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Research article

# The production and destiny of public space in an American city: examining the emergence and disruption of Brooklyn City Hall Square

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## Abstract

Urban form should reflect collective value for place in communities. Urban squares in particular have the potential to serve as the nucleus of communities, urban artefacts that link place to memory and heritage while serving basic needs for everyday life in the city. Civic squares, those linked to governmental institutions, have further potential to facilitate community gatherings for memorialisation, commemoration, celebration and political action. Despite these important functions and potential, the incremental planning of Brooklyn in the early nineteenth century placed little emphasis on squares of any kind, despite the community's expressed desires. Brooklyn's first civic square, here referred to as City Hall Square, in fact emerged in the city almost as an afterthought. Despite this lack of clear intent, this square evolved as a unique place in the urban culture of

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the region, simultaneously a crossroads for everyday life in the city, a commercial and cultural centre and the governmental seat and judicial centre of the city and county. The square was a seamlessly woven and connected place in the larger urban structure. While some discussions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, documented in the local newspaper, provide evidence of appreciation and value for this place, others suggest a resistance to the investment of community heritage and memory as it evolved. This urban space and the larger territory around it, confronted by regional pressures for transformation in the early and mid-twentieth century, was disrupted, leaving the place diminished, no longer serving as a meaningful hub of life in the city. An examination of Brooklyn City Hall Square's emergence and diminishment reveals a problematic treatment of this place that undermined its potential as a place for civic life, a repository of memory and heritage, but also a living nucleus of the community. It also provides insights for a conceptual framework for future reconstructions or transformations that may facilitate new civic values of place and reinvigorate this urban artefact, relinking it to both the origin of the city and the city's heritage and memory, but also the square's future potential as an inclusive, connected and meaningful place of community and civic spirit.

**Keywords:** urban space; public square; urban morphology; civic space; urban renewal

## Introduction

The study of the historical and operational structure and evolution of cities offers critical insights for their continued evolution in the twenty-first century. The examination of urban morphology is particularly critical at a time when a pandemic challenges fundamental assumptions about cities, from structure to density to the provision of open space and their consequences for physical health, social equity and environmental justice. Morphological study of particular districts and neighbourhoods of a city, here referred to as urban territory, allows for in-depth understanding not only of the nature of the structure and the 'urban artefacts' of that territory, but also of the city more generally.<sup>1</sup> Urban structure here, in its most fundamental aspect, refers to the system of differentiation of private and public space through the definition of blocks and their subdivision into building lots, and the public network of communication between them for pedestrian and other modes of traffic, consisting of boulevards, avenues, streets, alleys and lanes.<sup>2</sup> Within this general structure, open space in the form of squares, parks and promenades provide crucial places for a variety of types of activity and social interaction, a type of being in the city that is differentiated from the activity of the typical street. Civic squares, tied to the municipal administration of the city, have particular potential and capacity to be endowed with the values of the community. In this way, the civic square, as a key urban artefact, can act as a microcosm for the analysis of the values and forces driving the evolution of the morphology of a city.

Brooklyn was an important American city in the nineteenth century, which was consolidated into the metropolis of New York in 1898.<sup>3</sup> Brooklyn's position before consolidation as a sister city to New York, its chronological urbanisation following that of New York and the rich documentation of the city's growth offers a significant opportunity to study the regional urban morphology. In the territory of Brooklyn's initial growth, its first civic square emerged, almost by accident. This space, referred to here as City Hall Square, matured into a unique position in the region, simultaneously serving as the chief crossroads of the young city, a commercial and cultural hub, a transportation hub and the governmental and judicial seat of the city and county. For nearly a century, this square was a seamlessly woven and connected place in the larger urban structure.

As the city of Brooklyn grew, and the geographic centre of the city shifted away from this location to the east and south, the square's future was brought into question. Community discussion raised the question of the value of this space as rich debates on memorials, commemorations, celebrations and political activity ensued. A subtext was evident in some of the discussion, raising questions of class relations and attitudes regarding the mingling of all members of the community in the square. As this

place faced pressures for transformation in the twentieth century, both the values of the urban place and its structure were redefined, leaving the place diminished, no longer serving as a meaningful hub of civic life in the city. The examination of Brooklyn's City Hall Square in the context of its larger structure reveals the problematic treatment of this place where social vitality, memory and heritage are sacrificed, thwarting rather than propelling the community's civic spirit. This examination reveals pathways for continued transformations that may restore or establish new values of place that reinvigorate this urban artefact and relink it to both the origin of the city and the landform's longer history, its heritage and memory, but also its future potential as an inclusive, connected and meaningful place in community and civic life.

