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Construction under way for Newark's new Military Park

By [David Giambusso/The Star-Ledger](#)

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Workmen install fencing around Military Park in preparation of the start of a major reconstruction project. *Robert Sciarrino/The Star-Ledger*

NEWARK — In its 300-year history, Military Park has gone from a training ground for troops, to a city commons, to a blighted reminder of Newark's decline.

Today, work began on the park's latest iteration: cultural mecca.

Dan Biederman — the developer who rehabbed New York City's Bryant Park — has overseen a design for Military Park that envisions the six-acre site in Newark's downtown as a center for games, horticulture, cultural events and farmers markets.

Moreover, he said, it will do for Newark what Bryant Park helped do for midtown.

"All the philosophies that made Bryant Park from nothing to something are being brought to Newark," Biederman said.

The site sits between Broad Street and Park Place in an area that has been undergoing a slow transformation since the construction of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center and the Prudential Arena under former Mayor Sharpe James.

Mayor Cory Booker has added his touch as well, ushering in the construction of a new Prudential tower directly across the park and the new Panasonic headquarters two blocks away.

The \$3 million renovation will involve replacing trees, planting an acre of flowers, touching up Victorian lamp posts, redesigning the stairwells to the underground garage, adding new lighting and a building a cafe.

Biederman said he'd faced skepticism that crime would overtake the vision for the park but reminds critics what the area around Bryant Park was like in the late 1980's when he took on that project.

"There was more crime in the neighborhood around Bryant Park then there is around Military Park," he said. "We made it such a show place that they really couldn't commit any serious crimes."

The Military Park Partnership, which is financing the redesign and ongoing maintenance of the park, includes the city, Prudential Insurance, MCJ Amelior Foundation, and the Theater Square Development Corporation.

The group, a 501c-3 non-profit, will raise and oversee an annual budget of close to \$1 million for maintenance and event programming.

"As the centerpiece of our downtown, it is vital that we make this oasis of greenery a major part of our city's transformation," Booker said in a statement. "I am proud that we have entered a partnership with members of our community to restore Military Park to its deserved glory."

Construction is scheduled to be finished by fall, Biederman said, with programs starting in Spring 2014.

Biederman said he is confident the redesign will be a success.

"We've never failed with this approach and we don't intend to fail here," he said.