

# Civic News

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## Plaza to the People!

*Grand Army Plaza was meant to be used  
 — and not as a traffic rotary*

**T**his is Brooklyn, so why be modest? We challenge anyone to name a public space anywhere in this country that is grander — and less used — than our own Grand Army Plaza.

This dubious claim to fame has existed almost since the automobile overwhelmed other means of transportation and a ceaseless flow of traffic amputated Grand Army Plaza from the rest of Prospect Park (yes, it is part of the Park). But this is a Brooklyn where community activism seems newly energized; after the Plaza's status was widely lamented at the Park Slope Civic Council's March 3 forum on Traffic and Transportation, a new group sprang almost immediately into being: GAPCO, the Grand Army Plaza Coalition.

GAPCO has drawn support from individuals and civic groups, including the Civic Council, but even more telling of the Plaza's vexing status has been the involvement of such institutions as the Brooklyn Public Library, the Botanic Garden, and the Brooklyn Museum. Most crucially, the group can claim the wise counsel of Prospect Park Administrator and Prospect Park Alliance President Tupper Thomas; she has been an advocate for Grand Army Plaza for more than two decades, often as a near-lone voice.

"We are a coalition of individuals, organizations, and businesses who are committed to improving the public's experience of Grand Army Plaza," reads a draft mission statement for the coalition. "The Plaza currently functions as little more than a massive



*An illustration from the Brooklyn Eagle shows the huge crowd that filled what was then known simply as the Plaza when the Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Arch was dedicated on October 21, Columbus Day, 1892.*

traffic rotary, separating communities in its wake."

The group's immediate goals are grounded in what its members hope is realistically achievable, beginning with access: safer and saner crosswalks than the current zig-zag, traffic-dodging obstacle course. Then, if the Department of Transportation agrees to make reaching the Plaza less death-defying, GAPCO will look for ways to draw people to the grounds surrounding the Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Arch, the Bailey Fountain, and the John F.

Kennedy memorial, three of Brooklyn's best known but least visited landmarks.

Such modest ambitions are a far cry from what was intended for the Plaza by its famous designers, Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted. It would have been unimaginable to them that the Plaza would someday be so isolated from the rest of Prospect Park. The Plaza that Vaux and Olmsted built was integral to the Park and, especially, its

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Brooklyn Public Library Brooklyn Collection

Dave Pearson



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main entrance.

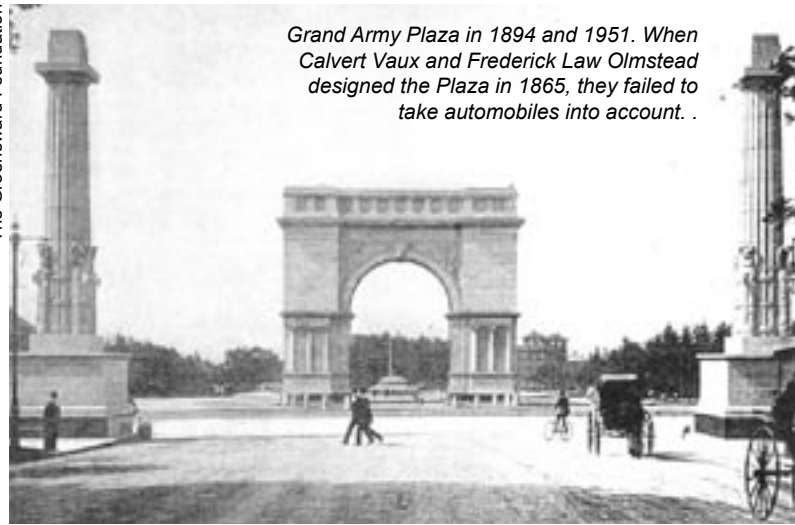
To hear their Plaza described as a “traffic rotary” would have caused both confusion and consternation. To steal from an old Yiddish aphorism, if Vaux and Olmsted had lived long enough to see the Jan. 18, 1947 issue of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, they would have dropped dead. “One of Brooklyn’s most impressive traffic maelstroms,” read the caption accompanying a photo of the Plaza awash in a sea of cars – a photo remarkable six decades later only because a maelstrom then looks like a mere squall today.

In February, 1865 Vaux sketched an ellipse onto a rough plan for Prospect Park. What he envisioned was, literally, a grand plaza: a great open space separated from the city along three-quarters of its circumference by landscaped mounds, with the open quarter leading into the park. It was to be a transitional space, where a visitor could begin to decompress from urban intensity. Vaux also expected – correctly – that it would become a popular venue for speechmaking, and predicted that a fountain and heroic monuments would eventually be erected on the site.