## The regional culture of urban form

In the territory now defined as New York City, an evolution of urban form is apparent in the examination of the plans and maps documenting the territory's urbanisation over time. This evolution of form is further revealed by historical analysis that overlays the social and political values driving the formation of the territory.<sup>4</sup>

This territory was the land of the Lenape for millennia prior to the arrival of the Dutch, the European colonisers who laid the foundations for the urbanisation of the land.<sup>5</sup> The Lenape dwelled in seasonal camps around the territory; this habitation pattern's major surviving legacy is the alignment of pathways that influenced the positioning and alignment of country roads/future streets of the city, especially in Brooklyn.<sup>6</sup>

New Amsterdam, founded by the Dutch in 1624 at the southern point of Mannahatta, was first and foremost a trading post that formed around the commercial interests of the Dutch West India Company rather than the needs of settlers seeking to establish new permanent settlements.<sup>7</sup> With a relatively stable population during Dutch rule, the low-density town, meticulously documented in the redraft of the 1660 Castello Plan by John Wolcott Adams shown in Figure 1, consisted of blocks of varying sizes defined by houses, stores and garden walls, with the block interiors used for agriculture and housing livestock to supply food to the population.<sup>8</sup> The urban morphology was centred on the functionality of land, allowing varied block sizing that shifted in dimension and scale based on the location of the block relative to the emerging commercial waterfront. Blocks distant from the waterfront could encompass more land for agricultural use while blocks adjacent to the waterfront were compressed to allow for more building frontage in the streets near the waterfront. The streets in the urban morphology respond to function and logical connectivity, laid out without a strict geometric structure but rather a fluid structure that allows the streets to adjust to the geography and the waterfront edges.

With the transition to English rule in 1664, the newly renamed city, New York, shifted its culture of urban morphology to one that increasingly prioritised the efficient accommodation of new permanent settlers.<sup>9</sup> This culture saw the subdivision of large estates and land holdings into increasingly geometrically governed blocks and streets, with the exploration of block sizes still evident in the variety of block depths and lengths. While topography and geographic features are respected to some degree, the planning culture is clearly pursuing the concept of a defined structure of parallel and perpendicular streets. The new neighbourhoods' structures were localised, developed within the boundaries of the estate but also oriented independently in response to some degree to geographic and topographic features of the land. This flexible/adaptable urban morphological culture was soon superseded by an exactly codified morphological culture in post-revolutionary New York through the 1811 plan for the city. This plan not only regulated the block and street dimensions but also unified them into a strict geometric order that could extend in an almost limitless manner up Manhattan Island, without having to consider local geographic features. This codified system developed on the priority of accommodating the townhouse as the base building typology of the moment, with building footprints of slightly varying widths and limited depths that allowed for ample rear gardens. Even as the prevalent building typology evolved to accommodate higher population density, the urban morphological culture of Manhattan held fast into the twenty-first century.<sup>10</sup>

Brooklyn's urban morphological culture, emerging in the post-revolutionary period, aligns with the early adaptable geometric culture of eighteenth-century New York rather than the contemporary 1811 plan, with landowners subdividing their land applying a geometric system with a localised orientation/alignment and localised variations of block and street sizes. This culture of urban morphol-

ogy persisted as Brooklyn grew, creating a much less cohesive structure when compared with the nineteenth-century structure of New York.

## Culture of the square in the early urban form of the region

Urban space, and in particular the square, is evident in the form of New Amsterdam/early New York. In this territory, the urban spaces can be categorised into two types: irregular emergent squares and planned formal squares.

### Irregular emergent squares

New Amsterdam and early New York's plans developed with irregular nodal open spaces that emerged from the demarcation of the blocks and have qualities that distinguished them from the general street network. In the redraft of the 1660 survey of New Amsterdam shown in Figure 1, a primary open space sits adjacent to the main entrance of the fort. This trapezoidal space lies at the end of the axis of the broad street (the future Broadway) to the north and slightly rotates to the alignment of the fort to the south. This space, the future Bowling Green, emerges from the contingent boundaries of the adjacent blocks, the geographic placement of the city gate to the north and the fort's positioning to defend the town from approaching ships in the harbour. The square's emergence is likely driven by a combination of keeping the land clear from the fort's immediate territory with the requirement for space outside the fort's gate for military and civic functions and ceremonies as a parade ground.<sup>11</sup>

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**Figure 1. Redraft of the Castello Plan, New Amsterdam in 1660 (Source: New York Public Library Digital Collections)**



**Figure 2. Plan of the City of New York, 1767 (Source: New York Public Library Digital Collections)**



Other irregular emergent squares are evident in the 1767 survey of the renamed city, also shown in Figure 2. Many of these squares are the resultant space of a complex intersection of streets, leaving an irregular open area that functioned as a node in the street network, a place with a differentiated spatial quality that eventually earned itself a formal name as a square in the young city. Hanover Square is an example of this type; others are evident but not yet named on this survey, including the future Chatham Square. The Common, a triangular space, emerged at the split of 'Broad Way' heading north and the future Park Row/Chatham Street cutting to the north-east. This space was at first a large open area on the edge of the city for events and executions; later it was surrounded by city fabric and eventually became the site for a new city hall in the early decades of the 1800s.

A more subtle but clear type of emergent urban space in the early form of the city are particularly wide streets that blur their role as both an identifiable open space and a street. Two of these are evident in the 1660 and 1767 surveys: Broad Way and Broad Street. They are both distinguished from the typical streets of the network, with a prominence enhanced by their links to key buildings in the city, including Trinity Church, the city's northern gate, City Hall and the Exchange.<sup>12</sup> Broad Street's width initially accommodated a canal flanked by street passages on both sides; the canal was later filled in, resulting in this remarkably wide street.

