It is hard to imagine Park Slope without Tupper Thomas. Even if we can’t legitimately claim her as our own (she lives in Crown Heights), any attempt to define our neighborhood has to begin with Prospect Park, and the park we know today has been significantly defined by her 30-year tenure at its helm. When Thomas announced in April that she plans to retire in December both as park administrator and as president of the Prospect Park Alliance (the non-profit organization she founded in 1987 to augment funding and services), the Civic Council decided to break with precedent and make her the first-ever two-time recipient of the Lovgren Award for Professional Service to the Community (she was previously honored in 1984).

Thomas’s announcement has produced a flood of encomiums—including a column by former PSCC president Bernie Graham in our April issue—and also a few gripes, centering on areas of the park that fall short of perfection and on concerns that the Alliance represents a troubling privatization of control over public space. Thomas touched on such matters and more in an interview with the Civic News in her office in Litchfield Manor.

Let’s start with the fundamental question: Why should we care about parks?

Frederick Law Olmsted and his partner, Calvert Vaux, the designers of Prospect Park, convinced people that parks were essential to cities. To have great cities, said Olmsted, you must have great parks. It was after Olmsted and Vaux had designed Central Park that Olmsted wrote his greatest treatise, one that is still read today, about why cities need parks. The purpose of the treatise? To convince the New York State legislature to fund Prospect Park.

Parks are essential today for the same reasons Olmsted pointed out 150 years ago. They build community. They are essential to quality of life. They bring nature into the city, and nature replenishes our souls. Prospect Park has been doing all that for Brooklyn for many years.

Last month, the New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT) presented the transportation committees of Community Boards 6 and 8 with its plans to significantly reconfigure Grand Army Plaza and Prospect Park West. These plans are intended to make the streets safer for pedestrians, bicyclists and drivers. Ideas for reconfiguring Prospect Park West were made public more than a year ago but the meeting, held at the Brooklyn Public Library’s Central Branch, marked the public unveiling of a significant redesign of Grand Army Plaza’s roadbed and public spaces.

For the better part of a century, Grand Army Plaza has posed a daunting challenge both to its users and those responsible for its planning and management. Envisioned as a grand entrance to Prospect Park by architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, by 1927 Grand Army Plaza had become home to the Death-O-Meter, a billboard featuring a running tally of Brooklyn’s fatal traffic accidents. NYCDOT first began to tinker with the Plaza’s markings, signage and signal changes in 1999 (when the Plaza was the scene of an accident about once every three days), and the impetus for a real makeover got a large boost in March.
Plans, continued from Page 1

2006, when a Park Slope Civic Council forum on neighborhood transportation issues gave birth to the Grand Army Plaza Coalition (GAPCo), an alliance of civic groups determined to see the Plaza become, as originally intended, much more than a roundabout.

While traffic accidents have been reduced to an average of about two a month, driving through the Plaza continues to feel a bit like a lap in a demolition derby. It remains largely devoid of pedestrian activity, and even with the addition of a bike path in 2007, it's still largely off-putting to cyclists. The plan announced last month by NYCDOT will surely change all that.

NYCDOT Assistant Commissioner for Traffic Management Ryan Russo presented the makeover, which should get under way in August. The project will realign travel lanes and simplify traffic movements, greatly enhance pedestrian access to the Arch and Bailey Fountain, recapture a goodly amount of asphalt for non-vehicular uses and significantly augment the bike lanes.

The planned changes include:

Grand Army Plaza North: Expand and improve the pedestrian islands and crosswalks on the north end of Grand Army Plaza, where northbound Flatbush Avenue and Vanderbilt Avenue intersect. Unnecessary and little-used through-lanes will be removed, and the northbound Flatbush Avenue buses-only lane will be realigned. The project will add several new crosswalks, making crossing to the fountain and arch shorter, more direct and vastly more inviting.

Inner Ring: Park Slope-bound traffic coming around the inner ring now has to merge across several lanes of traffic (almost always in heart-stopping fashion) to approach Union Street and Prospect Park West. NYCDOT plans to install an extended barrier between the inner lane and the through lanes of southbound Flatbush Avenue. This barrier will terminate at a new traffic signal, which will allow westbound traffic to proceed without having to merge with vehicles coming from Flatbush or Vanderbilt. NYCDOT will also calm traffic on the east side of the inner ring by streamlining the existing six travel lanes.

