

Epic to Ad Hoc

I.M. Pei and M. Paul Friedberg's Bedford Stuyvesant Superblock

Even considering how hard it is to get things built in New York City, it's disarming to look into the history of a patch of nice paving and discover it represents the combined efforts of Robert Kennedy, Edward Logue, the Astors, I.M. Pei, and Paul Friedberg. In fact, the paving in question is all that's left of a demonstration project that was to spearhead the transformation of central Brooklyn.

In February 1966 Robert Kennedy, then a year into his term as senator, capped a series of speeches on urban poverty with what was meant to be a pro forma tour of Brooklyn's Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood. Bed Stuy's fine blocks of rowhouses masked its decline into the nation's largest and poorest ghetto, and the barriers to public resources faced by the largely black community were worsened by the fact that the government and press barely acknowledged their neighborhood existed at all. Local leaders seized on Kennedy's visit to force the point: refusing to accompany the Senator, they confronted him unexpectedly at the end of his tour to demand action.

This ambush impressed on Kennedy both the frustration in Bed Stuy and the promise of its increasingly organized activist groups. His office began work on a neighborhood rehabilitation strategy that focused on economic growth and local self-determination.

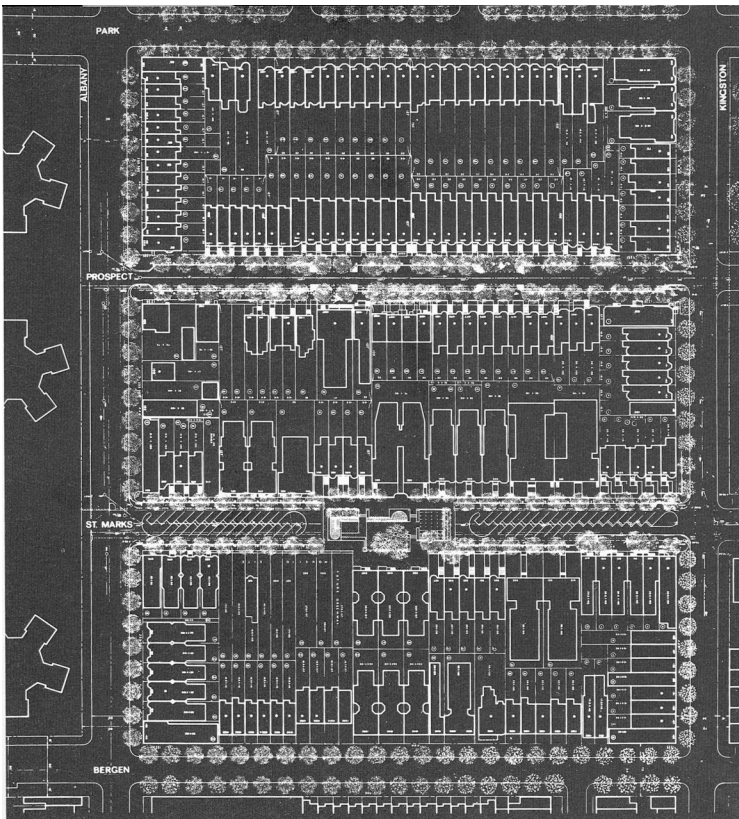
Kennedy's vision to combine "the best of community action with the best of the private enterprise system" was translated literally into the implemented program, which paired a not-for-profit community group with a Madison Avenue-based development board that included Jacob Javits and William Paley.

Soon after the program launched in December 1966, the component organizations started acting to type. The community-led group fractured into blocs that had become two officially separate entities by April. The businessmen's group hired Edward Logue to prepare a vast and transformative master plan for Central Brooklyn, as he had already done for New Haven and Boston. Logue's collaborators included I.M. Pei, who had an ongoing relationship with Logue and the Kennedys, and was to design specific prototypical interventions.