### Planned formal squares

The first planned square apparent in the 1767 survey of the young New York is Great Square,<sup>13</sup> a large-scale square developed as part of the city's expansion to the north in the mid-eighteenth century. This new grid-style neighbourhood, shown in Figure 2, indicates a clear shift towards an orthogonal grid as a planning strategy and the appreciation of a square as an anchoring component of the neighbourhood. This shift to a defined geometric form is ratified and codified by the 1811 Commissioners' Plan for New York City. While the Commissioners explicitly rejected a form of planning centred on figural public squares anchored by public buildings or monuments, they did, albeit somewhat reluctantly, indicate and describe a series of squares in their plans.<sup>14</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century,

the growth of New York had reached 50th Street, with eight planned formal squares indicated on an 1852 survey, partially shown in Figure 3.<sup>15</sup> Some of these squares were planned with the motivation of establishing land and real estate value, including Gramercy Square, Stuyvesant Square and Hudson Square.<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 3. Partial view of the 'Map of the City of New York Extending Northward to Fiftieth' (Source: David Rumsey Map Collection)**



## Brooklyn's urbanisation

Brooklyn sits just to the east of the early territory of New York across the estuary later referred to as the East River; this territory remained largely rural throughout the eighteenth century while New York underwent a period of rapid growth and quickly extended its footprint up the island to the north. The Revolutionary War stalled any further development of Brooklyn until the early decades of the nineteenth century, leaving Brooklyn lagging behind New York in the establishment of an urban form. This delay offered the landowners of this territory a powerful model and precedent to consider as they envisioned the transformation from estates, orchards and country lanes to streets and blocks.

### Landscape of indigenous roads and European village settlements

Brooklyn's pre-urban condition in the eighteenth century, shown in Figure 4, was a rural landscape marked by country roads that generally followed the alignment of the Lenape trails through the territory.<sup>17</sup> The primary trail connected the distant Atlantic shoreline to this north-west territory and continued winding between hills and leading down to the waterfront for a convenient crossing point to Manhattan Island. The early Dutch settlers respected this trail's alignment, setting up logical locations for the first villages in this territory: one at the river crossing, later referred to as Brookland Ferry, and a second on the highland in the heart of the territory, Brookland Parish, so named to reflect the Dutch Reformed Church built in the middle of the road.<sup>18</sup>

**Figure 4. Pre-urban territory in 1767 with rectangle marking area of initial urban plan. The red circle indicates the future location of City Hall (Source: New York Public Library)**



**Figure 5. Facsimile of the Approved Map of Brooklyn Village 1819. The circle indicates the future location of City Hall; the long block that will be subdivided for the City Hall site is highlighted** (Source: New York Public Library)



### **Recognition of the real estate potential**

By 1806 urbanisation was underway in Brooklyn. At this time, New York's population had already exceeded 60,000 people.<sup>19</sup> A property survey developed by Jeremiah Lott for Jacob and John Hicks documents a view of how Brooklyn would transform.<sup>20</sup> This plan for the land running up the hill to the south of Brookland Ferry village shows 50-ft wide streets and 200-ft deep blocks of slightly varying lengths. The typical lots in this plan are 25-ft wide and 100-ft deep. While the streets are slightly narrower, both the block and lot dimensions in the Hicks survey generally correspond with the New York Commissioners' Plan of 1811. This plan is evidence of a critical view of Brooklyn's urban form as it is initiated: the form would be as equally dense as New York.

## Positioning the development: Brooklyn Village, Vinegar Hill and Olympia

By 1816 this initial plan was extended further south, with additional landowners, notably Hezekiah Beers Pierrepont, continuing and adjusting the urban form established by the Hicks survey.<sup>21</sup> Pierrepont envisioned how the bluff south of the ferry would appeal to New York's upper classes, especially with the wide exposure to the fresh breezes blowing across the harbour. He tweaked the dimensions established by the Hicks survey, seeking wider streets and lots for larger houses for his property's urban plan.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, two other developments emerged to the east of the ferry, occupying the territory between the ferry and Wallabout Bay, the site of the nascent Navy Yard. Both developments were conceived and marketed to specific communities: John Jackson named his track 'Vinegar Hill' with the goal of marketing the lots to Irish immigrants, while Joshua and Comfort Sands named their development 'Olympia' and aimed their marketing at transplants from Connecticut.<sup>23</sup> In the latter case, their plan indicates a more sophisticated urban form, with an unusual network of streets, lanes and alleys, perhaps intended to facilitate an anticipated maritime industrial focus for the waterfront site.<sup>24</sup>

## Incremental urbanism

A facsimile of the 1819 approved map of Brooklyn Village, shown in Figure 5, documents the entire plan of early Brooklyn, compiling the territory at Brookland Ferry, the Hicks and Pierrepont plans, Olympia and Vinegar Hill.<sup>25</sup> The planning of the territory at this point follows the pattern of urban form apparent in the pre-1811 plan development of New York, with landowners subdividing their landholdings applying an independent, localised grid system within the contingent conditions of the location, geography and boundaries of their property. This pattern of urban form is marked by rotated grids that often meet at the pre-existing country roads.