Grand Army Plaza South: NYCDOT plans to add several new crosswalks on the south end to enhance access to the inner ring and the cultural attractions and Prospect Heights to the east. New pedestrian islands will be added, and existing islands will be enlarged and landscaped. The greenmarket space will be expanded to align with the new two-lane configuration of Prospect Park West (more about that below), protected from cars by physical barriers and resurfaced with an epoxy-and-gravel mix to better delineate the pedestrian area. (The space on the Plaza between the arch and fountain will receive a similar upgrade.) New two-way bike-path segments will connect the new Prospect Park West bike path to the Plaza Street bike lanes.

Plaza Streets East and West: The existing one-way, counter-clockwise Class II bike lane running along Plaza Streets East and West will be converted to a two-way, physically protected bike path, running between the inner curb and a three-foot buffer zone, protected by the inner parking lane. This will greatly improve cyclist safety and make for much easier connections with existing bike lanes on Vanderbilt Avenue, Berkeley Place and Lincoln Place, as well as with the new Prospect Park West and planned Eastern Parkway bike paths.

Taken in total, the planned changes to Grand Army Plaza constitute a startling makeover and go a long way toward realizing the long-term vision laid out by GAPCo.

“At this stage of the game, the upgrades planned by NYCDOT are everything we asked for—and more,” says Michael Cairl, chairman of the Park Slope Civic Council’s Livable Streets Committee and GAPCo spokesman. “Driving through Grand Army Plaza will be calmer and more orderly, the Plaza will be vastly more accessible to pedestrians, and cycling will be a much safer and more convenient proposition. It’s a win-win-win.”

All the planned work will be funded from the agency’s operating budget, avoiding the need for scarce capital funds and allowing the agency to move quickly. The work should be complete by the end of this year.

At about the time that the Grand Army Plaza work gets under way, NYCDOT should be wrapping up an equally startling makeover of Prospect Park West. At the same meeting, NYCDOT Director of Bicycle Projects Joshua Benson reaffirmed that the agency will be moving forward in June on its planned traffic calming and bicycle path project for the avenue.

The Prospect Park West redesign, which Benson said is primarily aimed at curtailing a chronic speeding problem, will eliminate one of the avenue’s three travel lanes, replacing it with a park-side, two-way bicycle path protected by a three-foot painted buffer and a row of parked cars. NYCDOT representatives reported last May to a meeting of Community Board 6 that a survey of Prospect Park West traffic found that 70 percent of cars were exceeding the 30-mile-per-hour speed limit, with 15 percent traveling at 40 mph or faster. A follow-up study by Park Slope Neighbors this spring reported that 85 percent of cars were speeding, with nearly a third traveling at 40 mph and up. Studies have shown that the fatality rate for pedestrians struck by cars traveling at 40 mph is 85 percent, a figure that drops to 45 percent at 30 mph and just 5 percent at 20 mph.

In addition to slowing traffic to a less-than-breakneck pace, the removal of a travel lane on Prospect Park West will make for a shorter, safer crossing for pedestrians, and the new bike path will provide cyclists with a dedicated, protected space that will get them off the sidewalk and offer an important northbound route for bicycle commuters. Once it’s connected with the new two-way bike paths around Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn’s bike lane connectivity will have taken a great leap forward.

The Park Slope Civic Council endorsed the idea of eliminating a travel lane on Prospect Park West and replacing it with a protected bike path last spring. In combination with the changes planned for Grand Army Plaza, the prospect of a more walkable, bikeable and safely driveable neighborhood is just over the horizon.

—Eric McLure, Civic Council Treasurer and Campaign Coordinator, Park Slope Neighbors

To see renderings and for more information, go to http://tinyurl.com/newGAP and http://tinyurl.com/PPW2010.

