

ON THE WATERFRONT
ORFF PHOTOGRAPHED
IN UPPER NEW YORK BAY
WEARING A MARNI COAT,
J. BRAND JEANS, AND
HUNTER RAINBOOTS.

COAST GUARD

OYSTER-TECT KATE
ORFF'S PEARLY PLAN
TO SAVE SHORES

If you were to drop by SCAPE, Kate Orff's downtown Manhattan landscape architecture firm, on one of the days she's been forced to stay inside, you'd probably sense that she'd rather be out tromping around New York's watery fringes. "I'm drawn to landscapes that are unconventional," says the slim, sandy-haired tomboy. "Places where you can kind of get stuck in the mud."

Orff launched her bid to transform the city's shores three years ago, when the Museum of Modern Art invited her to draw up a plan for a future of rising sea levels. Her organizing idea? Oysters. Orff grew up swimming in the oyster-rich waters of Chesapeake Bay; later, during her time at the University of Virginia, where she played Division I lacrosse, she became acquainted with that infamous mid-Atlantic cocktail the oyster shooter. But as the child of engineers and, during landscape architecture school at Harvard, an advisee of the eminently pragmatic Rem Koolhaas, Orff had also become obsessed

with the oyster's practical side. She knew that the once trillions-strong New York oyster colonies had quite literally built the city's foundations (Liberty and Ellis islands are actually the remnants of two giant oyster reefs known formerly as Little Oyster and Big Oyster islands); now she set out to recreate this natural infrastructure through a kind of human/oyster collaboration. "Nature doesn't exist outside of us anymore," she says. "We need to transform ourselves from being awed by nature to having a relationship with it."

Hiring a team of biologists and enlisting the help of students from New York's Harbor School and a handful of amateur knitters, her vision became almost Neptunian in scope. She and her team produced a model of a giant 3-D waterscape to rebuild the archipelago of long-ago-destroyed oyster islands that once protected the shores of Red Hook: The ugly concrete piers and metal bulkheads that now gird the city were replaced by soft-sloping shores cloaked by *flash >000*



WATER WORKS
A RENDERING OF ORFF'S
RECONSTRUCTED OYSTER REEFS OFF
THE COAST OF GOVERNER'S ISLAND.

did the MoMA project based on maps and speculations on how sea levels might rise in New York City," Orff says. "Then we saw our maps literally come to life. It became very real, very quickly."

In the wake of Sandy's devastation, Orff's work has stepped into high gear: All around the walls of SCAPE, renderings of the city's troubled bays and inlets are spread out with oyster-tecture plans superimposed. (As part of the Mayor's Special Initiative for Recovery and Restoration, Orff has been commissioned to drafting a harbor-wide strategy for coastal protection based on oyster-reef and island building.) This spring/ tkmmonth, the first actual piece of oyster-tecture will be put in place when the Sims Metal Management Site—a pier at the mouth of the Gowanus Canal—is retrofitted with a habitat structure to attract oyster larvae.

Of course, the project is only one of several hard and soft options being considered by the city, but Orff has an inner toughness that convinces. It's a focus shared by her equally tough Israeli-American husband, an engineer, and her two adventurous children, whom Orff loves to take on explorations of the city's remaining marshes. "I think it's going to happen," Orff says firmly. "Our waters are getting cleaner. Oysters are coming back. They were once a key part of New York's ecological infrastructure. Now is the time for remaking that." —PAUL GREENBERG *flash >000*

protective living reef and marshland. Barry Bergdoll, MoMA's chief architecture curator, was duly impressed. "Orff brings a rare combination," he says. "She is a charismatic and persuasive spokesperson for her work, but equally a brilliant artist." Orff called the finished work "Oyster-tecture" and presented it at MoMA as something of a provocation; a year later, she followed it up with a TED talk. A year after that, Hurricane Sandy changed everyone's thinking about the waterfront. "We



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CAROLINE DE MAIGRET IN CHANEL.



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TALLULAH HARLECH IN TK, Collection WireImage



MODEL CAROLYN MURPHY IN VERSACE PANTS.

SCOTCH GUARD

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MILEY CYRUS IN TOPSHOP.

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