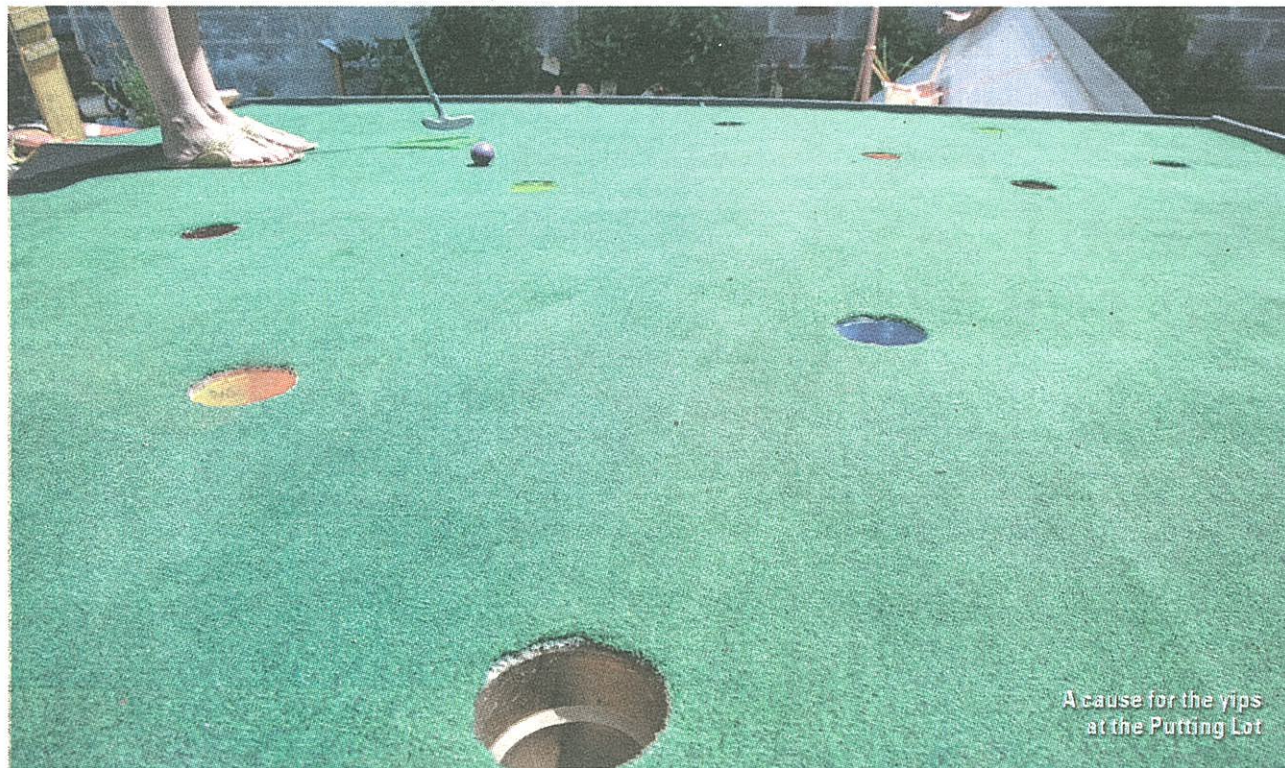


The Van Goghs of Putt-Putt

Haul out the Stimpmeter—artists design two local miniature golf courses

Art



A cause for the yips
at the Putting Lot

Jackie Snow

The Putting Lot

12 Wyckoff Avenue, Brooklyn
theputtinglot.org

'City of Dreams' Mini Golf

Governors Island
figmentnyc.org

BY ALAN GILBERT

Who knew miniature golf could be a utopian endeavor? More affectionately known as putt-putt, it's an activity most people associate with summertime in the suburbs. Usually located between softball fields, ice cream stands, and teenage make-out spots, putt-putt courses encapsulate important American postwar innovations: kitsch, repetitive design, manicured lawns, concession-stand cuisine. Before the current economic collapse, some wondered whether New York City was itself transforming into a giant suburb. Two artist-designed mini-golf courses open this summer help put this theory to the test: the 9-hole Putting Lot in Bushwick and Figment's *City of Dreams* Mini Golf 18-hole course on Governors Island.

In both cases, artists responded to an open call for work and, upon selection, were given a small stipend to construct their proposed mini-golf holes. Financial exigencies, as well as a desire to engage with the immediate urban environment, resulted in the use of plenty of recycled materials: PVC tubing and plastic water

bottles are favorites. The Putting Lot was the brainchild of Rachel Himmelfarb and Gabriel Fries-Briggs, who managed to get from inspiration to reality in only a few months this past spring—a formidable task, given the need to find a willing landlord, obtain city approval, provide insurance, etc. They scouted various vacant lots in Bushwick until settling on a location just steps away from the Jefferson Street L train stop.

