

January 18, 2020

Dear Public Design Commission members,

We ask that you reject NYCEDC's conceptual design for public art addressing Abolitionist history in Abolitionist Place Park (a.k.a. Willoughby Square Park) in Downtown Brooklyn. Not only is the presentation too vague and incomplete to make any sort of decision about it, but it represents a step-down from the Bloomberg administration's promise for this park in terms of its transparency and community engagement, its funding, and its holistic integration.

First, the locations, materials, content, and typesetting are not set in this proposal. The Public Design Commission's standards (<https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/designcommission/downloads/pdf/Checklist-Structures-CONCEPTUAL-4-10-20.pdf>) require that conceptual review include "drawings and materials as needed to completely and concisely present the proposal." There is no real proposal in this presentation, just assorted, vague suggestions about possibilities.

Second, there have been long-standing demands by city officials and the public that all projects run by the Department of Cultural Affairs' Percent for Art program have greater transparency. In this case, the New York City Economic Development Corporation initiated a public art process secretly without any public notice, public release of the finalist designs, or public meetings, even through Zoom. As a result, interested community advocates, historians, and the local Black community have been completely in the dark. In addition, while the presentation does not have any detail at all about the budget, our understanding is that it has been reduced significantly from Mayor Bloomberg's promise. A full budget for a worthy memorial that drives the park's design is critical since the park's creation directly destroyed the Abolitionist history of Brooklyn via eminent domain. If this design process moves forward without greater transparency, the Public Design Commission risks significant public backlash which will result in delays that shall achieve the opposite of NYCEDC's aim to expedite the park's construction.

Third, any public art recognizing the Abolitionist history of Brooklyn needs to be a concrete encounter with history. The history of Abolitionism in Downtown Brooklyn is an extremely complex topic that involves real and numerous individuals and organizations. This memorial must be a specific encounter with the history of Abolitionism in Brooklyn, not a set of "questions and prompts regarding futurity, emancipation, progress, and the complexity of narration." The word "abolition" is nowhere in this presentation, and there is no detail about how the artist would engage historians to ensure that any public art does justice to the research on this topic. The very fact that the proposal envisions an expedited "virtual" process to review possible textual "questions" during COVID-19 reveals that this public artwork is being rushed to meet NYCEDC's timetable. This plan would not give any artist time to do this complicated topic justice with expert advice.

Kameelah Janan Rasheed may be a talented artist who is able to address difficult issues related to the Black experience in her work. However, the lack of community engagement in her selection means that this process must be reformed. At the very least, this proposal should be rejected until it can be presented again with specific detail of its proposed design and its encounter with the history of Abolitionism in Brooklyn.

Sincerely,

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Brooklyn Activist

Shawnée Lee
Friends of Abolitionist Place, daughter of Mama Joy Monroe

Anthony Beckford
President, Black Lives Matter Brooklyn and Candidate, 45th City Council District

Patricia Oldham
Historian, City University of New York (retired)

Anthony Di Lorenzo
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