This pattern of Brooklyn's early urban form can be described as incremental urbanisation, in contrast to the Commissioners' Plan of 1811 for New York. This form of urbanisation has certain advantages and qualities that were sacrificed in the New York plan, including the ability to adjust to the local topographic conditions or specific geographic features including waterfront edges, ridges, bluffs and alignment of the historic roads.<sup>26</sup> Incremental urbanisation also contributes a specific quality to the urban form with a subtle but important definition of the various quarters or neighbourhoods based on the shifting and rotation of the grids. This allows for dynamic conditions where two independent grids meet; these conditions often form the distinct centres or defined edges of neighbourhoods. At the same time, a lack of continuity and connectivity are adverse conditions at the macro scale of a city; in the case of early Brooklyn's territory these conditions would prove to be central concerns of the future planning of this part of Brooklyn.

## A city without public squares

Incremental urbanism provides opportunities for squares and other forms of open space through emerging conditions at nodal points as well as planned spaces as part of the initial urbanisation. Nodal points incubate a condition for future public squares, as evident in New York in Hanover and Chatham Squares, and in pre-urban Brooklyn at the ferry landing as well as in the broadening of the street at Brooklyn Parish. Beyond nodal points, each new territory has equal potential for the integration of planned squares and parks as it is transformed from rural landscape to urban neighbourhood, with this critical moment allowing for some of the transforming space to be reserved for open areas, holding it back from the speculative market. This pattern is observed in New York as the city's development marches north, as at Gramercy Square, for example.

As the initial planning was underway, there was discussion in the Brooklyn community regarding the development of squares: the notes of General Jeremiah Johnson, dated 1800, discussed by Stiles in his history of Brooklyn, confirm the recognition that public squares and other forms of public space are a critical component for the emerging urban places of Brooklyn. These notes include the following passage regarding the development of Olympia:

Now proper time that a corporation for Olympia should commence its operations, and particular appropriations be made for extensive market-places, a square for an academy, another for a promenade, others for public buildings of different sorts, as churches, courthouses, alms-houses, etc.<sup>27</sup>

Despite this recommendation, no open spaces are included in the plan for Olympia. In the case of Brooklyn Village, Pierrepont, having profited from the beneficial aspect of his property on the bluff in Brooklyn Heights, did push for a public space where all residents could enjoy the view and fresh air. This founding father of Brooklyn with a vision for the new city, however, was unable to deliver this public space for its residents.<sup>28</sup> While a few nodal points are visible in the 1819 plan,<sup>29</sup> there is no clear indication of space being reserved for squares or parks in any of the developments.<sup>30</sup> The evidence points instead to the intention to maximise saleable/taxable property.

This lack of integration of open space is explicitly noted by members of the community. There is clear discussion among the Brooklyn public about the pervasive density and the missed opportunity to establish public open space in this new city. An editorial in the *Brooklyn Long-Island Star* in 1830 criticised this failure:

One may look in vain for a public square, a well shaded avenue, or even a sufficient cemetery. The whole object seems to have been to cover every lot of eighteen by twenty-two with a house, to project and open unneeded as well as unheard of streets, and to tumble the hills into valleys . . . We have not a single public square.<sup>31</sup>