Ben Roosevelt, who designed the Putting Lot's 1st hole, took photographs of the exact spot where his contribution would be located. He transferred these photos onto a large decal he applied to the hole's playing surface. While lining up their putts, players look down at an image of rocks, dirt, scraps of trash, and a plastic soda bottle. Though the hole is a direct shot with no obstacles, putting on a hard surface means it plays *very* fast (no wetting down this nonexistent green). On one of the days I visited, a player mentioned to the attendant handing him a scorecard that he and his friends had placed a friendly wager on their round, then promptly shot a seven—the maximum allowed—on the 1st hole. Ouch. Even Tiger Woods might have trouble recovering from that initial score on a 9-hole course.

The Putting Lot's 3rd hole, its literal centerpiece, might be its best. Created by Adam Hayes and Mark Kroeckel's design studio Openshop, it features two ramps, 150-plus upside-down used plastic

water bottles, a kiddie pool, and a curving shape that evokes a cross between Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* earthwork and the TPC at Sawgrass's famous 17th hole. The temptation here is to use the two ramps to launch the ball onto the small circular green in the middle of the water. Some basic law of geometry or physics seems to make this nearly impossible, but that doesn't stop golfers from plunking shot after shot into the water.

Nearly all of the holes reference both waste and the creative reuse of materials—much like the Putting Lot and its temporary repurposing of an abandoned, trash-strewn space. The 6th hole, by Skewville, re-creates the façade of a bodega selling street art. It rebrands tires, milk

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crates, and a video game machine, while serving as a backdrop for the course as a whole—an appropriate placement, given its Bushwick home. The Putting Lot's organizers and volunteers have made outreach a priority; recent artist transplants to the neighborhood can be found playing rounds alongside children and adults from the older community. According to Himmelfarb, the course averages between 50 and 100 players on weekend days; another popular time is in the early evening after work.

Out on Governors Island, it sometimes feels as if there are between 50 and 100 people jostling in line to play a single hole. That's an exaggeration, of course, and I played on a Saturday that happened to coincide with a family-oriented festival as well as a *New York Times* article detailing things to do on Governors Island... but still. Where the Putting Lot has a laid-back feel even at its most crowded, the public-art organization Figment's *City of Dreams* Mini Golf featured a veritable army of young golfers, many of them under five, who, with no maximum stroke limit, were content to hack away until their parents moved them along in occasional near exasperation—except, that is, at Chris Shelley's 17th hole, a delightful automatic hole-in-one for any player making basic contact with the ball. As any harried parent will attest, life—and not just putt-putt—needs a few more of these.

Among the most striking installations at the Whitney Museum's 2007 Gordon Matta-Clark retrospective were four rooftop corners the artist sawed out of a building in New Jersey. Matta-Clark is an important precursor to current sculptural reimaginings of architectural dystopia, whether urban or suburban. At the Putting Lot, Zabor/Tsien-Shiang's 8th hole wedged a similar-looking corner into the ground, while at the Governors Island course, Jason Austin, Aleksandr Mergold, and Eli Kent's 14th hole allows golfers to walk along a rooftop surface of gently sloped tiles and shingles. Brian Bucher's 6th hole utilizes movable wood blocks painted with small black windows. Its ominous cityscape evokes both neglected tenement buildings and empty, faceless condos. Similarly, Laura Salierno and Tara Marchionna's 10th hole—with its discarded plastic bags, tennis balls, water bottles, and tires—transplants some of the Putting Lot's Bushwick grittiness onto Governors Island's bright, sunny lawn.

Each of the latter's mini-golf holes are fronted by a small sign with artist commentary on their creations: "a place for communal dreaming," says one; another proclaims its "alternative applications for materials." Heady rhetoric abounds, even if the course isn't nearly as integrated into its surroundings as the Putting Lot. As isolated sculptural pieces, some holes on Governors Island worked better than others: Particularly beautiful is Benjamin Jones and Anna Hecker's sinuous, strong, and decouped 12th hole, inspired by Coney Island's Cyclone. The New York City Dreaming Commission's 60-foot-long, straight-shot 5th hole is a simple yet smart minimalist respite from putt-putt's deliberate obstructions.

But making discrete works of art is hardly the point at either course. Instead, it's to create low-cost or free entertainment that also provides an opportunity to reflect on current and future urban spaces. But not literally. Donald Trump once built a miniature golf course in Central Park with holes fashioned after New York City landmarks, and it costs at least \$200,000 to license an official Putt-Putt® franchise. The Putting Lot and *City of Dreams* Mini Golf respond to the sport's various clichés by envisioning a less readily branded kind of fun.