



## Queens Plaza: Finally a There There

A fresh swath of green brings a sense of community to a Long Island City transit hub; high-rise development brings residents to use it

BY CLAIRE WILSON



It's not quite a neighborhood – not yet, anyway – but Queens Plaza is certainly evolving into something other than the seedy backdrop for *Law & Order* segments it once was. Luxury residential developments shoot skyward, hotels thrive, and businesses like JetBlue and MetLife have moved in. It is also only a scant 15-minute commute to Midtown Manhattan.

A rare patch of green stands out as the harbinger of neighborhoodly things to come: Dutch Kills Green, a 1.5-acre swath of plantings and bike paths that now hosts butterflies, blueberry bushes, and baby strollers where parking lots once dominated. The park was designed by landscape architect Margie Ruddick, ASLA, of Margie Ruddick Landscape (who was with WRT/Wallace Roberts & Todd when the project began in 2009), and Marpillero Pollak Architects, with the New York City Economic Development Corporation as the client. Completed in 2012, the park creates the only true outdoor gathering space in this part of Long Island City, once defined only by strip clubs, donut shops, elevated subway tracks, and the ramp to the Queensboro Bridge. “It was just acres of asphalt with people getting hit as they ran across lines of traffic,” says Ruddick. “It was confusing and dangerous, and we needed to make it into a refuge – a green refuge.”

Rezoning from commercial to mixed use in 2001 started the changes around Queens Plaza, a locus of seven subway lines, 10 bus lines, and 16 lanes of traffic – “not decommissioned like the High Line,” according to Linda Pollak, AIA, Affil. ASLA, principal of Marpillero Pollak Architects.

The NYC Department of City Planning (DCP) and the Department of Transportation had already begun reconfiguring the streets and adding medians, leaving the design team a parcel that began with a long, narrow strip near the bridge and swelled into a wide triangle wrapped by an elevated line. The designers raised the grade and constructed sunken wetlands to gather, clean, and filter storm water. Using earth as a sound buffer, they lowered the decibel level by 23%, making it more like a street in SoHo than Times Square, according to Ruddick. (Regrettably, trains still screech overhead.)

Artist Michael Singer designed textured pavers and low-slung wood and concrete benches informed by both the Dutch granaries that once stood at the site and the industrial character of the area, also home to many artists. The seating design enhances the effect of the different topographical levels that create intimate places to sit and gather, according to Pollak. “People like to stand and lie on the benches or climb around,” she says. “The topography is very engaging.”

Plantings are primarily native species. Three mature pin oaks found in the former parking lot were preserved, to everyone's delight, along with some historic millstones that were incorporated into the landscape. “The trees were a treasure that provided shade immediately,” Ruddick says.

Dutch Kills Green is phase one of a multiphase improvement plan that stretches west from Dutch Kills to the Sunnyside Rail Yards and east to Queensbridge Park and the East River. Storage space under the Queensboro Bridge is being studied for reuse; an unused park known as “Baby Park” may be refurbished, as may an attractive allée of mature London planetrees that runs between the Queensboro Bridge and the Queensbridge Houses, the nation's largest public housing complex. Improved lighting for both the bridge and elevated tracks that lead from it to Queens Plaza is also under consideration, according to Penny Lee, a DCP senior planner for Long Island City.

New bike lanes have been a resounding success, and the park's popularity thrives with its plantings. “The slightest bit of sunshine peeks out, and people are on those benches, having lunch,” says Elizabeth Lusskin, president of the Long Island City Partnership. In general, she says, “quality-of-life issues are vastly improved.”

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