CALENDAR

PCCC Annual Meeting

All members are welcome to our year-end meeting for the election of officers and new trustees. Lovgren Awards will be presented to two people who have made significant contributions to the community: one volunteer and one professional. Three scholarships will be awarded to students at the Secondary Schools for Research, Journalism and Law.

Thursday, June 3, 6:30 pm, Prospect Park Y Rooftop Meeting Room.

This will be the last monthly meeting until Sept. 2.

Three members are welcome to attend the Annual Meeting of the Park Slope Civic Council.

Thursday, June 3, 6:30 pm, Prospect Park Y Rooftop Meeting Room.

Four members are welcome to attend the Annual Meeting of the Park Slope Civic Council.

Thursday, June 3, 6:30 pm, Prospect Park Y Rooftop Meeting Room.
Trustees Approve Slate, Lovgren Awards: At their May meeting, Civic Council Trustees approved the following slate of officers for the coming year: Michael Cairl, president; Lauri Schindler, 1st vice president; Gilly Youner, 2nd vice president; Eric McClure, treasurer; Judith Lief, recording secretary; and Alexa Halsall, membership secretary. The trustees also approved the nomination of eight new trustees: Robert Gilbert, John Golobe, Isabel Hill, Josh Levy, Daniel Meeter, Cathy Sokil Milnikiewicz, Chandru Murthi and Rebecca Welch.

In keeping with a change in the bylaws enacted two years ago limiting trustees to nine years’ continuous service, Nathaniel Allman, Cynthia Dantzic, Mort Fleischer, Lyn Hill, Robert Levine and Darlene Lovgren Demarsico are leaving the board. Former trustees may “re-up” after a year’s leave. Retiring from the Board are Ken Freeman, Linda Gnat-Mullin and Richard White.

Trustees also voted approval of two Lovgren Awards: Tupper Thomas, for professional service to the community, and Matt Pinchik, for volunteer service. Thomas, who is retiring in December after 30 years as Prospect Park administrator and 26 years as president of the Prospect Park Alliance, is the first-ever two-time recipient of a Lovgren Award, having been also honored in 1984. Pinchik is being honored for his work with the Park Slope Volunteer Ambulance Corps. (Thomas is interviewed in this issue and there will be more on Pinchik in the June issue.)

The Lovgren Awards will be presented at the Civic Council’s annual meeting and year-end celebration on June 6 in the rooftop room at the Prospect Park YMCA. At that same meeting, members will vote on the slate of officers and trustees, grant recipients will be recognized and three $1,000 scholarwill be presented to graduates of the three schools at the John Jay Campus: the Secondary Schools for Law, Journalism and Research. All members are invited.
In honor the Civic Council’s 51st annual House Tour, which took place on May 16, this month’s column is about Park Slope’s brownstones, relating to a column I wrote two years ago: “What’s a Brownstone?” (June 2008).

Most of the houses in the Slope were built in the 1880s and ’90s, following an economic boom in the cities of New York and Brooklyn. The completion of the Brooklyn Bridge in May 1883 freed people from dependency on the ferries and the weather to get back and forth between New York City and what some consider this nation’s first suburb, Brooklyn. In the same way that Robert Moses’ highway system (and the GI bill) led to Long Island’s rapid growth in the 1950s, the Brooklyn Bridge, with a train system linked to Brooklyn’s trolley system, brought masses of middle-class families to newly built row houses in Park Slope.

Many of the row houses were built from the reddish brown sedimentary sandstone that came from quarries close by in New Jersey, Connecticut and Pennsylvania, coining the term “brownstone.” The stone was actually a lot more pinkish when it was first quarried and has aged to the familiar color we know today. Since the “brownstoning” days of the 1960s and ’70s, when young couples began to buy and renovate these “cheap” buildings, “brownstone” has become a catch-all term for any row house, regardless of color and whether built of brick or stone.

Park Slope’s row houses were built both as private homes and apartment houses. Brownstone was easy to carve, and sometimes stone carvers brought from Europe to build our subways earned extra money by going house to house and adding special details. This same softness of the stone made it susceptible to deterioration in a process known as delamination or spalling. This condition was aggravated because most of the brownstone blocks were laid with their layers of sediment, or grain, running vertically on the face of the buildings.

