



THE BATTLE OF FORT GREENE

**NEIGHBORHOOD ACTIVISTS PUT
A HALT TO NEW YORK CITY'S
PLAN TO MAKE A PARK
MORE ACCESSIBLE.**

BY TOM STOELKER



The stated goal of the New York City Parks Department's Parks Without Borders initiative is to make parks safer and more accessible. But the program's latest project, a revamping of Fort Greene Park in Brooklyn, has been stymied by a New York Supreme Court decision that halts what some see as a ham-handed effort to ram through the \$10.5 million redesign.

At issue is the park's design heritage, which is as diverse as the neighborhood. The site was a military stronghold during the Revolutionary War, and became a park in 1847. Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted created a meandering design in 1867, establishing one of Brooklyn's first designed parks. In 1908, a redesign by the architecture firm McKim, Mead, and White overwhelmed the Olmstedian design with a wide, formal stair

that leads to a 150-foot-high Doric column, which marked a crypt for prisoners who died on British ships during the Revolutionary War. In 1969, Berman, Roberts, and Scofidio (later of Diller Scofidio + Renfro) transformed the northwest corner with lawn-topped mounds supported by cobblestones, a design conceived by the landscape architect A. E. Bye Jr. The team also buffered the noisy city corner with honey locusts and a thicket of Norway maples.

For generations, the towering trees in the northwest corner have sheltered the outdoor celebrations of residents from the New York City Housing Authority apartments located directly across the street.

"This is the reason I stayed in Brooklyn," says Stacy Williams, who has lived in the Ingersoll Houses for the past 28 years. Nearby, her granddaughter played on Bye's mounds. "Any function, this is the park to go to."

Fort Greene is undoubtedly one of the city's more imposing parks. Retaining walls surround nearly every side of the grounds, creating a fortress-like effect. The parks department's plan is to tear down the walls, remove Bye's mounds, and fell more than 50 mature trees in the park's northwest corner to run a primarily concrete boulevard down the square's axis.

The formal design would be more at home in an American city aspiring to be a part of the City Beautiful movement than

TOP LEFT

A.E. Bye Jr.'s grass-topped mounds have been used as a play area for generations of neighborhood children.

BOTTOM LEFT

A city proposal would remove the mounds for a pedestrian thoroughfare, creating space for vendors and events.

SITE PLAN

21st-century New York, said plaintiffs in the lawsuit, a group that includes Friends of Fort Greene Park, City Club of New York, and the Sierra Club. “It’s a lazy design,” says Ling Hsu, the president of Friends of Fort Greene Park and an alumna of the nearby Pratt Institute. “It was proposed in 2017 in a diverse neighborhood where the uses may have changed, but as the environment and society evolve, the design should evolve with the surroundings and the users instead of going backwards.”

Michael Gotkin, a landscape preservation consultant to Friends of Fort Greene Park, says that every designer up until now has respected that Olmsted made the entrance off-axis and oblique. “The formalist element at the core is intentionally revealed only upon entering the park.”



Initially, the parks department produced handouts explaining that the trees slated for removal were invasive and nearing the end of their life span. However, documents attained by Hsu and the other plaintiffs through the Freedom of Information Act revealed that 49 out of the 58 trees identified for removal are in fine health, Hsu says. Instead, their location didn’t fit within the new design intent. Hsu and her colleagues say that the community board and the Landmarks Preservation Commission were given incorrect information on the tree health, thereby avoiding environmental review—that is, until the issue made its way to the New York State Supreme Court.

When asked about the complaint, Nicholas Paolucci, the director of public affairs and press secretary for the city’s law department, wrote in an e-mail that his department “filed a notice of appeal to preserve our right to appeal, but the city is considering its options.”

Back in the park, as her granddaughter played atop the grass-topped mounds, Williams was dismayed that the landforms would be replaced with concrete to accommodate farmers’ market vendors and events. “If you’re going to do something for the park, upgrade the park,” she said. “Build a ramp for people in the wheelchairs. Fix that. Fix the little cracks, everything. The park don’t really need this glamorous thing you’re putting in it.”●

LEFT, TOP

The circular plaza in its current state with Bye’s mounds in the distance.

LEFT, BOTTOM

The proposed renovation would expand circular plant beds and add a water feature at the center of the circle.

