

Reclaiming the Streets

Partners in the Renaissance

Grand Army Plaza

BROOKLYN'S GRAND ARMY PLAZA, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, rivals the grandeur of European plazas like the Parisian Etoile where the Arc de Triomphe is located. There is, however, one notable difference: unlike the great European plazas, Grand Army Plaza is, for the most part, disconnected from the city around it and devoid of human life and activity. Over the years, this great civic space has evolved into an impenetrable traffic rotary.

Since early 2006, a diverse group of community stakeholders has come together to re-envision Grand Army Plaza with pedestrian accessibility and traffic taming as central tenets. The Grand Army Plaza Coalition (GAPCo) includes a rapidly expanding list of organizations and important pillars of the neighborhood like the Prospect Park Alliance, The Brooklyn Public Library and The Heart of Brooklyn which represents all of the cultural institutions around Grand Army Plaza, as well as neighborhood groups like the Park Slope Civic Council and the Prospect Heights Parents Association.

GAPCo and Transportation Alternatives hired world famous architect and city planner Jan Gehl, of Gehl Architects in Copenhagen, Denmark, to conduct a phase-one vision of how the plaza could be transformed. Looking forward, the Coalition is considering the next stage of planning to convince the city that transforming the plaza should be a priority and will make it one of the best known public spaces in the world.

Transportation Alternatives asked Robert Witherwax, Co-Chair Eastern Parkway/Cultural Row Neighborhood Association and Member of GAPCo to comment on the developments.

T.A.: How did you get involved with the GAPCo?

ROBERT WITHERWAX: In 2000, a loose band of neighbors advocating for the renovation of the Eastern Parkway median expanded into the Eastern Parkway/Cultural Row Neighbor-

hood Association (EPCRNA). Tupper Thomas [Prospect Park Alliance President/ Park Administrator] and the Prospect Park Alliance heard the concerns of the neighborhood that the decrepit condition of the median and the unsafe traffic flow at Washington Avenue merited attention. The Alliance lobbied for the project, designed it, and all the while consulted closely with the residents of the block. Now, after enduring some ups and downs, the project is designed, funded, and ready for construction (slated for summer 2007).

After the Park Slope Civic Council (PSCC) forum about traffic in March, 2006, Mike Dowd, chair of the Prospect Heights Parent's Association (PHPA), put me in touch with the PSCC. I offered our group's total support for any comprehensive re-examination of Grand Army Plaza (GAP). Plus, as an individual who uses GAP as a frequent pedestrian, cyclist, motorist, dog-walker, and stroller-pusher, I am pretty qualified to discuss it from many perspectives!



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One of the primary throughlines of the GAPCo experience so far has been that it is not just rich Park Slopies complaining about not being able to find parking in front of their brownstones. What EPCRNA and PHPA bring to the table is the notion that GAP divides two vibrant neighborhoods when it should join them. Add to that the cooperation of the cultural institutions (Prospect Park Alliance specifically and the Heart of Brooklyn as a group), the political leaders (Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, Congressman Major Owens, and various City Councilmembers) and the business organizations, and you have a really diverse group that represents as many interests as possible.

What is your vision for your neighborhood?

My ideal vision for Grand Army Plaza is nothing eccentric: it's about freedom and choice. My vision is for a streetscape where the car, the bike and the person, moving at their proper speeds, can enter the matrix at any point, proceed without undue delay or circuitousness through the matrix and exit at any

Witness the Renaissance

Throughout the city, streets are being transformed to benefit the pedestrian supermajority. For more information about what is happening at these locations and others visit nycsr.org.



point. My mantra has been: improve access to and through Grand Army Plaza for everyone!

I would love to see more retail options on Washington and Underhill Avenues. I would love to see more people using the cultural institutions. I would love for more people to relax in Mount Prospect Park, bike on the Parkway, move freely through the Plaza. I would love for biking to 7th Avenue to be more convenient, less dangerous, and quicker than taking the 2/3 to Atlantic Center. The fact that it is not, bothers me. It seems to go against the urban ideal.

How does GAPCo complement your work on Eastern Parkway?

For me, the Eastern Parkway work has been primarily about two themes—equity and safety. Equity: the notion of accommodating different speeds and modes of passage along the same or similar axis is very Olmstedian (compare Prospect Park's interlaced footpaths, bridle paths, and roadways, with Eastern Parkway's parallel main road, access road, bike path, and sidewalks). Safety: the median itself is dangerous: with all the potholes and rough pavement it is almost impassable on a bicycle. People emerge from the subway and step right on to the roadway, right into traf-

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hood tied to an industrial waterfront and later serving as a “backstage” community for the theater industry. Ninth Avenue, with varied food, art and boutique markets, restaurants and bars, has emerged as the retail heart of the district.