Over the years that it took to build our row houses, styles changed from the more simple Neo-Grec to the heavily detailed, usually asymmetric Queen Anne. Brick buildings also evolved from simple styles to the use of longer bricks, often orange colored, as well as combinations of stone and brick. The 1892 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, commemorating the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s voyage, showed off the newest architectural style: a “White City” built from limestone. Soon, many of Park Slope’s newer row houses were being built from limestone; white brownstones.

Brownstone as a term meaning row house is regional to the Northeast, and Park Slope is the largest preserved brownstone neighborhood in the country. However, if you asked someone in Chicago what a typical brownstone looked like, the answer would be a single-family detached home, more like the mansions that still dot the upper part of the Slope.

Many different builders put up our row houses, and while a row constructed by a particular builder will share a look and feel—and similar interior layout—you can see many differences as you look more closely. Sometimes a row of houses creates a design within itself by forming mirror images along the row, or by changing designs within the row.

Some developers bought 10 city lots, each 20-feet wide, and then built 11 homes, each 18-feet wide. As a result, one of the homes would need an “A” or “1/2” in its address. Other developers went the other direction, building three homes on four lots, with each about 26-feet wide. The more common practice, however, was to squeeze an extra house in a row if you could.

When our blocks and building lots were laid out, the center of each block had a lane for deliveries carved into the back yards. Though these alleys were never built, you can see evidence of them by checking if you or your neighbor behind you received the strip of “extra” land. The entrance to these alleys could have been at the center of the avenue-portion of each block, but were most often on the side streets, behind the buildings facing the avenue, to the side of the first and last rows of houses. On many blocks that space was converted to garages for those lucky Slopers who now have a place to park.

The homes closer to the Gowanus Canal were built smaller to accommodate the workers who manned the factories and shipping-related industries. They could not afford the larger, taller homes with stoops up the slope. It was the stoop in the more affluent homes that allowed family members and guests to enter at the parlor level and avoid the “service” part of the house. Deliveries of food and supplies went under the stoop, directly to the kitchen at the ground floor (technically the basement) level. The cellar is the level (fully underground) below the basement. The word “stoop” comes from the Dutch stoep, the name for the front porch on old Dutch homes, which were raised to
A row of newly built limestone “brownstones” ca. 1905 on 6th Street between 7th and 8th Avenues. A mix of straight and L-shaped stoops visually break up the row. The sign says that these are “High Grade Two Family Houses.” The last several houses and the apartment house in the background are now a parking lot for Methodist Hospital.

avoid floods and had steps leading up to their porches.

The parlor level, at the top of the stoop, contained the dining area and a formal sitting room, where the gentleman of the house might share a cigar with a guest. Above the parlor floor were the separate husband and wife bedrooms, which might have had a pass through, with two small sinks, separate from the central hall. The top floor was for children and hired help. With the kitchen in the back of the basement, the front room was sometimes used as a breakfast room. While I have described a four-story brownstone, it is actually a three-story house by city code, with three floors, a basement and a cellar.

The brownstoners of the 1960s and ’70s had to add sweat equity to the low prices they paid for their row houses. Lucky ones found pristine homes that needed electric and plumbing upgrades. Others bought homes that had been broken up into apartments or housing houses in the Depression. Though seen today as original ornamentation, many tin ceilings were added in the Depression because they were a cheap way to fix the ceilings. With the apartments came fire escapes or sprinkler systems, to meet newly enacted city codes.

Sometimes details were saved when brownstones were carved into apartments. I still remember lifting up linoleum to find that my own parquet floors were in beautiful condition, with less wear than I expected for a house that had foot traffic for well over 100 years. Many brownstoners found only sub-flooring beneath the linoleum, thinking that the original homeowner could not afford parquet, though it was really the opposite: The more well-to-do had carpets made to fit their rooms and the parquet was a cheaper alternative to having carpets woven to individual specifications. The patterns of the parquet and the borders came from catalogs. Flooring and other details, like newel posts and wooden grillwork, individualized each house within its row. Fireplaces and mantels were also chosen by the homeowner and were usually fitted with gas or coal fixtures that were often closed with a cover in the summer. Because these were not the wood-burning fireplaces found in even older homes, many current homeowners have found that they have to expand the fireplace and reline the flue when they want to include fireplaces in their renovations.