## Incremental urban planning and its impact on this territory

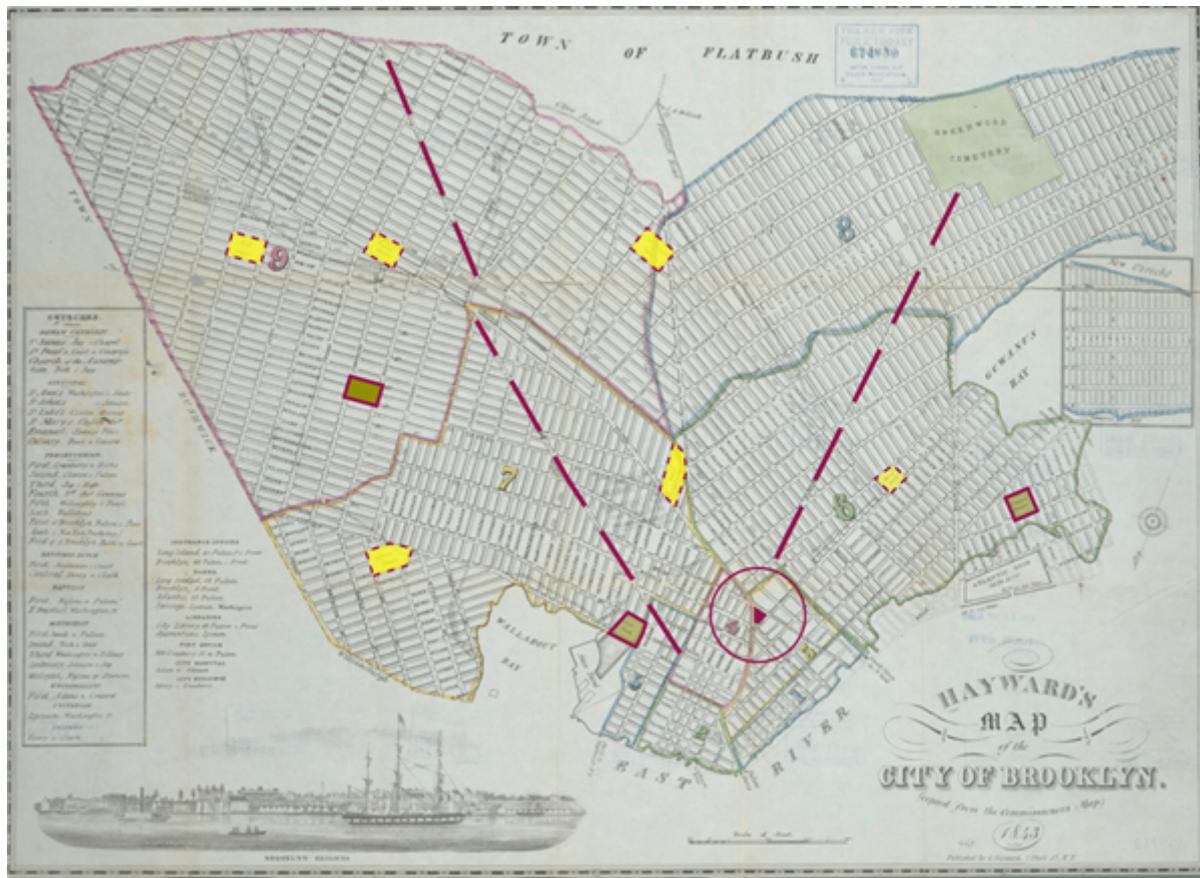
The incremental pattern of Brooklyn's initial urbanisation continues in the next phase to the south and east, documented in the 1843 Hayward Map shown in Figure 6. The city's extent in this decade takes on the shape of a butterfly with Flatbush Avenue as a spine down the middle. Each wing of the butterfly is dense with blocks of slightly varying dimensions and proportions with independent grid alignments/orientations.

The 1843 Hayward Map and other plans that date from the 1840s reveal the considerations the city commissioners were exploring in their plans for the city's expansion.<sup>32</sup> The 1840s planning reveals a critical opportunity for conceptualising and integrating a broader 'macro' structure that provides both a conceptual clarity but also opportunities for more direct and efficient circulation linking the initial urban territory to these expanding neighbourhoods.<sup>33</sup> This planning also offers a critical opportunity to develop a distributed system of public spaces to both relieve the density but also provide a sense of place and centre for the new neighbourhoods. While the 1843 Hayward Map indicates some concept of a larger connective structure through proposed radial diagonal streets and some distribution of proposed public squares, overall, the planning documents of this period clearly indicate that a unified structure or clear conceptual plan is not applied as a model for the planning of Brooklyn's urban form.<sup>34</sup> In addition to lacking a clear system or structure, many of the structural elements explored in this planning, including several of the proposed public squares and two diagonal connections shown in Figure 6, were never realised.

## Civic square by accident

While the initial planning of the new city was devoid of public space, the need for a dedicated site for Brooklyn's new City Hall became apparent; one was established in the 1830s where Fulton Street bends to the south-east where it meets Joralemon and Willoughby Streets. This location follows a clear logic, placing it along the critical artery of Fulton Street not far from the old ferry landing, now called Fulton Ferry, and a new one at Main Street.<sup>35</sup> The site was previously laid out as an odd-shaped block intended for residential lots, but the geometric irregularity was resolved by simplifying the block and dedicating the leftover triangle of land to the site for the future City Hall.<sup>36</sup> While the triangular geometry of the site is striking in contrast to the more regular blocks of the territory, the scale of the site is diminutive for the primary civic structure of the young city. This further reflects the primacy of real estate income that likely made the allocation of a larger site less appealing to the landowners.<sup>37</sup>

**Figure 6. Hayward's 1843 Map of Brooklyn copied from the Commissioners' map showing unbuilt radial streets in dashed red lines and unbuilt open spaces in dashed red outlines with yellow fill (Source: New York Public Library)**



## Evolution of the site and the emergence of the square

The initial design for City Hall had a large programme and a footprint that fully filled the triangular lot.<sup>38</sup> With no established squares in the structure of the city at the time of the design planning,<sup>39</sup> it is notable that an open space was not the initial intention for this site.<sup>40</sup> This initial building programme was halted due to a market downturn, and when the project resumed, the building programme was reduced and the new design had a simple rectangular footprint.<sup>41</sup> This new footprint was situated on the southern portion of the site, leaving the northern portion free of construction, as shown in Figure 7. The concept for a forecourt-like open space likely evolved simultaneously with the reduced building's design as it sets up a natural place for appreciating the Ionic pedimented porch standing above a steep monumental stair on the north façade of the building. This façade addressed residents and visitors approaching from the north after arriving at the ferry landings, still the major transit access points to Brooklyn at the time.<sup>42</sup> With the open space serving as a forecourt, the monumental portico provides a dramatic sense of arrival in Brooklyn, the impressive presence that some of the elite desired for their city.<sup>43</sup>

