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Monumental New York

Ralph Gardner Jr. Visits Four Freedoms Park

By RALPH GARDNER JR.



Although it happened Tuesday afternoon, I already regard with nostalgia my visit to Four Freedoms Park, the monument to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt that opened less than a year ago at the southern tip of Roosevelt Island. But I doubt what I visualize is in keeping with the intention of Louis Kahn, the monument's architect, who most likely wanted visitors' main memory to be the matching paths of Littleleaf linden trees and the lawn they frame that lead the eye to a giant bust of FDR hovering in the distance.

"Kahn was a master of forced perspective," explained Sally Minard, the president of the Four Freedoms Park Conservancy and my tour guide.

Rather, what I most remember is a spit of land, really just a small rock outcropping, standing no more than 75 feet offshore. And sunbathing on it Tuesday afternoon were a dozen or so cormorants who were probably puzzled as to why they had the normally bustling East River all to themselves.



Natalie Keyssar

The bust of Franklin Delano Roosevelt that is the focal point of Four Freedoms Park on Roosevelt Island

The reason was that the United Nations was in session, the president in town addressing it and the river closed to traffic—with the exception of several Coast Guard patrol boats that floated silently in the water, their authority reinforced by large guns on their bows.

The park itself is closed Tuesdays. Thus, the only people present besides us were a couple of NYPD patrol cars carrying members of its Counter-Terrorism Bureau. There was also a park guard delegated to keep watch on a security camera I'd been told was installed and operated by the State Department. It was focused on the United Nations building across the river.

Come to think of it, this might have been the best time and way to have seen the park, though I doubt its spell would have been diminished even if we'd had to share it with the hundreds of people who show up on a normal day—thus far weighted toward Ph.D.s, according to visitor surveys, "and a disproportionate number of architects," Ms. Minard reported.

There had been 140,000 visitors as of last weekend, she added: "In less than 11 months, from all over the world." That's notable because the park is probably still not on many New Yorkers' mental maps (it's reached via the Roosevelt Island tram or the F train, followed by a several-minute walk along a promenade boarding the river) and those who run it could probably do a better job with signage for visitors first reaching the island.

Kahn's work, as is true of some of our best memorials, pays tribute to more than just its main subjects: Roosevelt and his Four Freedoms. (Enunciated in a January 1941 wartime speech, they are the freedom of speech and worship, and freedom from want and fear; they're etched in granite in the "room," an open-air enclosure at the base of the memorial.) It also takes us out of ourselves and away from our cellphones; it serves as a place for peace and contemplation—of water fowl and much else.



Natalie Keyssar

The lawn leading to the bust of Franklin Delano Roosevelt

The park's austerity and quiet monumentality contribute to its effect. After passing a line of mature copper beech trees, the steps you climb to the site are 100 feet wide, and its walls 12 feet high at that point. They easily could have served as a noble approach to the Parthenon or the pyramids. (The comparison isn't entirely fanciful; Ms. Minard said Kahn was a student of classical architecture and an Egyptologist.)

The accomplished serenity is all the more remarkable because there's simply so much stimulus, so many sights and sounds, competing for your attention. This is New York, after all, the park jutting into the river like

the prow of a boat.

Manhattan's glimmering skyline is to the west, Queens's burgeoning waterfront to the east—if you're a fan of its iconic Pepsi sign, you'll never get a better view—and most of all there's the relentless whoosh of traffic on the now more aptly than ever named FDR Drive.

It's also no coincidence that the park is a stone's throw from the U.N., an organization of which Roosevelt is commonly considered the founding father, his four freedoms inscribed in its charter, even though he didn't live to see its realization.

While the park might seem to have come about with surprising suddenness, its origin dates to Sept. 24, 1973—coincidentally, 40 years to the day of my visit—when Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, Mayor John Lindsay and 800 guests gathered on the island to rename it in Roosevelt's honor (it was previously Welfare Island) and to announce that a park would be built on its four southernmost acres.

"All five children of Franklin and Eleanor and 23 grandchildren," Ms. Minard said. "They all came by boat. Louis Kahn was in the audience. Averell Harriman presided. And Arthur Schlesinger was the keynote speaker."

Fast-, or rather slow-, forward to Oct. 17, 2012, when the park's dedication ceremony finally occurred, with the news anchor Tom Brokaw serving as master of ceremonies and the speakers including former President Bill Clinton and Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Why so long?

"What happened was a perfect storm," Ms. Minard explained. "Rockefeller was picked to be vice president. Kahn died of a heart attack in Penn Station. And the city virtually went bankrupt in the

mid-'70s."

As recently as a few years ago, the park still wasn't a sure bet. Much of the credit for keeping the idea alive—construction finally began in March 2010—goes to the stamina and leadership of William J. vanden Heuvel, an attorney, former U.S. ambassador and chairman of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute. His name is etched on the commemorative steps.

"On Sunday, we're hosting an open house," Ms. Minard explained hopefully as she looked across the water, past the contented cormorants, to the United Nations headquarters. "We invited the 193 delegates here for the General Assembly. It would be nice of them to come over here."

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