

HUDSON HEIGHTS, NEW YORK CITY

The Paterno Trivium transforms an unsafe traffic intersection into a neighborhood gathering spot

At the tip of Manhattan on a hill overlooking the Hudson River, three streets converged to create an unsafe intersection for both motorists and pedestrians. Cars roared by while walkers warily dodged traffic—that is, until a group of residents rallied to convert the dangerous intersection into a “pocket” park. By creating a highly visible fork in the road, the park slows traffic, channeling cars safely through the intersection. Meanwhile, the addition of curb ramps and clearly marked crosswalks have increased pedestrian safety, particularly for children walking to the nearby school. The park—called The Paterno Trivium—is a meeting place for residents to gather, sit, and take in the vista of the Palisades across the Hudson on the Jersey shore. The Paterno Trivium has become a beacon in the neighborhood, signaling walkability, attention to community connections, and concerns for pedestrian safety.



THOMAS NAVIN

DEDICATION AND RIBBON CUTTING CEREMONY OF THE PATERNO TRIVIVM, A NEWLY DESIGNED POCKET PARK IN HUDSON HEIGHTS.

THE PLACE

Hudson Heights, a neighborhood within Washington Heights, is the highest point in Manhattan. Home to a diverse mix of people, many of the neighborhood’s eldest residents are Irish, German, and Jewish immigrants who settled there in the 1920’s and 30’s, while newer residents include Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and a large and growing Russian population that live in the eastern portion of the community. The area is also home to a large Orthodox Jewish population. Because of its proximity to subways and easy access to Manhattan, the area is also very attractive to young singles, artists and musicians.

THE PROJECT

The idea for The Paterno Trivium developed out of community concern over a hazardous intersection and the desire to create a central neighborhood meeting place. The poorly defined markings and lack of pedestrian-friendly infrastructure at the junction of Cabrini Boulevard, Pinehurst Avenue, and West 187th Street worried residents, especially because it was located so close to a public elementary school. On a daily basis, residents would see motorists cut dangerously through the intersection, while elderly pedestrians had no safe place to stop while crossing the busy streets.

Residents had been quite interested in somehow fixing the intersection to make it safer for the community, so when Thomas Navin, a trained architect moved into the neighborhood, residents approached him and asked him to join their efforts. With his formal training and interest in improving his new neighborhood,



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FRIENDS OF THE PATERNO TRIVIUM MAINTAIN PLANTS WITHIN THE PARK (LEFT). HUDSON HEIGHTS ELDERS MEET AT THE CIRCULAR BENCH IN THE PATERNO TRIVIUM (RIGHT).

he was able to observe how the space was being used and immediately saw the potential for what it could become.

In the summer of 2000, he drew up a design that he presented to the community board for approval. “From the get-go, I felt it should be a clearer crosswalk for pedestrians and a resting point,” Navin explained. “I imagined a place for meeting where people could stop, rest and see the views of the cliffs on the far side of the Hudson and the afterglow of the setting sun.” The triangle’s central location near a block-long commercial hub makes it an ideal park location and because it also rests atop a steep hill, it provides a resting place as pedestrians crest the peak.

After receiving community board approval for his design, Navin discovered the Department of Transportation and Department of Parks had already begun to draft their own plans for the area. But because the community board had backed Navin’s design, the city agencies accepted it. The agencies also appreciated the plan for its practicality and attention to safety and agreed to pay for sidewalks, curbing and, through New York City’s Greenstreets program, planting or “greening” the area.

Navin had envisioned a design that also had some unique features, like special planters, a radiating sun pattern embossed in the concrete, and a curved bench

to improve the look and the utility of this triangular site (26’4” x 41’x34’8”). Therefore he anticipated the need to have additional backing and clout to ensure that the plan was fully implemented. As a result, Navin assembled an advisory group that was both knowledgeable about landscaping and well connected to the park system. The group advocated for a customized bench that has become the park’s signature element. In an attempt to weave the park into the historical fabric of the neighborhood, the advisory group also proposed naming the park in honor of Charles Paterno, a former landowner who had brought a great deal of residential housing to the area. The New York City Park Commissioner ultimately embraced these ideas. The only catch was that the advisory group had to take responsibility for maintaining the area and its distinct elements. This group, which named itself Friends of The Paterno Trivium, was not daunted. They established a maintenance endowment to provide care for the park’s unique features. While the Parks Department would maintain the basic elements of the Trivium, the Friends agreed to raise funds and provide fiscal oversight for the maintenance needed to keep The Trivium in excellent condition.

