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Brewer Fountain Plaza reopens as historic area gets facelift

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Nathan Smolensky (left) played chess with Adam Badoo, as Thomas Cater played against Natasha Us-Christiansen at Brewer Fountain on Wednesday. (DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF)

In a once-forsaken corner of Boston Common, a professional pianist sat at her instrument and played compositions by Gershwin, Cole Porter, and Miles Davis. Two young men faced off over a chess board. People pulled newspapers and magazines from a reading rack, sat back on new park benches, and listened to the music mingle with the bubbling of water from Brewer Fountain.

A new plaza debuted Wednesday near Tremont and Park streets that may change what it means to be a park in Boston. The overhaul included more than just new granite and fresh grass. The goal is to give people who pass this corner a reason to stop, sit, and spend time in America's oldest park.

"It has a different ambience than the rest of the Common," said Julia Gabberty, 24, who ate a chickpea fritter as she sat at one of the plaza's 30 new cafe tables. "It makes it a little special."

Gabberty purchased her lunch from Clover Food Lab, a food truck serving vegetarian sandwiches, soups, and salads that will regularly perch near the fountain. Other new amenities include two carts with 450 books that can be perused in the plaza. A media rack

will be stocked with six daily newspapers and 30 magazines for reading free of charge. Patrons can borrow boards to play chess or backgammon.

The attractions on the plaza are part of a broader effort spearheaded by the Friends of the Public Garden, which also advocates for Boston Common. The entire project will cost almost \$5 million, most of it raised from private donors. It began with Brewer Fountain, a majestic 22-foot sculpture refurbished earlier, largely with money from the city.



A trumpeter added to the festive air at the ceremony today (David L. Ryan/Globe Staff)

The Friends of the Public Garden raised money for the granite plaza, benches, curbs, and pathways. Liberty Mall, a stretch of lawn that runs up from the fountain to the State House, was completely redone. It has irrigation and sod so fresh that Parks Commissioner Antonia Pollak enthused that it looked as lush as the outfield at Fenway Park.

This year, renovations will focus on Lafayette Mall, a cracked path along Tremont Street that feels more like an urban sidewalk than a park.

Wednesday was a day to celebrate the reopening of Brewer Fountain Plaza and the new amenities. The ceremony included speeches by lifelong parks advocate Henry Lee, Mayor Thomas M. Menino, and others.

“I just know on a warm day there’s going to be hundreds of people coming here,” said Councilor Salvatore LaMattina, who journeyed to New York several years ago to examine that city’s efforts to enliven parks.

The most innovative new attraction to Brewer Fountain Plaza is the piano, which is an Ivers & Pond model built in 1885. The instrument must be stowed each night in a secure place near the Frog Pond, so a traditional piano would be difficult to keep in tune because of the bumpy foot paths and the fluctuating humidity, said Ted Furst, a parks consultant hired by the Friends of the Garden who designed the piano.

To make it outdoor friendly, the piano was gutted and outfitted with a high-end Roland electronic keyboard, an eight-channel mixer, and a professional speaker system, all powered by a solar panel. The instrument can act as an amplifier, allowing several other instruments to plug in.

For now, the plan is to stick with pianists such as Concetta Donato, who will play every weekday during lunch and some evenings. Donato, a recent graduate of Berklee College of Music, first played the plaza earlier this week and a homeless man stood in front of the piano and repeatedly and loudly urged Donato not to stop.

"It's a little different," Donato said, noting that pianists are not often exposed to the distractions felt by saxophone players and other street musicians. "People are walking by. The wind. But it's good."

Her music drew Alice and Fabrice Piegelin into the park, where they sat at a café table and held hands.

"When we heard the piano, we followed," said Alice Piegelin, a tourist from the French island of Réunion in the Indian Ocean. "It's very pleasant."