Later in 1865, Vaux was joined by Olmsted and, over the next several years, they created one of the nation’s great city parks, which very much included the space then known simply as the Plaza. In 1874, in their annual report to the park’s commissioners, the two men discussed the Plaza’s intended functions:

“The principal entrance to a large metropolitan park admits in its design of more than one theory of artistic arrangement. The contrast between the urban and the rural requires in some cases to be sharply drawn, the city enclosing the park as squarely and completely as a picture frame enclosed a picture. In other situations and under different circumstances, a series of intermediate, partly rural and partly urban, effects may, with propriety, be in-

The Greensward Foundation



Grand Army Plaza in 1894 and 1951. When Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted designed the Plaza in 1865, they failed to take automobiles into account. .

roduced at the point of junction. In the Brooklyn park, the latter arrangement seemed to be preferable for several reasons.”

Among those reasons was the park’s unusual shape. In 1865, when Vaux sketched his ellipse, he had just finished convincing the commissioners not to extend their new park to the east of Flatbush Avenue, which, even then, he saw as a hazard to pedestrians. But that left the location he envisioned as the park’s main entrance at the awkward, sharply angled intersection of Flatbush and Ninth Avenue (now Prospect Park West).

“The unsatisfactory feature was the shape of the entrance itself, left at the apex of a triangle which was apparently struggling to wedge its way into the street system of the city,” Vaux and Olmsted wrote in their 1974 report “To overcome this serious difficulty, the Plaza was introduced as a main elementary feature in the general design.”

They expressed relief that the needed land had been acquired before property values shot up, thanks to the opening of Prospect Park, and argued that the Plaza accomplished its goals.

“The apex of the triangle which forms the actual entrance has become a mere segment of an ellipse, 800 feet in diameter, and, therefore, on a scale large enough to contrast favorably even with such a wide street of approach as Flatbush Avenue.”

Describing the mounds surrounding the Plaza, which were intersected by Flatbush and Vanderbilt Avenues, they wrote, “Three large masses of plantation are introduced outside the park boundary... so that the rural element may be strongly suggested before the main entrance is reached.”

“Rural element” is not an image that comes to mind when contemplating Grand Army Plaza today, any more than it was in 1955 when the New York *World-Telegram* described it as “the only concrete and asphalt roulette wheel in the world,” or even

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as a parking spot for ambulance drivers on break, is gone. Thomas reported it would have cost some \$30 million to implement the changes in 1987, but that the city refused to approve the funding. The renderings were consigned to the Prospect Park archives.

In October 21, 1869, a statue of Abraham Lincoln was unveiled on the Plaza. Among the speakers was Prospect Park Commissioner Abiel A. Low, whose son, Seth, would later be elected mayor of both Brooklyn and New York City. "It seemed to be most fitting and proper," said Low, "that on this spot, destined ere long to be the center of a vast city, this monument should be erected; that all our citizens who gather from time to time in this Plaza, and look upon the form and features of this central figure, may be led to ponder the example of the great original...before entering upon paths of pleasure now opening to our view."

The Lincoln statue has been moved to the Concert Grove, and it may be too much to hope that Grand Army Plaza will ever again be Brooklyn's center, but perhaps, at least, safe passage can be restored to the citizens of our borough who gather on the Plaza "from time to time."  
*—Ezra Goldstein*

*To learn more about GAPCO, go to <http://www.openplans.org/projects/gap> and click on "Get involved!"*

in 1928, when the Safety Council of Brooklyn chose the Plaza as the site for its "Death-O-Meter," telling drivers the running number of traffic fatalities in the Borough.

It is especially ironic that the "masses of plantation" now shelter the buildings ringing the outside perimeter, along Plaza Street. That's a radical turn from 1896, when the Prospect Park Commissioners described how "the outer world was excluded by the erection of beautiful mounds," and apologized for the delay in relocating trolley tracks from the Plaza to outside the mounds, on Plaza Street.

"Olmsted and Vaux designed the elliptical Plaza not only to form a grand, yet partly rural, entrance to the park, but also to create a large, well-defined space which would overwhelm Flatbush Avenue," wrote Mary B. Dierickx in a 1982 study for the Department of Transportation. The design worked just fine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, she noted, but failed to anticipate the automobile. What happened in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote Dierickx, was that "Flatbush Avenue has succeeded in overwhelming the Plaza."

In 1987, the Parks Department produced plans that would have shifted the balance back a bit in favor of Grand Army Plaza. At a recent GAPCO meeting, Tupper Thomas unfurled one of the schematics drawn nearly two decades earlier.

Some two dozen people crowded around for a better view of this Holy Grail: proof that alternatives to the status quo are conceivable. The schematic showed a significant narrowing of the multi-lane highways that now encircle the Plaza, with traffic flow maintained by islands designed to funnel cars into the appropriate lanes with far greater efficiency than the present free-for-all. The Arch is restored to its rightful place as part of the Plaza: the road cut that now separates the Arch from the rest of the Plaza grounds, and that is used principally

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