On August 4th, Charles Paterno’s birthday, over 200 community residents gathered for a ribbon cutting ceremony for The Paterno Trivium. The late Paterno’s

granddaughter attended the event, as did a local city councilman and the New York City Parks Commissioner. Paterno's granddaughter, who had solicited donations from family members for the Trivium's signature semi-circular bench, presented the funds to the group. Today, The Paterno Trivium is viewed as an important element in the community and the Friends of The Paterno Trivium have generated significant support from community members and local officials alike. The intersection is perceived as safer for pedestrians, offering them an inviting respite as they cross any of the three busy streets that converge at the triangle. New crosswalks and the visibly marked fork in the road funnel traffic and slow motorists who are now more aware of the pedestrians.

THE PEOPLE

Diverse Partners Collaborate to Build Healthy Environments

Under the leadership of Executive Director Navin, the volunteer advisory group that calls themselves Friends of The Paterno Trivium provides stewardship for the park. They pick up trash, plants bulbs and water the foliage regularly. The group has planted Winter King Hawthorn trees, which are in full bloom around Mother's Day weekend, and groundcover that blooms in August to commemorate the birth anniversary of the Trivium's namesake. The Friends toil all year round, shoveling snow in the winter, planting in the spring, and continually maximizing their connections with the landscape industry to get plants and planters at the lowest possible cost. The group also holds fundraisers and serves as liaison with the Parks Department. The circular bench (\$7,500); planter (\$1,500); low protective fencing (\$3,000); and seasonal plantings (\$200) are the result of private donations.

New York City Department of Parks and Department of Transportation's project, Greenstreets, provides for the upkeep of basic elements of the Trivium. In an

effort to make "green" traffic intersections throughout New York City, Greenstreets provided initial funds for the curbing, concrete work and first plantings. Neighborhood volunteers of all ages weed, water, and plant bulbs. Local merchants and surrounding buildings provide access to water; a landscaping company has donated plants; and the Paterno family offers ongoing support. Key neighborhood activists and neighborhood organizations, such as Hudson Heights Owners Coalition, a group of apartment owners in the area, donate money, give in-kind support, and announce fundraising events in regular mailings and at monthly meetings.

THE RESULTS

Healthy Change in Local Environments

The Paterno Trivium represents the successful completion of a community-initiated effort to improve the neighborhood. Most of all, The Paterno Trivium serves an important function: to slow automobile traffic, improve pedestrian safety, and create a safe destination for pedestrians. At the same time, its form adds another important dimension to The Paterno Trivium. Attention to detail and awareness that the space could be much more than simply a pedestrian enhancement have resulted in a gathering space where there was none. This park also promotes social connections. Senior citizens and teenagers alike now have a place where they can meet and talk with friends.

Careful use of the triangular space has prompted positive social exchanges. Though early on residents had fears that placing a bench on the site would encourage homeless people to sleep there or promote loitering, Navin says he has been amazed at how the

space really works. Different people enjoy the space in different ways. "The curvature of the bench encourages social interaction by creating a comfortable seating arrangement. It allows for eight people to be in one conversation because they are facing inward, but because of the arm rests, it also allows people to sit alone or as

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HUDSON HEIGHTS RESIDENTS SIT AND WATCH PASSERSBY FROM THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD RESTING PLACE.

couples. The curve also allows people to walk up to the Trivium, or roll up in a wheelchair and become part of a conversation that is already going on. This is an amazing quality of the semi-circular bench.” Wheelchair users have also benefited from the curb-cuts that were etched into the sidewalks when the park was constructed. This allows them to remain safely on the sidewalk.

The Trivium’s flexible, multipurpose design is used in different ways depending on the time of day. In the morning, dog-walkers and joggers stop with their morning cup of coffee, while later in the morning elderly residents join companions or attendants to rest at the top of the hill after shopping. The curved bench allows visitors to choose between facing or putting their backs to the sun. As school lets out kids gather, and at dusk in warm weather another group of seniors, primarily women, chat until about 15 minutes

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after sunset. In the evening, people pause on their return home and teenagers meet up.