The lighting fixtures were originally mostly gas. The ready availability of gas in our area made it possible to light tall rooms, allowing for our elegant parlor floors. The gas lamps were soon replaced by electric, and sometimes fixtures contained both types of globes: facing down for electric bulbs and pointing up for gas flames. The decorative medallions above the fixtures actually had a utilitarian purpose: They pushed down the warm, smoky air put out by gas lamps and kept it from staining the rest of the ceiling.

The narrowness of our row houses led to features not commonly seen in other buildings. “Coffin corners” are the little nooks in the corners of many stairways that often now hold a vase or other small items. They were built into the stairway so a coffin could be kept level while maneuvering down the steps. Wakes were held at home, and the deceased was laid out in his or her own bedroom. The stairways also created a weak spot in the floor: The houses were narrow enough to allow floor joists to extend from one common wall to another, except where the stairwell was built. All our houses lean toward the stairwell gap, no matter which side is downhill on the actual “Slope” from the park to the Gowanus.

Within our historic row houses, Park Slope celebrates its differences in people and buildings. Just look at our buildings’ details: Some have simple door framing and lintels, or massive arches, or ornate carvings, or fancy brick work, or terra cotta, or mansard roofs, or turrets, or arched balconies, or L-shaped stoops or heavy cast iron; some are brick while others are brownstone, or limestone or a mix, yet they are all still called brownstones.

Most brownstoners have learned to love the little quirks in their homes (though most could do without the spalling of their brownstone) and are proud of those details that make each house special, even if there are 10 houses in your row. The push by the Park Slope Civic Council to landmark a larger portion of our neighborhood will guarantee that our homes will continue to create a neighborhood that cares for the richness of the past while keeping the neighborhood as diverse as when Brooklyn was the “City of Churches,” with its many denominations represented throughout the Slope.

—Bob Levine, Trustee and PSCC Historian
A park is also a democratic space. It’s where Mayflower-types and new immigrants come together and experience the same things. Their children run in the same meadows. They learn from one another.

Today, we know that parks are important as places to get exercise. People think they’re having fun when they’re getting healthy. We also know today that cities, where people live close together, are lots more energy efficient and better for the planet than suburbs. If people are going to live close together, however, they need parks.

An editorial in the *Brooklyn Paper* praised your work but lamented the need for organizations like the Prospect Park Alliance, which raises money for park projects from private sources. The Alliance, according to the editorial, symbolizes the city’s abdication of its responsibility to maintain its parks.

I look at it the opposite way. This isn’t the 1860s, when a park could be built and maintained with tax revenue. There are a million more demands on the city than in the 1860s. Would you have the mayor take money from schools or desperately needed services for the parks? There is a finite amount of money for the city to spend for all the things we expect of it and for all the services that are needed, unless you’re willing to say that the city should raise lots more in taxes.

Almost every large park in New York City, what we call regional parks, that draw people from all over, has a fundraising entity like the Alliance. If the city had to pick up the entire bill for Prospect Park or Central Park, where would that money come from? And what money would the Parks Department have left to take care of all the smaller parks?

Also, all the money the Alliance raises goes to augmenting city services, not replacing them. The Parks Department is still responsible for cutting the grass, picking up the garbage and cleaning the bathrooms. The Alliance makes it possible for us to have the only urban Audubon Center in the country and to have a special crew of natural resource people to care for Brooklyn’s last surviving forest. It makes it possible for us to bring the entire freshman class of a high school in Prospect Heights to the park to learn about service and the environment—to cite just one example of the many ways we work with the schools and the community. We’re adding things the Parks Department can’t do.

A public-private partnership like the Alliance also gets lots more people personally involved with the Park, and that’s a very good thing.

Brooklyn Bridge Park has been especially criticized for including condos on public land to provide a revenue stream. If Prospect Park were built today, would we see condos in our park, too?

