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As Military Park reopens, developers talk challenges and changes

Stacy Jones/The Star-Ledger By Stacy Jones/The Star-Ledger

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NEWARK — Ribbons and fanfare won't grace the storied grounds of Military Park for another month, but the fences that have kept out passersby started coming down last week.

The developers call it a soft opening. And if not for an unexpectedly harsh winter, the nearly 350-year-old park would have opened in late April.

For the past four years the park has been in the hands of developer Dan Biederman, whose résumé includes Manhattan's Bryant Park and Herald Square and Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square. Now the 6-acre plot at the heart of Newark that endured wars, riots and blight has reached the end of its \$3 million face-lift. If Biederman's past projects are any indication, Military Park's revival could have a dramatic impact on real estate values surrounding the space.

There's already plenty of activity surrounding the park. In November construction crews worked back-to-back shifts to start building Prudential's 20-story, \$144 million office tower before the bitter cold arrived. Whole Foods announced plans to open an outlet in the old Hahne and Company department store, which sits opposite the park along Broad Street.

This past week Pillar College, formerly known as Somerset Christian College, announced it signed a five-year lease to rent 23,000 square feet of space in the Military Park Building, near the corner of East Park Street and Park Place.

In 2011 floodwaters from Tropical Storm Irene forced the small, private college out of its campus in the Zarephath section of Franklin Township in Somerset.

Louis Tapia, the real estate agent who brokered the deal between the college and the Berger Organization, which acquired the building in 2007, said the renovated park will be a valuable amenity when it's up and running.



Top view of

the War Memorial in Military Park, which takes the shape of a sabre when viewed from above, as seen from the Military Park Building across the street from the park. This photo was taken in 1996. For its most recent renovation, the sabre shape has now filled in with tulip flowers. Star-Ledger File Photo

"The park will definitely be an influence on the entire neighborhood. That part of Newark has always been nice because of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, but as far as Pillar is concerned, the park will become a place for students to relax and grab a bite to eat between classes," he said. "It gives them a nice place to get some air and it enhances the atmosphere."

There wasn't always a flurry of activity of development surrounding Military Park. In fact, at the onset, people said Biederman's plans would do little to effect real change on the city.

"Some have said you need to be in affluent areas to do this kind of work and it's affluent people who have more use for public spaces than non-affluent people," Biederman said. "We think Newark will be a good city for this public space."

Plans for reinventing the park were set in motion a decade ago. In 2004 Essex County approved a \$295,000 grant to help pay for the park's renovation on the condition it be matched with private funds. When the matching funds still had not materialized in 2009, the grant was rescinded. The following year Biederman, well-known for his ability to create thriving public spaces using private money, was brought in to handle the project.

Ben Donsky, project manager at Biederman Redevelopment Ventures, said they were still working with a limited budget.

"We did not have a ton of money to redo the park. We did not completely rethink the design and, frankly, there were a few design problems," he said. "But the major problems with Military Park were that it was dull and neglected. There was a lot of deferred maintenance and things were broken."

That shifted their focus to what Donsky calls strategic design interventions.

Trees were moved closer to the street on either side of the triangular park to create more open space. Permanent benches were replaced with movable outdoor furniture and fences around the monuments, including the Wars of America statue by Mount Rushmore sculptor Gutzon Borglum, were taken down.

Changing the aesthetics of the once run-down park is one thing, but for Biederman the key to creating successful, self-sustaining urban parks extends beyond design.

"We really are against parks programming themselves once a day or twice a week," he said, "because then the odds of someone stumbling upon some event in progress is very small."

To that end, Donsky said they have already packed Military Park's calendar to make sure it's hard to miss the fact that it has reopened.

"We're already working with literally dozens of different organizations to do programming here in the park," he said. "We're going to have fitness classes. Right now we have three yoga classes a week on the calendar, plus tai chi, zumba and dance classes. We'll also have our reading room available"

There's one more important way in which the new Military Park will resemble its sibling across the Hudson River: The restaurant, the name of which has not been made public, will have a liquor license.

Gemma Giantomasi, a partner at Newark law firm Genova Burns Giantomasi Webster, said the easing of city regulations that would have prohibited the park's restaurant serving alcohol has been a boon for Newark's downtown neighborhood.



Monaysha

Watson, 4, waits her sister Nakiyah's face painting done at Africa Festival in Military Park in 2000. The 16th annual Africa Festival was held in Military Park in downtown Newark. Mia Song/The Star-Ledger

Usually establishments with liquor licenses are not allowed to be within 1,000 feet of one another. Those rules were relaxed in Newark's downtown, but included some extra stipulations: No more than 49 percent of the park's restaurant's sales can come from alcohol. It will also need to include at least 30 seats for diners and very few stools at the bar.

For establishments that followed the rules, it has been a game changer, said Giantomasi.

"Without this you would not have Joe's Crab Shack or Dinosaur Bar-B-Que on Market Street, and you would not have the growth we've seen on Edison Place with Brick City Bar and Grill and Loft 47," she said. "By doing this the city has really made it possible to turn this area into a destination. Families can come to NJPAC, walk around the park and have a nice meal at a family establishment."