This was the generating operation that established an emergent urban open space for City Hall. As the space emerged, it took on the nature of a classic square anchored by a dominant civic building, an uncommon condition in the region's urban morphology.<sup>44</sup> At the completion of City Hall this public space surfaced in the consciousness of the community, who discussed the space's treatment. A mention of the building nearing completion in an 1846 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* article articulates the author(s)' desire for the space in front of the building:

We hope there will be a proper liberality and taste shown in the 'outside trimmings' of the place – which are often in similar matters so overlooked as to spoil the general effect of all. We allude to the fence, the entrance-yard, and so on. A tasty and solid fence is very necessary to such a building – and by due disposition of flagging, trees, grass-plots, &c., the grounds round the Hall might be made in a high degree ornamental.<sup>45</sup>

**Figure 7. Left: 1849 survey of City Hall and adjacent blocks with author's highlights; right: views of City Hall and County Courthouse, ca. 1876, with park and urban fabric around the space (Source: New York Public Library)**



### A civic place without a name

Strangely, even with the appreciation of this new open space as a civic place tied to City Hall, there is ambiguity regarding a formal name for this space. This ambiguity is substantiated by numerous maps/surveys that label City Hall but not the open space, whereas other parks and squares are indicated with clear names.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the references to this space in the local papers vary, suggesting a formal name is not agreed upon.<sup>47</sup> The term City Hall Square is thus applied to this space for clarity here.

### The maturing of City Hall Square: crossroads and civic place

Detailed maps, engravings<sup>48</sup> and photographs give a sense of the nature of the fabric forming the perimeter of this square in its initial build out, as shown in Figure 7. Documentation from the 1850s and 1860s shows a range of building types, up to four storeys tall, including townhouses, a theatre, a church, a hotel and a concert hall. Across the street to the south and east of City Hall, the King's County Courthouse was built by the same architect and provides a dynamic extension of the growing civic architecture of the place.<sup>49</sup> Some of the buildings fronting the square have commercial shopfronts at street level, a condition that continued as the space evolved. The documentation reinforces this space not only as a civic seat but also as a commercial/cultural/transit hub.

As the city grew, the block to the south of City Hall saw a concentration of additional governmental buildings flanking the courthouse.<sup>50</sup> These buildings, although they do not front directly onto the square, define a rich architectural grouping with City Hall that reinforces this place as the civic/governmental heart of Brooklyn. In particular, the courthouse, with its striking dome and orientation setting it oblique to City Hall generates a rich scenographic complement to City Hall, visible in Figure 7, that one

especially appreciates when approaching from the north. Together, these government buildings define an emergent civic/governmental centre endowed with a remarkable architectural and urban richness that stands out in the American conception of civic centre.<sup>51</sup>

Although Brooklyn expanded to the east and south, shifting its geographic centre away from this territory, City Hall Square maintained significance in the community as the nineteenth century progressed. The perimeter fabric defining City Hall Square continued to evolve over the decades, with buildings of varied massing, rich in their detailing, supporting a variety of uses. Residential streets were a block away while offices, theatres, shops and banks fronted onto the triangular space. The elevated train line connected distant neighbourhood populations to this square, adding another layer of activity, albeit less desirable due to the noise and pollution of the trains. The Brooklyn Bridge, opened in 1883, reinforced the significance of the square with its alignment and access point along Fulton Street a short distance north of City Hall.<sup>52</sup> The two structures became linked in the image of Brooklyn, as depicted in scenes of the city in the late nineteenth century.<sup>53</sup>

## Signs of ambiguity in the value of this civic place

City Hall Square is a logical place for commemoration as the venerable civic space, but some in the community raised questions about its appropriateness for its first memorial. A debate regarding the location suitable for the installation of the monument to Henry Ward Beecher reveals a lack of consensus about the importance and role of the space in the community.<sup>54</sup> In 1887 some community members supported the monument's siting in City Hall Square because its placement in this 'heart of the city' would make his memory ever present to the community, while others saw this space as too busy and perhaps less dignified as a place for such an important monument.<sup>55</sup>

**Figure 8. Diagram of the changing conditions of City Hall Square (Source: author)**



Another manifestation of this tension about the role of this space in the community can be discerned by examining the treatment of the space, especially its frequent design changes. The lack of stability in the space's design treatment, shown in Figure 8, suggests the lack of a consistent vision for the role of this space in the community. The various iterations of the design of the landscape treatment are repeatedly revealed in archived photographs to create awkward conditions for the staging of events in the space.<sup>56</sup> These photos capture a marked tension between the desire to treat the space with decorative landscape features and the desire to assemble the community in this space for special events. Despite this clear awkwardness, future changes did little to solve this problem.<sup>57</sup>

## Road infrastructure, superblocks, zoning work against vitality of the territory

Photographs from the 1900s to the 1920s, like the one shown in Figure 9, reinforce the nature of the place as a crossroads in the city, with pedestrians, trams and motor cars sharing the roadway and elevated train lines above mirroring the subway lines hidden underground.<sup>58</sup> As transportation infrastructure, especially that focused on the private motor vehicle, became a major focus of urban design in the twentieth century, this territory of Brooklyn, the key threshold to Manhattan, experienced significant pressure to adapt and change to accommodate new demands for transportation connectivity.<sup>59</sup> The pressure was particularly acute with the continued reliance on the two historic pathways, Fulton Street and Flatbush Avenue, to connect the river crossings to the distant territories of Brooklyn's expanding neighbourhoods.