But the park’s construction has not been struggle-free. Oftentimes with community areas like these, youth can be perceived as “troublemakers,” ruining the atmosphere for other users. Since its inception, teenage skateboarders who use the Trivium have caused stress in the community. While some resident groups have sought police involvement, the Friends have been enlisting skateboarders to help plant and water. Through this alternative approach they have transferred a sense of ownership and pride to the skateboarders, some of whom now act as “protectors” of the park. Recently, community groups have also been asking the skateboarders what features appeal to them, prompting discussion about creating a separate facility for skateboarders to use. This was an innovative solution to a common problem in many communities, and a unique way to engage unlikely volunteers.

Truly a community resource, the Trivium’s features encourage diverse groups of people to use the space in their own ways. And the transition periods bring together groups who might not normally interact. “Something as subtle as the curve creates opportunities to talk,” said Navin. And “each year a holiday tree is donated by one of the local merchants and community members are invited to decorate the tree,” he said. “Throughout the year, lots goes on that brings the community together and that ties in with the four seasons.”

Traffic calming measures, like those initiated at The Paterno Trivium, reduce injuries, slow automobile traffic, increase perceived safety, and are believed to promote walking and biking.¹ In *Our Built and Natural Environments: A Technical Review of the Interactions between Land Use, Transportation and Environmental Quality*, the US Environmental Protection Agency reports that “narrow streets, shade trees, well-maintained sidewalks, and traffic slowed through traffic calming measures also improve the pedestrian envi-

ronment” and can encourage walking.² Pedestrian-friendly intersections, especially along routes that children take to school and those connecting residential areas to shops and transportation are important for reducing traffic-related pedestrian injuries.

Improved pedestrian safety in the neighborhood encourages healthy activities such as walking and jogging. Increased access to such health-promoting environments can prove to have significant benefits for residents.

WISDOM FROM EXPERIENCE

Navin cautions that “it is imperative to forge connections and collaborations at several different levels. We had to reach beyond the community groups to work with larger institutions and bureaucracies to move this effort forward and legitimize what we were seeking to achieve. The composition of the advisory board was instrumental in getting some of the city groups to take us seriously,” he says. “Also, naming The Trivium after Charles V. Paterno grounded the place in that it suggested a sense of permanence and created a way for people to connect to the history of the neighborhood. The way a space is constructed has a lot to do with how people will use it.”

LOOKING AHEAD

Now that The Paterno Trivium has been successfully completed, the Friends serve as a resource to other community organizations seeking to transform elements of their built environments. Upkeep and maintenance of the plants are ongoing responsibilities. And though many Greenstreets projects have fallen into disrepair because of lack of ownership, the efforts of community activists and the Friends keep the Trivium well-maintained and replanted seasonally. Volunteers demonstrate their ongoing commitment by making their cleanup, watering and planting efforts visible to the community.

In addition to reinforcing local social interactions, the creation of the Trivium has inspired further neighborhood development. Now other initiatives to pro-

mote walking and increase social connectedness are underway in the Washington Heights area. One block east of the Trivium, community members are working to beautify a stair path to create a “natural gym” and a “natural amphitheater” to promote use of the stairs. These newly inspired activities aimed at behavioral and environmental change illustrate the enduring impact that community building efforts like The Paterno Trivium can have on activity, safety, and local culture.

PROGRAM CONTACT

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Frank LD, Engelke PO, Schmid TL. *Health and Community Design: The impact of the built environment and physical activity*. Island Press, Washington D.C., 2003.
- 2 Our Built and Natural Environments: A Technical Review of the Interactions between Land Use, Transportation and Environmental Quality. United States Environmental Protection Agency Development, Community, and Environment. Washington, DC. Publication: EPA 231-R-00-005, November 2000.

This is one in a series of 11 profiles that reveal how improvements to the built environment can positively influence the health of community residents. The examples illustrate how changes to the built environment can be particularly meaningful in communities that have historically lacked important features such as pedestrian infrastructure, services and institutions, or public art. Taken more broadly, the profiles demonstrate how improvements to the built environment have the potential to reduce health disparities.

The profiles were written and produced by Prevention Institute. Funding and guidance were provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Center for Environmental Health. It is our hope that these profiles will stimulate and inspire partnerships between community residents and practitioners from multiple fields and sectors to design solutions and take action to improve the built environment for the health and well-being of all.