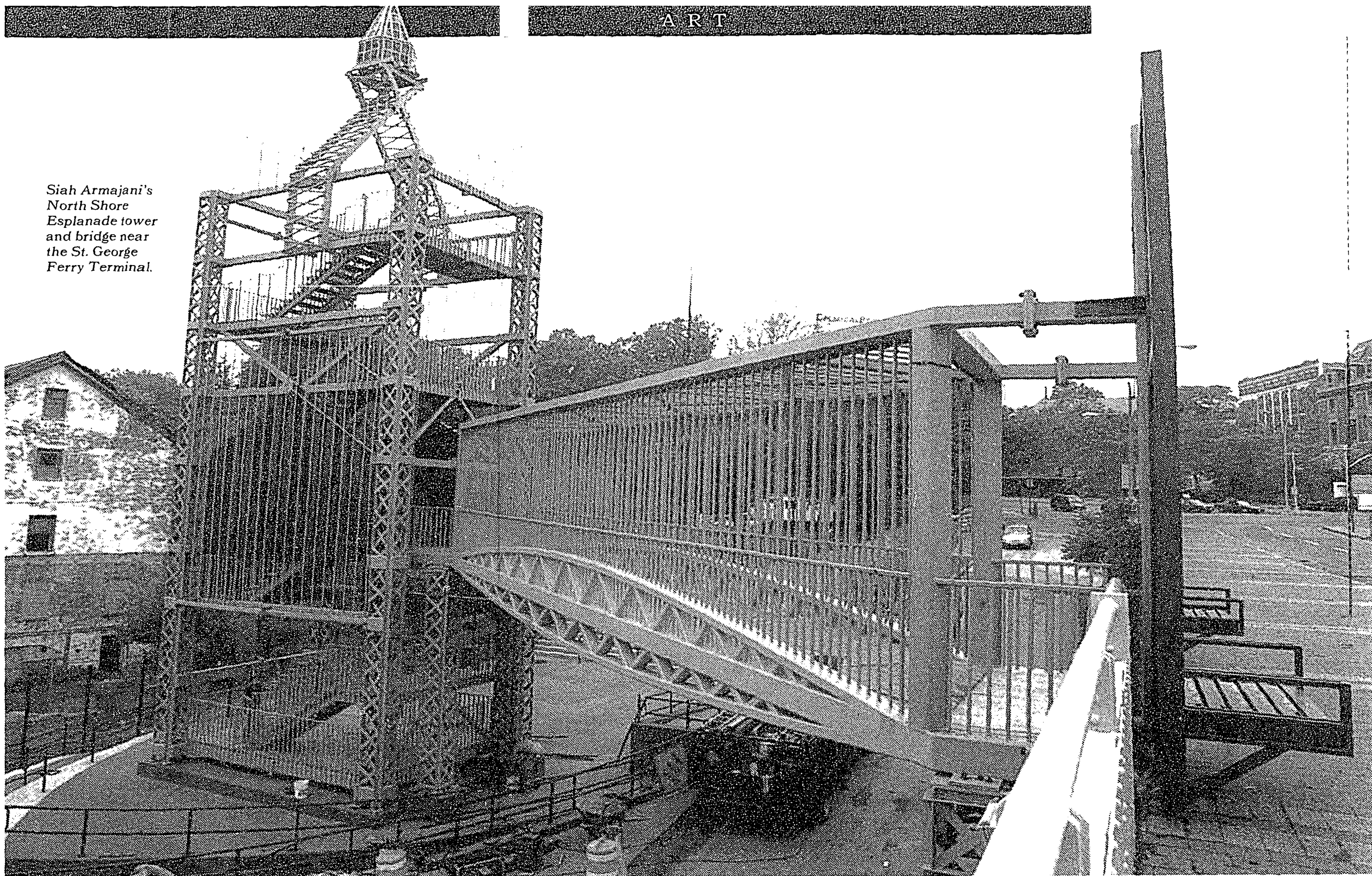
By DINITIA SMITH

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Siah Armajani's North Shore Esplanade tower and bridge near the St. George Ferry Terminal.