As the economy and tourist industry have boomed in the last few years the streets have become exceedingly congested, with substantial traffic and the re-routing of major truck routes from the Holland to the Lincoln Tunnel following September 11th, 2001. Accident rates have accelerated and major retail corridors like 9th Avenue have been transformed into bus, truck and commuter thoroughfares. Major residential developments on key corridors and recent up-zoning at the western edge of the neighborhood will only make the situation worse.

Led by the Clinton/Hells Kitchen Pedestrian Safety Coalition (CHEKPEDS), numerous organizations, including Community Board 4, Transportation Alternatives, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, Project for Public Spaces and elected officials, have called on the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council and the NYC Department of Transportation to initiate a comprehensive traffic and air quality study to develop congestion mitigations.

Transportation Alternatives recently caught up with Christine Berthet, co-founder of CHEKPEDS.

T.A.: How did CHEKPEDS Start?

CHRISTINE BERTHET: Following the success of the Hells Kitchen/Hudson Yards Alliance against the West Side Stadium, Hell’s Kitchen Neighborhood Association (HKNA) chair Kathleen Treat tasked HKNA’s transportation committee with developing a coalition for pedestrian safety. An October 2005 rally, attended by many angry residents, confirmed that traffic is one of the major issues in our neighborhood. All the elected officials present demonstrated their support and block associations expressed interest in joining in the coalition. The leadership team of CHEKPEDS includes Darrick Sampson, President of the 47th Street Block Association, Brian Sogol, President of the Hudson Crossing Tenants Association and Martin Treat and Christine Berthet, Co-Chairs of the HKNA Transportation Committee. CHEKPEDS is focused on the pedestrian

environment and safety on 9th Avenue from 57th Street to 35th Street.

What has your experience been with neighborhood residents, businesses, agencies and elected officials?

The residents of Clinton/Hells Kitchen have a history of taking their future in their own hands. Seven years ago, HKNA designed a community-driven plan for the neighborhood and the residents are now energized by the prospect of envisioning the future of 9th Avenue. Businesses and other neighborhood organizations are warming up to it as well. While the city agencies are considering our efforts with interest, clearly a framework does not exist yet for a proactive and positive community-driven collaboration with them. Thankfully [Manhattan Borough President] Scott Stringer, [State Senator] Tom Duane, [City Council Speaker] Christine Quinn, [U.S. Congressman] Jerry Nadler, [State Assemblymember] Dick Gottfried and the Public Advocate [Betsy Gottbaum] are all very supportive of this endeavor.

What is your vision for your neighborhood?

Neighborhood children could walk to school safely, seniors could cross the avenue without threat of injury and tourists would not have to fear for their lives when going from the river to midtown. Bicycles and horse carriages would travel safely on 9th Avenue, emergency vehicles would avail themselves of technology intended to give them right of way at critical times; as a result, injuries would decrease by 50% in the next five years, instead of doubling as they have in the past five years. The sidewalks would be larger, greener and more welcoming to cafes, shoppers and commuters, as well as restaur-



An October 2005 Rally in Hell’s Kitchen, Manhattan spurred the formation of CHEKPEDS.

ant- and theater-goers in the evening. The Lincoln Tunnel-bound traffic would be well balanced between various entrances that have less impact on residential or pedestrian streets. The number of trucks would be reduced by 35%; the number of Lincoln tunnel bound cars would be reduced by 65%; police officers and traffic agents would give tickets to motorists who do not respect traffic and noise rules. In three years, the number of tickets would increase by 1000%! □

fic. There are no crosswalks or signal lights at major points in the area. And forget about curb cuts.

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—ROBERT WITHERWAX

Any discussion of GAP must enlarge upon these themes. Equity: no one can say that GAP is a ped-friendly zone right now. I do laud the DOT for making it as ped-friendly as it can possibly be without major surgery, however, it’s due for major surgery! It is even worse for bikes. Safety: many people on either side of the GAP divide want to commune with each other, but avoid the plaza entirely! The car-friendly design of the flow is inequitable and unsafe to the pedestrians or cyclists of both neighborhoods.

Clinton/Hell’s Kitchen

THE CLINTON/HELL’S KITCHEN NEIGHBORHOOD is a growing residential community in west-midtown Manhattan. The area was historically an immigrant, working-class neighbor-