

## Sculptor Wages Long Twilight Struggle to Restore His Bust of JFK

*A Plinth Grows in Brooklyn, but It Stays Empty As Mr. Estern Asks What City Can Do for Him*

By BARRY NEWMAN

BROOKLYN, N.Y. -- John F. Kennedy was assassinated 45 years ago -- the anniversary is Nov. 22, Saturday. And now that the country has a new first family evoking something of the Kennedy mystique, Neil Estern has been thinking it's high time his sculpture of JFK is put back where it belongs.



NEIL ESTERN

It belongs in Grand Army Plaza, a traffic maelstrom in the heart of Brooklyn. The plaza's arch marks the Union's triumph in the Civil War. Set around it are statues of such notables as Gen. Henry Slocum (known as "Slow Come" for his Gettysburg performance) and Alexander Skene, a Scottish gynecologist and Brooklyn immigrant who had an infection (skenitis) named after him.

Facing the vehicular onslaught from Flatbush Avenue at the plaza's northern tip stands a perplexing object: a 7-foot-tall, gray-granite plinth. It has no inscription. "We just call it the monument," said Jonathan Tuczynski, who was doing maintenance work in the plaza one day. "I've been wondering: What's it for?"

Mr. Estern, who is 82 years old, knows only too well: The plinth is intended for a larger-than-life bust of President Kennedy that he delivered to New York City not quite two years after the 1963 assassination. The bust actually stood in the plaza from May 31, 1965, until Oct. 6, 2003, when it was transported in the midst of a construction project to points publicly unknown.



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Barry Newman

The Brooklyn plinth sculptor Neil Estern sought to have erected sits empty as New York tries to find the money to refurbish his bust of John F. Kennedy.

irritation.

Mr. Estern was an eager young sculptor in the early 1960s, but not a poor one. He started out as a doll modeler for Ideal Toy Corp., and in 1959, was in the chips: He created Patti Playpal, the doll that has gone down in collectible annals as a masterpiece of American vinyl. Still, Mr. Estern preferred bronze. When the president was killed, Mr. Estern was moved to sculpt him. With no idea what might become of it, he made a clay model.

Meanwhile, Brooklyn's devoted Democrats were planning a JFK memorial for Grand Army Plaza. They had ordered up an eternal flame, with a marble-clad, cinder-block box to sit it on. But, as Mr. Estern remembers it, Jacqueline Kennedy made it clear to them that one eternal flame, in Arlington National Cemetery, was sufficient for her husband; she vetoed the flame on Flatbush Avenue.

Mr. Estern, who was born in Brooklyn and still lived there, offered his JFK instead.

On Memorial Day 1965, 20,000 people filled the plaza to see Robert F. Kennedy unveil it. The crowd of "hysterical admirers" surged, the *New York Times* reported, and knocked him over.

Mr. Estern was there feeling distraught. The eternal flame's flameless box with its veneer of thin marble had been set up anyway and JFK was projecting out of it at eye level. "They just stuck it on the side of that box," Mr. Estern says.

He went to parks commissioner Thomas Hoving in 1966 to argue that the bust rated a granite plinth. Mr. Hoving had one cut, but it was never used. Joseph Bresnan, a former city monuments officer, recalls locating it in 1972 and finding another place for it: outside a Brooklyn courthouse, under a bust of Robert Kennedy, by another sculptor.

Mr. Estern's JFK stayed stuck to its box. Other JFK statues were erected, of course, from Boston's State House to Buckminster Hollow, Tenn. But Mr. Estern's was New York City's only official sculptural monument to the president.

It led him to a career of commissions and frustrations. His 1970s Fiorello LaGuardia was bound for LaGuardia Airport when funds dried up; it took 20 years to see it standing in Manhattan -- and nearly that long for his Franklin Roosevelt to take a seat near the National Mall.

As Mr. Estern worked on, the box in Brooklyn still pained him. A 1993 Smithsonian Institution survey recorded graffiti stains so deep that scrubbing them off had worn away the inscriptions. The bust itself looked like it had been whacked by a bat.

But Mr. Estern's complaints about the plinth were ignored until he got a phone call from the Parks Department in 2003. "They had some money," he says.

The plaza's fountain was leaking. Rebuilding it would cost the city \$2 million. The parks executive guiding the job, Tupper Thomas, thought the JFK bust would be easy to spruce up as well.

One thing, however, made the job unusual: The sculptor was alive. "If he wasn't around," Ms. Thomas says, "we'd have just said, 'Shine that thing up and put it back.'"

Instead, at Mr. Estern's urging, she ordered a new granite plinth, as Thomas Hoving had done 37 years before -- and promptly hit a brick wall. The arbiter of New York monuments is the Art Commission, and it didn't see why the bust shouldn't hang off the front of a box as it always had.

"I explained that you can't do it that way," Mr. Estern says. When the commission went along, he informed it that his old JFK was no good, either. To sit on a pedestal, it had to be squared off. That meant a new casting. And Mr. Estern had more plans. "I've gotten better," he says. "I saw some things I could improve."

By the time the Art Commission agreed, two years later, the fountain project was over budget. The granite pedestal was done, but Mr. Estern wanted \$50,000 for the new JFK. The city wouldn't give him a nickel.

So Brooklyn's old bronze JFK, absent from Grand Army Plaza for more than five years, is in storage now, upended on a cart in the Picnic House of nearby Prospect Park. Mr. Estern, meantime, has moved from Brooklyn to Connecticut. Luckily, he had kept a plaster cast of the original clay model.

It occupies an upstairs bedroom. Swiveling its turntable there on a fall afternoon, the sculptor pointed out the fine-tuning he has done in fresh clay: "The neck was too slender here, where it meets the collar," he said. "The temples were too deep. I filled them."

Now Mr. Estern's work is complete. His perfected president is ready for casting in bronze and placement on granite. All he wants is a check to cover the cost, with whatever is left over as his fee. New York's 2009 budget, according to Ms. Thomas, finally has a \$70,000 item that ought to do it. Nothing else blocks the way -- except the economic washout and a city frantic to save a buck.

"I'm pursuing the funding now," said Christian Zimmerman, an architect who oversees the plaza. In his office at the Picnic House, Mr. Zimmerman is awaiting a "certificate to proceed" from the city. "I have a call in," he said. "I'd really like to get this done soon. Neil Estern's not a young man."