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

## Building a Beacon for a Kingdom by the Sea

By DINITIA SMITH

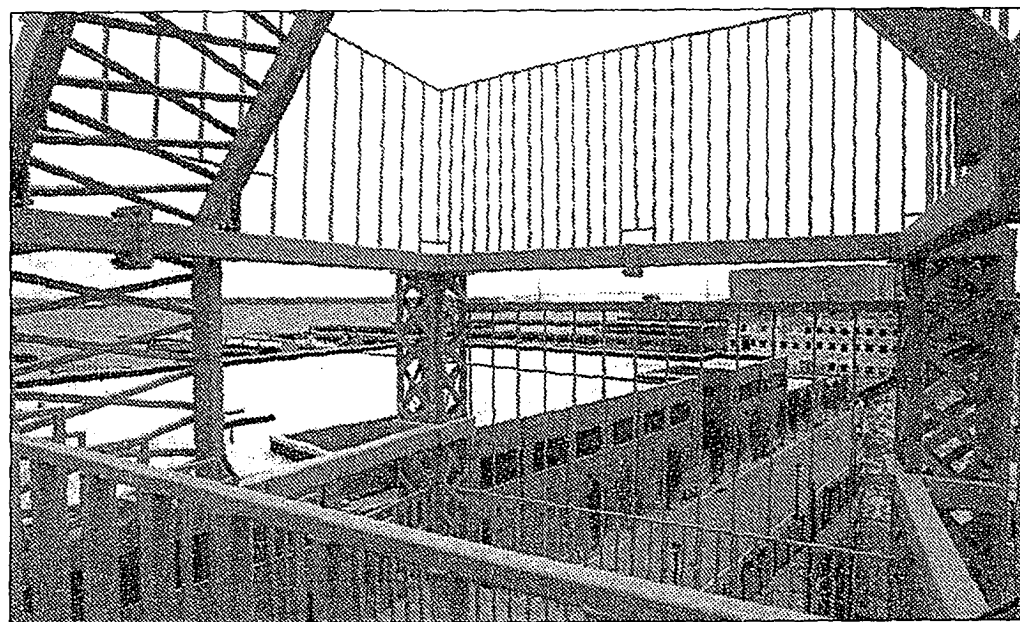
**"K**ANTIAN PHILOSOPHERS believed that art was good because it was useless. We believe that art is good because it is useful."

So says Siah Armajani, who is one of the major sculptors working in the realm of public art today. This is a big summer for Mr. Armajani. On July 19, his Olympic tower and bridge, built of wood and gray steel, topped by a brilliantly painted cauldron, stood as the symbolic center of the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta and on millions of television screens around the world.

And any day now, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani is expected to cut the ribbon for the new North Shore Esplanade Extension, a plaza on the Staten Island waterfront near the St. George Ferry Terminal, for which Mr. Armajani has built a 65-foot-long bridge and a 65-foot-tall tower topped with a lighthouse motif.

Mr. Armajani's Staten Island project, whose design was a precursor to the one in Atlanta, cost about \$500,000 and was financed through New York City's Percent for Art program. By virtue of its sheer size and expense, it constitutes one of the largest public art projects in New York in recent years, according to Tom Finkelpearl, the former director of the Percent for Art program.

The elusive Mr. Armajani may be the perfect man for the new age of public art, one in which cautious bureaucrats typically fear a repeat of controversies that resulted when artists challenged community tastes or tried to impose their egos on a community. Never again the outcry like the one



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

A river view from Mr. Armajani's new project on Staten Island.

Armajani said. The tower has a reddish-gold glass top, with a 1,000-watt light in it, to evoke the lighthouse facility that stood there from the 1860's until the 1970's. Also, like most of Mr. Armajani's projects, it is functional. The bridge connects the bus ramp of the St. George Ferry Terminal to a section of the new plaza.

"I will not express my angst," said Mr. Armajani of his aesthetic. "The warmth and friendliness of the bridge — I work very hard at that. According to me, I should do something functional, something that should bring joy and happiness. We are just trying to harness our ego." Mr. Armajani says his favorite public space is the immense Mall of America in his hometown. "Forty million people come to the mall, and they're all happy," he says.

