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Decades Later, a Vision Survives

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The park — a memorial to Franklin Delano Roosevelt — was conceived four decades ago. The visionary architect who designed it died in 1974. The site, a landfill along one of the more dramatic stretches of waterfront in New York City, remained a rubble heap while the project was left for dead.

But in a city proud of its own impatience, perseverance sometimes pays off. Next month, on that triangular plot on the southern end of Roosevelt Island, the four-acre Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Park will open, a belated and monumental triumph for New York and for everyone who cares about architecture and public space.

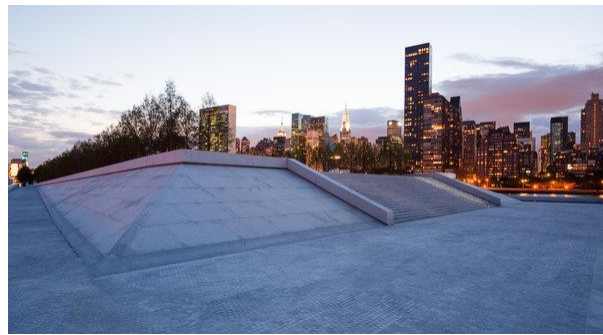
Louis Kahn is the architect. He completed drawings for the park just before he died suddenly, in Pennsylvania Station, at 73. That Kahn's plan survived periodic calls to privatize the government-owned property and build a hotel and fancy town houses, among other commercial proposals, proves the benefit of resisting short-term financial imperatives. In the end the value of the project goes far beyond dollars and cents.

It gives New York nothing less than a new spiritual heart. That's to say it creates an exalted, austere public space, at once like the prow of a ship and a retreat for meditation. It's a memorial, perhaps naïvely optimistic but uplifting and confident, unlike the one at ground zero. It is as solemn as the Roosevelt wartime speech it honors, a call to safeguard the freedoms of speech and worship and the freedoms from want and fear. From inside the great, open granite enclosure that Kahn called the "room" at the tip of the island, a long fly ball away from the United Nations, a visitor looks out over the city and the churning waters of the East River in the direction of the Statue of Liberty, the ocean and Europe. It is the long view that Roosevelt had for America.

In this respect the park is probably the closest Kahn came to pure abstract art, a virtual walk-in sculpture that does more than honor the 32nd president and bring to life a neglected but symbolic stretch of prime shorefront on an island soon to be transformed by a Cornell University campus. A tapered lawn and flanking allées of littleleaf linden trees converge from atop a 100-foot-wide ceremonial staircase, pointing toward the tip of the island as if stretching toward infinity.

Maybe Kahn was thinking about Philip Johnson's memorial to John F. Kennedy in Dallas, another roofless room, which was dedicated in 1970. (Kahn didn't see eye to eye with Johnson, but that doesn't mean he always ignored him.) The symmetrical layout and extended vista also calls to mind the plaza at Kahn's Salk Institute for Biological Studies in San Diego and various pioneering examples of landscape sculpture in the American West by contemporaneous artists like Walter De Maria, Donald Judd and Michael Heizer.

Kahn once described "the endlessly changing qualities of natural light, in which a room is a different room every second of the day." In the park's room he chose to leave inch-wide gaps



Louis Kahn's Four Freedoms Park on Roosevelt Island
Robert Wright for The New York Times

between the 36-ton granite blocks, polishing only the sides of the stones inside the gaps to create shiny, reflective slits that amplify narrow views through them.

It's a stroke of genius. The blocks seem to flatten when you're peering through the gaps, a perhaps accidental Alice-in-Wonderland effect that nonetheless derives from the heightened awareness a visitor feels, as one does at some of those land-art sites, of the endlessly shifting relationship between nature and artifice.

This becomes Kahn's only work in New York City. Mitchell/Giurgola Architects, the New York firm, and the F. J. Sciamé Construction Company, with Weidlinger Associates and Langan Engineering, executed the project, with some tweaks. Lighting was added to the widened tree-lined paths, the layout of trees slightly altered, a bust of Roosevelt by Jo Davidson inserted in a free-standing wall where Kahn had squiggled only some indefinite shape in his drawings. And the whole site has been raised 15 inches to accommodate climate change. (The Army Corps of Engineers says the East River has risen nearly five inches since the early 1970s.)

Questions about the integrity of posthumous construction — whether this is still Kahn's design and not a pastiche — are understandable and stem partly from a history of lamentable buildings after plans by other visionary architects, like Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier.

But here the outcome speaks for itself. Kahn prescribed the size, placement, polish and crisp cut of the enormous granite blocks and parapets (from a quarry in North Carolina), which, like the ancient Egyptian stones at Giza, lend to the site a military dignity and rhythm. He chose copper beech trees for the entrance. He devised the sloping paths that hug the water and meet the plaza at the foot of the lawn. In the important ways this is Kahn's park.

It opens on Oct. 24. Much of the credit belongs to William J. vanden Heuvel, a former United States ambassador. His mother ran a boardinghouse and his father was a factory worker, both of them Roosevelt-loving immigrants who settled in Rochester. He galvanized support and helped raise \$53 million for the project; donations included \$10 million from Alphawood, a foundation controlled by the Chicago businessman and leading Democratic donor Fred Eychaner. A conservancy will maintain what is expected to become a state park.

Mayor John V. Lindsay and Edward J. Logue, who was Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller's urban development czar, had originally envisioned the park, honoring Roosevelt and his speech, in tandem with a new town and the renaming of what was still called Welfare Island. The town rose, the name changed. But the city's financial meltdown in the 1970s and the departure of Rockefeller for Washington as vice president delayed the park.

Opening now, all these years later in a remade city, the place requires an effort to visit because the island isn't extensively served by mass transit, but the pilgrimage goes along with the site's gravity. The uncanny calm it inspires amid the city din is as touching as the care and devotion its construction workers clearly brought to a project that included lugging, like Gothic church builders in the Middle Ages, the giant stones from barges.

Preserving the site will be a challenge. The park is pristine to a fault. Policing graffiti artists and skateboarders must be weighed against the park's freedom theme.

The sober ruin of an adjacent 19th-century smallpox hospital, designed by James Renwick Jr., architect of St. Patrick's Cathedral, is to become the park's entry pavilion, where visitors can be sensitized to the fragility of the stone; and maybe just as useful would be to adopt the green space on the opposite side of the ruin as a playground to give skateboarders an alternative to the memorial. If the rest of the island wants to rise to Kahn's challenge, it will also need a better master plan for the Cornell campus. The suburban-style office park, under review now — soulless, rigid and without thoughtful public space — isn't nearly good enough.

The new Four Freedoms Park is a lot to live up to.

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