The Logue plan made two grand moves. First, it ran a linear development zone across Bed Stuy, studded with speculative opportunities that included a Philip Johnson-designed mall and a community center by James Polshek. Second, it resolved the "surplus" of streets by closing two thirds of them, bundling the neighborhood into greened superblocks. While the plan was intended as a framework for discussion, community leaders found it both implausible and threatening on its face, and Logue's work was abandoned almost as soon as it was presented in June 1967.

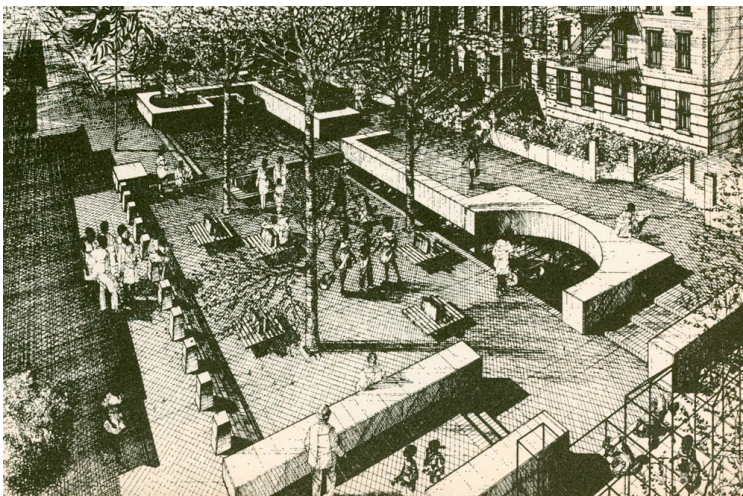
The Vincent Astor Foundation, however, had already allotted a \$1 million grant to realize a pilot superbloc designed by Pei and landscape architect Paul Friedberg. Two adjacent streets running between Brower Park and the Albany Houses at the southern edge of Bed Stuy were selected. Perverse as it seemed to locate a green-space project right between two existing parks, this was almost certainly a deliberate move to keep users from the wider neighborhood from overwhelming what was meant as a highly localized improvement.

In the nature of things, “superblock” turned out to be a dated and misleading label for Pei and Friedberg’s limited but incisive interventions. Although they initially intended to produce a generic template, input from local residents made it clear that each street required a specifically tuned response. Prospect Place, a block of owner-occupied rowhouses, was only modestly adjusted: two slightly raised paving areas were placed at third points along the street to slow traffic. Round concrete planters marked the corners of these deliberately ambiguous zones. St. Marks Place, full of children by day and prostitutes at night, got more emphatic treatment: a sculptural plaza set in the middle of the roadbed created an official playground and cut off the sex and drug trade’s through-traffic. St. Marks’ atypical width allowed the ends of the block to be reconfigured as U-shaped cul-de-sacs, with parking squeezed down the middle rather than along the curb.



Bedford Stuyvesant Superblock -- Area Plan

from Architectural Forum, April 1968



Bedford Stuyvesant Superblock -- St. Marks Plaza

from Architectural Forum, April 1968

Beyond the strategic clarity of these measures, Pei and Friedberg worked to a sensible and unobtrusive level of refinement. Both streets used a palette of caramel-colored pavers, concrete bollards and seating, and maple trees laid out in clean rhythms. The most demonstrative design work was concentrated on the St. Marks plaza, which mixed Pei's chunky geometries with Friedberg's interest in defining areas of activity with shifting ground planes. The plaza forcefully asserted itself as a traffic blockade by digging down three steps from street level. This level change was partially mediated by a concrete parapet paralleled by a recirculating watercourse fed from a mushroom-shaped fountain.

By its completion in fall of 1969, the Bed Stuy superblock seemed more like a memorial to Senator Kennedy than a viable prototype. No one was going to replicate it a hundred times over, and the community's focus had turned to immediate economic and social stabilization. In 2001, the Parks Department undertook a sensible but anodyne reconstruction of the St. Marks plaza that erased its architectural interest. Still, it's the very smallness of the intervention that counts: Pei and Friedberg turned from the grand adventures of urban transformation to a specific moment in the city, and finally produced a version of the infamous superblock that lived up to its stated intentions. This should be seen as heightened, not diminished, ambition.