**Figure 9. Left: Washington St. from Fulton ca. 1900–1920, looking north from City Hall Square; right: a similar view in 2016 (Sources: Detroit Publishing Company photograph collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, 2016 photo by author)**



As early as 1843, the Hayward Map's radial diagonal streets show evidence of a recognition of the need to develop easy movement from the civic area to the rest of Brooklyn. The missed opportunity to introduce a circulation structure on a city-wide scale early on left future generations confronted with a serious and challenging transportation problem. A number of plans, including those in Figure 10, confirm that addressing this challenge was a high priority for the planners, threatening the urban structure and fabric of the territory, now a historic neighbourhood, with significant intervention.<sup>60</sup> Surface roads for cars come to dominate the planning process and justify exploring radical changes to the whole territory, with significant impact on City Hall Square.

**Figure 10. Urban plans focused on connectivity, including, left: ca. 1900 plan to connect the Brooklyn Bridge directly to Flatbush Ave; centre: 1907 commission plan that includes a major roundabout and radiating avenues at the convergence of the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges; right: the largely realised 1944 new Civic Centre Plan. (Sources: New York Public Library, Internet Archive/Cornell University Library)**



### Traffic arteries and open space undermining the urban form

As options were considered to solve the transportation challenge, the idea emerged to develop traffic arteries linked to a monumental open space to serve as a new gateway to Brooklyn. This concept was developed further with the goal of visually linking the Brooklyn Bridge to Borough Hall (City Hall's new name after the consolidation of Brooklyn with New York in 1898), the two primary identifying urban artefacts of Brooklyn. Another component was layered into this concept: the development of a new 'modern' civic centre replacing some of the historic governmental structures.<sup>61</sup> These concepts were presented as the major goals of the replanning of the territory between the bridge and Borough Hall, with a number of iterations tested in planning drawings and multiple building campaigns. Combined, these ideas centred on a large-scale open space that could provide a new setting for governmental and institutional buildings that were seen as a means of dignifying and monumentalising this gateway space.<sup>62</sup> This vision proceeded, however, with little competing value placed on the existing spatial quality or sense of place of City Hall Square with its unique and architecturally rich civic centre already in place. It also proceeded with little value placed on the existing dense street network providing strong local connectivity across the territory.

Between 1930 and 1960, this territory was radically transformed.<sup>63</sup> Dozens of blocks dense with historic fabric were demolished, including buildings with significant architectural value, most particularly the King's County Courthouse. Numerous streets were de-mapped to consolidate land into superblocks for large-scale housing projects. High-capacity and high-speed roadways, motorways and ramps were inserted to create long-distance connectivity. At the local scale, the superblocks and major roadway infrastructure created barriers to movement that subdivided and separated people across the territory. Through this planning process, referred to as 'urban renewal', the territory of early Brooklyn that lacked open space was transformed into a territory with vast stretches of open space in the mid-twentieth century,<sup>64</sup> as shown in Figures 11 and 12. The replanning of this territory resulted in a dysfunctional, interrupted local street network with odd block configurations.

### Separating rather than mixing uses

A diagram of uses, shown in Figure 11, provides a sense of the impact of the twentieth-century concept for a strict zoning approach that separates uses. This highlights the contrast of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century development pattern that concentrated mixed-use (red) along key streets in the neighbourhoods, still extant to the south, and the post-mid-twentieth-century pattern that justified clearing mixed-use fabric to provide large areas for government, institutional (yellow) and office uses (orange), in the central area of the territory. This diagram co-relates well with the observations of the most active streets (red) and the least active areas (yellow). In contrast, photographs from the early

twentieth century, along with detailed fire atlas maps document the intense mixture of uses at City Hall Square and along Fulton Street.<sup>65</sup> This fabric's removal, in combination with the decreased street network connectivity, contributed to the current observable low daily activity and pedestrian use of the streets and open spaces north of Borough Hall.<sup>66</sup>

**Figure 11. Left: figure ground diagram of buildings to open space; centre: blocks to streets; right: use pattern diagram (Source: author)**



The modern civic centre, intended as a dignified, monumental gateway to Brooklyn, turns out in the end to be an underwhelming and underused place in the city that was bypassed by the traffic coming off the Brooklyn Bridge, negating the very concept of a gateway to Brooklyn that dominated the planning conversation. The north portico of Borough Hall now greets skateboarding youths rather than visitors to the great borough. All of these factors played a role in transforming City Hall Square from the crossroads of the city to a localised open space with diminished significance to the larger community both in daily life and for special civic events.