**T**HE SCULPTOR, A SLENDER man with round, black-framed glasses who usually wears a suit and tie, has had no formal training as an artist; his undergraduate degree was in philosophy. He is given to lapidary, sometimes airy remarks, as if in the end, words don't matter. Indeed, he doesn't always make sense. "By the way, I contradict myself quite a bit," he says with a laugh.

It is all these qualities that have made Mr. Armajani a successful purveyor of the new public art, work that tries to be either participatory or functional. In 1988, Mr. Armajani designed the Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge in Minneapolis, uniting two communities split by a 16-lane highway. Paul Goldberger, writing in *The New York Times*, called it "an almost magical mix of the toylike and the monumental."

Mr. Armajani also designed the poetry garden for the headquarters of the Lannan Foundation in Los Angeles. And in 1983, with the sculptor Scott Burton, the architect César Pelli and the landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg, he collaborated on the design of the World Financial Center plaza in Lower Manhattan. Following the architectural traditions of Mr. Armajani's native Iran, the railing along the waterfront was

embedded with quotations, in this case from Frank O'Hara and Walt Whitman.

Currently, Mr. Armajani is designing a bridge for Beloit, Wis.; two skyway bridges for the Louisville, Ky., airport; a glass bridge for Newcastle, England, and three covered bridges for Leipzig, Germany.

The site of Mr. Armajani's Staten Island project once had a utilitarian purpose. During the 1860's, it was the location of the United States Lighthouse Service supply base for all lighthouses from Narragansett Bay to Delaware Bay. In 1939 the Coast Guard took over the property, and in the 1970's it was given to the city. The deterioration began soon after.

For years, the fine old buildings, some historic landmarks, stood neglected. Homeless people took up residence in the officers' houses. The land was overgrown with weeds and wild roses. Visitors crossing on the ferry were confronted by a forbidding sight, acres of vermin-infested land strewn with the husks of stolen cars and tantalizing glimpses of old red-brick buildings, one with an 1869 cornerstone.

In a way, the spectacle was a symbol of the contradictions of Staten Island itself, a place of sweeping bluffs and glittering vistas, impregnated with the culture of the sea, yet in sections bleak and rife with urban decay. Many visitors coming for a day's outing found little to do and simply turned around.

Over the years, Staten Islanders discussed various solutions to the problem, and one seemed to emerge in connection with a new ferry-maintenance building planned for the borough. In 1991, a mayoral task force suggested extending the nearby Bay Street Landing Esplanade to the ferry terminal so people coming over on the ferry would have somewhere to go. The resulting plaza could accommodate art fairs and farmers' markets, and, it was hoped, some of the old Coast Guard buildings adjacent to it could be restored and put to use.

The project was envisioned as the first stage of the planned six-mile-long esplanade running from the ferry terminal south to the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and north to

**Siah Armajani, a public artist who loves bridges and poetry, has created a modest monument near the Staten Island waterfront.**

Snug Harbor. Eventually, the whole area might become another South Street Seaport, an attraction for both islanders and visitors.

In 1992 a landscape architectural firm, Johansson & Walcavage, was hired to design the plaza. Under city law, a percent of the project's total budget of approximately \$40 million — about \$33 million for a new maintenance building and about \$7 million for the plaza — was designated for art. A panel of community leaders, local artists and representatives from city agencies was formed to consider what kind of art should be within the project area.

Late that year, the city's Department of Cultural Affairs showed the panel slides of work by 81 artists, Mr. Armajani's among them. The list was narrowed to 18. It included Andrew Leicester, who designed the tile mosaics for Penn Station, an entrance to a Cincinnati park and a riverside walk in Philadelphia. Later, Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzler, who had designed a series of glass blocks embedded with artifacts at Stuyvesant High School, were added.

In March 1993, Mr. Armajani flew to New York to be interviewed. "I was not expected to say anything about the site," Mr. Armajani said afterward. "Some did. But I'm not that fast." Some of the panelists felt that the scale of his work might overwhelm the site.

