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Revival Is Planned for a Derelict Downtown Newark Park



Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

A statue of John F. Kennedy is one of the features of Military Park in Newark, which will undergo a \$3.25 million renovation.

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NEWARK — During a recent tour of Military Park on a frigid afternoon here, Daniel A. Biederman waved his arm at the derelict plaza before him, with its once-proud statuary gazing out at ailing trees and graffiti-covered garbage bins.



Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Daniel A. Biederman, who remade Bryant Park in Midtown Manhattan, will oversee extensive changes to the Newark park.

“This could be the Bryant Park of Newark, but nobody uses it,” said Mr. Biederman, the urban parks expert who two decades ago transformed that park in Midtown Manhattan from a forbidding drug haven to a jewel-box refuge. “If it was a gorgeous day in June, you’d still have six or eight people here.”

But with the city in the midst of a building boom, Military Park is poised for its own makeover. This spring, ground will be broken on a \$3.25 million renovation overseen by Mr. Biederman and his firm, Biederman Redevelopment Ventures.

The plan, Mr. Biederman said, is to replace unhealthy trees, plant a full acre of flowers, build a new cafe and public restroom, repair the Victorian-style lampposts (more than half are broken), create new seating areas and install custom-designed trash bins in the triangular six-acre park.

One of the biggest tasks is to address the ugly concrete structures in the park that enclose stairwells leading to an underground parking garage. Plans call for converting the stairwell heads to glass and aluminum, making them more appealing and less dangerous.

Dating to 1667, Military Park in downtown Newark has witnessed the city's sometimes triumphant, sometimes painful history, from a colonial settlement to an industrial powerhouse to a symbol of urban decay.

Newark officials said the plan for Military Park fit in with Mayor Cory A. Booker's focus on parks across the city. Some 40 acres of parkland in residential neighborhoods have been newly built or rehabilitated, representing a \$20 million investment, said Damon Rich, the city's chief urban designer.



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Concrete stair enclosures in Military Park will be replaced with aluminum and glass structures.

“For the administration, the revival of Military Park is really about bringing the mayor’s vision for parks downtown,” Mr. Rich said. “Historically, Newark has been ‘underparked.’ We’ve had a real deficit to address.”

There are two other downtown parks, but Military Park is the closest to the central business district and, perhaps more important, will be the new front yard of [Prudential](#), the insurance behemoth whose roots in Newark date to the 1870s. Prudential’s world headquarters is a few blocks south of the park, but the

company plans to build a new \$440 million tower on a site directly opposite the park. And construction is under way on Panasonic's North American headquarters, which is moving from Secaucus to a site a block away from Military Park

It is no surprise, then, that Prudential is a pillar of the Military Park Partnership, the nonprofit group overseeing the park's renovation. The group also includes the city; the MCJ Amelior Foundation, which is active in Newark causes; and the Theater Square Development Corporation, a subsidiary of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. For many, it was the 1997 opening of the arts center, which also overlooks Military Park, that signaled the start of the city's attempted rebirth.

Last fall, the Newark Municipal Council voted unanimously to put the Military Park Partnership in charge of the park's redevelopment. The partnership had earlier hired Biederman Redevelopment Ventures. Mr. Biederman has worked on park projects in several cities in the past decade, including Boston, Buffalo, Dallas and Pittsburgh. He is still active in Bryant Park, as president of the Bryant Park Management Corporation.

"We're really excited to see Dan Biederman bring his vision and have that vision evolve in the soil of Newark," Mr. Rich said.

The goal is for Military Park to be self-sustaining, a model pioneered by Bryant Park, which receives no money from New York City but reaps income from concessions, fees from office buildings and corporate sponsorships. Whereas Bryant Park, which is roughly the same size, has a gardening budget of \$500,000 a year, Military Park will have to make do with less.

Mr. Biederman anticipates a horticulture budget of \$100,000 to tend the planned boxwoods, hydrangeas and geraniums. (That will still buy a lot of mulch.)

In addition to the physical upgrades, Mr. Biederman's firm plans to infuse the park with programming. On any given day in Bryant Park, there is table tennis, chess, yoga classes, juggling lessons, lectures, concerts and film screenings. "All

of that enlivens the park,” he said. “Downtown Newark needs use. It needs really busy spaces.”

The park, bounded by Broad Street, Rector Street and Park Place, has a number of assets, chief among them its sculpture. An epic monument, “Wars of America,” was designed by Gutzon Borglum, who created Mount Rushmore. Nearby, at the southwestern tip of the park’s triangle, rises a bust of President John F. Kennedy, by the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz; it was erected in 1965, a few years before race riots sent the city into a tailspin.

At the moment, the future site of Prudential’s headquarters is occupied by the long-empty S. Klein department store, whose faded sign conjures the city’s retail heyday. On the other side of the park, Theater Square Development plans to erect a residential building.

“Crime in downtown Newark has come down enormously,” said Mr. Biederman, addressing the question of whether people would be drawn to the park. “But there is still uncertainty because the perception of crime trails reality.”

Residents and city officials hope the park’s restoration will evoke Newark’s vibrant history. In 1869, Military Park displayed what is believed to be the first public electric lights in the country.

That was the year the park officially became a town commons, ending its 200-year run as a training ground for soldiers.

“With new office towers on the way from Prudential and Panasonic, and new residents moving downtown,” Mayor Booker said, “a revitalized Military Park will be the central community public space.”