If this park were being built today, you would have to establish a revenue stream. I would love to have a steady revenue stream for Prospect Park. That’s the reality. You can’t build a major new park without a funding source. Downtown parks are often funded by special taxing districts. Battery Park is a perfect example. That beautiful park along the river is completely paid for by the development corporation.

Cities that set up their park systems later than ours often set up special park boards with their own taxing capabilities. That’s the way it’s done in Minneapolis, where I grew up, which has a fantastic park system. It’s also done that way in Chicago.

In New York, however, unless you are willing to change the tax system, our major parks would be in very poor condition without these public-private partnerships. When you look at old pictures of Prospect Park, you can see that it was worn to a fare-thee-well. People say its glory days were in the 1940s and ’50s. I say we’re in our glory days now.

On less global matters, there has also been some
carping about continued problems with litter and garbage in
the park, and people are always complaining about the mess
left by barbecuers. When you met with the Civic Council this
winter, you said that the Parks Department has radically cut
the number of enforcement agents on its payroll. Is that the crux
of the problem?

Education is more important than enforcement. For example,
people dump the coals from their charcoal grills around the trees
because they don’t want to hurt the grass and they don’t know
they’re killing the trees. Almost no one wants to hurt a tree or to
leave garbage. They just haven’t thought about it.

We started to test a program this month, running through July,
where much of the Alliance staff—no matter what their job title—is
going around and talking to people, giving out garbage bags, telling
them about the rules. I would point out that this is the same staff
that’s taking 12 days’ furlough this year because of budget cuts.
We’re also testing largerdumpsters, thanks to help from Goldman
Sachs and [the dog-walkers organization] FIDO and we’re installing
more hot bins where people can dump their coals.

The reality is, even when we had plenty of enforcement, garbage
used to be knee high until Wednesday in some locations because
people were so bad. People are much better than they used to be.

They try. It’s nothing like the old days, even though the number of
people coming to the park now compared to then is through the
roof. We’re very efficient and even with less staff than we ever had
for maintenance we’re finished by 10am on Monday. On Monday
morning, everyone pitches in—including regular volunteers from
corporations like Goldman Sachs and from groups like the East Side
Revival, which works in the area from the Vale to the zoo.

You were very eloquent in your defense of barbecuing when you
talked to the Civic Council.

I feel very strongly about defending the right of people to barbecue
in the park. Every culture barbecues, from WASPS to Orthodox Jews
to Southeast Asians. Everybody. There’s no reason we can’t figure
out a way to do it without killing the trees that are the very reason
people come to the park. I don’t want to give it up. When you live
in a high-rise, the park is your backyard.

What are your goals for the next few months?

We still have to raise another $20 million for Lakeside [the new
ice-skating complex and Concert Grove restoration]. We hope to
start construction this fall, which is very exciting. I want to get the
Alliance fundraising on enough of an even keel so we don’t have
as lengthy a furlough next year. I hope I can figure out ways to do
that.

Then what? What do you have planned for your retirement?

I will not mind not working as hard as I do now, but I don’t think
I can retire-retire. I expect I’ll be volunteering in the Park, and
I may get more involved with the City Park Alliance, a national
coalition I helped found 10 years ago and co-chaired for seven
years. We’ve come a long way, and now have staffing and an office
in DC. We argue for federal money for city parks. Urban develop-
ment has to include open space. Some people think parks are
frivolous, but that’s silly. It’s a big issue, and obviously I feel very
passionate about it.

I also expect I’ll take on some neighborhood issues. And don’t
forget that I have two grandchildren with a third on the way. They
will be an excellent way for me to use my time.
The Park Slope Civic Council
Organized as the South Brooklyn Board of Trade in 1896, PSCC is one of the oldest civic associations in Brooklyn. We identify and address quality-of-life issues important to the community; create and support projects geared to improving and protecting the neighborhood; and assist local non-profit organizations that benefit those living and working in Park Slope. Our many ongoing programs include the Halloween Parade, the Clean Streets campaign, community forums, and a holiday toy drive. Our annual House Tour raises thousands of dollars for neighborhood initiatives. All are welcome to join. To learn more, go to parkslopeciviccouncil.org.

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