Others thought that his passion for bridges was ideal for the project.

Mr. Armajani won the final round of voting, with 13 votes, and Mr. Leicester close behind at 12, and Ms. Jones and Mr. Ginzler with 11. "It was the closest vote I'd ever seen for a project like this," said Mr. Finkelpearl.

Then the real planning began, with Mr. Armajani flying regularly to New York for community meetings. "I told them I'm not interested in their taste," he said. "But I listen very carefully to the needs of the people."

In his stark studio in a warehouse district in Minneapolis, filled with models of his projects, Mr. Armajani began constructing a model of the tower and bridge from balsa and cardboard. There were already discussions about building a pedestrian bridge linking the ferry terminal to part of the new plaza. Did Mr. Armajani originally have a bridge in mind for the site, a bridge that would be a work of art? Well, he always does bridges. Also, he added with a laugh, "I always gravitate toward the lazy. Besides, I'm always looking for a bridge."

Mr. Armajani, who often incorporates snatches of poetry in his work, this time chose some lines from Wallace Stevens. "It is very important to invite people to come to the piece," Mr. Armajani said. At the same time, he said, he wanted "to be a little bit subversive, to attract attention to someone good."

**C**ONSTRUCTION OF THE PLAZA began last spring. A structural engineer photographed the area with a video camera, and, using a computer, calculated the possible effect of wind changes and stress points on Mr. Armajani's design. At American Structural Metals in Hugo, Minn., 30 workers began to make the bridge and tower.

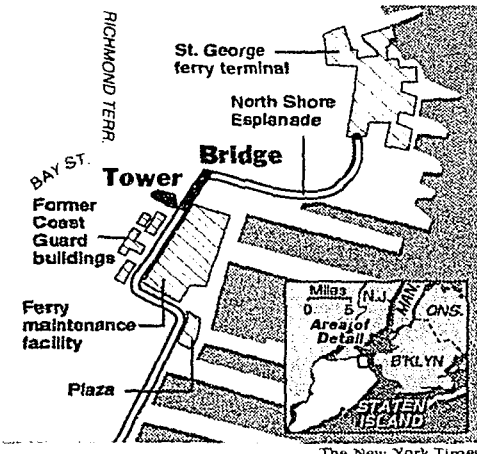
By late May, the plaza was nearly finished and outfitted with granite tables topped with chessboards, decorative red buoys and garden furniture.

On Friday and Saturday, May 24 and 25, in Minnesota, the bridge and tower were loaded in pieces onto seven tractor trailers, each 45 feet long. On Tuesday, May 28, the convoy, sometimes accompanied by escort vans with flashing lights, set out for Staten Island. Two days later, three trucks carrying the tower arrived at the New Jersey side of the Goethals Bridge. At 4 A.M. on Friday, May 31, they arrived at Bay Street in Staten Island while four others loaded with sections of the new bridge arrived later.

Mr. Armajani was nowhere to be found. "The piece was too large for me to install," he explained. But he was keeping in touch by phone.

Finally, on midday on Wednesday, June 5, the bridge was lowered onto steel piers. At 4:40 P.M., the last bolts were being tightened. Passengers leaving Staten Island on the ferry that day could look back and see the sun shining through the orange-colored glass of the lighthouse tower.

High on the horizontal framework of the bridge were some of Wallace Stevens's words, in small brass letters: "The cloud rose upward like a heavy stone/ That lost its heaviness through the same will,/ Which changed light green to olive then to blue." □



The location of Mr. Armajani's new public art project in Staten Island.

accompanying the 1981 installation of Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc" in Federal Plaza in Manhattan. Mr. Armajani, 56, who was born in Iran, and became a citizen in 1968, doesn't like to leave his hometown, Minneapolis, refuses to be photographed and usually isn't even present when his projects are being built.

And his Staten Island project is a perfect example of the new public art. The steel and wood structure is painted a nonthreatening gray, with accents of green and orange-yellow, to represent "the sunshine," Mr.

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Alan S. Weiner for The New York Times

The Olympic torch and tower in Atlanta.