

DISPATCHES

Jake Mooney

In the Heart of Brooklyn, No Man's Island

FROM a seat near the center of Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn one recent sunny afternoon, the world was a surprisingly quiet place. The sounds of the traffic whirlpool swirling around in every direction had receded into a white-noise drone, and the only pedestrian passers-by were those brave enough to cross four lanes of cars at one time in pursuit of a short cut.

It was, in short, not a bad place for quiet reflection. Javaka Steptoe, of nearby Prospect-Lefferts Gardens, knew this: He had stopped to meditate on his way home from the gym, and he was sitting quietly and undisturbed on a bench near the middle of the plaza, a solitary figure with his eyes closed and his back straight. At that moment, he was the only person who could be seen sitting in the plaza, which at 11 acres is about the same size as 10 football fields.

A little later, when he stood up and proceeded to make his way through the traffic and head home, Mr. Steptoe was asked if the elliptical space could perhaps be made easier to navigate.

"I don't have a problem with it how it is," he said with a smile. "It suits my purposes."

Still, Grand Army Plaza is not quite what Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted envisioned when they designed the space in the 1860s. They pictured a grand and sprawling entrance to Prospect Park, a gateway through which most of the park's visitors would pass. It worked for a time, but soon there was

discontent. "No one cares to cross it," a report by Brooklyn's Parks Commission noted in 1888. "It is devoid of all life and is a stony waste. It is suggestive of Siberia in winter and Sahara in summer."

The complaint would ring strikingly familiar to many in the area today, who say the plaza, designed as a portal and a promenade, long ago devolved into a traffic circle with more lanes than the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway — depending on what point you're crossing from — and a center as daunting to reach as an island in a storm.

Now, those neighbors — through an umbrella group called the Grand Army Plaza Coalition, which is working with the city's parks and transportation departments — have begun an effort to redesign the plaza, or, they say, to design it for the first time with cars in mind.

When the Design Trust for Public Space, which is working with the local groups, held a competition in the spring seeking new ideas for the plaza, the

organization received more than 200 entries. A jury narrowed them to 30 finalists and three prizewinners, whose proposals are all to be displayed in the plaza starting Sept. 12.

Deborah Marton, the trust's executive director, says that just getting people into the middle of the plaza to see the exhibits is important.

"Today, if you want to move north to south or east to west, you're basically confined to the perimeters," Ms. Marton said. "If you're on a bike or on foot, what the space conveys to you is that the people who actually live there are much less important than people who are passing through in a car."

But managing the 4,000 cars that the trust says pass through the plaza every hour will be tricky. Craig Hammerman, the district manager of Community Board 6 and a member of the plaza coalition, said the neighborhoods south of Prospect Park face rush-hour traffic jams when flow through the park and around the plaza is restricted.

Even so, added Mr. Hammerman, with a redesign, perhaps parts of the circle could be closed to traffic at times.

According to Michael Cairl, a spokesman for the coalition who lives a block away from the plaza on Berkeley Place, one of the sad things about the plaza is that it acts as a barrier between neighborhoods, like Park Slope and Prospect Heights, and even between destinations that are otherwise physically close, like Brooklyn's Central Library and the subway stop on the other side of the plaza.

Another issue involves the center island, with its park, fountain and handful of devotees for whom it can feel like a private secret. "It's such a great space," Mr. Cairl said of the plaza. "We like to call it our flawed gem."



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