**Figure 12. Left: 1924 aerial; right: 1996 aerial (Source: NYCityMap DoITT)**



## Assessing the production and transformation of City Hall Square

This analysis provides insights but also raises further questions regarding the production of this square, the territory of Brooklyn's early urbanisation and the major interventions in this territory during the urban renewal period. First, it is clear that Brooklyn developed in the context of New York's planning, where the commissioners authoring the 1811 plan only reluctantly allocated space for public use in the form of squares and parks, and many squares developed in New York were driven more by real estate

speculation than the desire to provide public amenities. The Brooklyn landowners making decisions about its initial urbanisation failed to produce any public open space. The public was well aware of this failure, petitioning and cajoling the newly established municipality to consider providing such places. While there are examples of attempts to produce public spaces that would benefit the community, the value of land and its taxable contribution to the city seemed to be a higher priority than the provision of squares and parks.

The space produced at City Hall was not in the initial plans, and only emerged as the building design was replanned on a more modest scale. This awkward production of the space was reflected in the lack of a clear formal name. The space nonetheless did thrive as it evolved, clearly meaningful to the city, both in terms of the concentration of municipal and commercial buildings but also in the use of the space in daily life, as well as special commemorations and celebrations. This active use, even with its awkwardness, continued through the mid-twentieth century, with the celebration of the Brooklyn Dodgers' 1955 World Series victory held in this space.<sup>67</sup> Photographs document the space as an active part of life in Brooklyn up to the point of its transformation in the urban renewal period.

The urban renewal planning was the culmination of a decades-long design process and discussion in the community, with multiple configurations built and then modified. The goals and aspirations for this work, however, were largely abandoned in the final design and implementation. Major disruption of the territory was justified by the municipal authorities, whose decisions were made at a time of major demographic change with the phenomenon of suburbanisation and 'white flight'.<sup>68</sup> Ideological views of the modern city, aligned with real estate development interests, supported this disruption.<sup>69</sup> The outcome of this disruption was a disconnected and dysfunctional street network that stifled pedestrian mobility and accessibility, leaving the vast territory of open space north of Borough Hall underused.<sup>70</sup> The Brooklynites represented in the press had remarkable discussions about open spaces in their community in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but that did not ensure a legacy of great open-space design.<sup>71</sup>

Brooklyn City Hall Square served not only as a true gateway to Brooklyn, with traffic between Brooklyn and Manhattan largely passing through this space, but also as a symbolic representation of Brooklyn, an artefact tying its vital present to both its origin but also its hopeful future. The significance of the loss of this urban artefact can be felt in the disconnected, quiet, placeless qualities of Columbus Park, now the official name of the space. The central goal for a gateway in twentieth-century planning is incongruous with the current conditions that pedestrians, cyclists and motorists crossing the Brooklyn Bridge encounter when they 'arrive in the middle of nowhere' as they are dumped onto the heavy traffic corridor of Tillary Street.<sup>72</sup>

The twentieth-century concept for a civic centre marked by impressive architectural works reinforcing the sense of place and its significance as a seat of government failed to fully materialise.<sup>73</sup> The impressive qualities found in the composition of government buildings immediately around City Hall in the nineteenth century were sacrificed along with the civic place of the square in the name of progress, but their replacement is hardly equally compelling.<sup>74</sup>

Furthermore, the loss of the historic link between the square and the ferry landing is especially unfortunate today with the revival of the East River ferry, the landing area and the attraction of Brooklyn Bridge Park.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, the resilient vitality of Fulton Mall to the east is cut off, rather than tapped into.<sup>76</sup> This severing of Fulton Street ended the centuries-long prominence of the historic Lenape path through the territory.

The once-significant use of the site as a place for commemoration and civic events, even with the poor design treatment, was disrupted, sacrificing its challenged but then still growing role as a repository of community memory and heritage.<sup>77</sup> The Beecher Monument was moved a block and a half to the north, disconnecting it from Borough Hall and placing it in a much less active location where few pedestrians come in contact with it. The intention behind the naming of the post-urban renewal space Columbus Park is questionable in regard to meaning and representation of the community in the face of the growing population of people of colour in Brooklyn.<sup>78</sup>

The lost significance of this place to the community, combined with the continued treatment of the space that hinders large-scale gatherings, results in the diminishment of the place for civic identity and activity. In fact, during the large-scale protests after the killing of George Floyd in 2020, the space at the Barclay's Center, a corporate, commercial space at Flatbush and Atlantic Avenue, seems to have been a more practical and poignant space for political protest than the awkward space at Borough Hall.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, a large-scale march to raise awareness of police violence against black transgender women was staged on the avenue in front of the Brooklyn Museum rather than Borough Hall.<sup>80</sup>

Analysis of historical discussions in the local newspaper suggests a classist view of this urban space as it matured, a view that likely weighs on the decision-making process by the elite for this space's development and eventual transformation.<sup>81</sup> As the social context for the major disruption of this territory was the abandonment of neighbourhoods by white middle-class families, there is a clear need for additional analysis of the social/economic/political production of the urban renewal project.<sup>82</sup> This context also points to the importance of digging further into the critical role of urban space for daily interaction and community assembly in relation to building social capital among the less powerful members of Brooklyn society.<sup>83</sup>

## Concluding remarks

The value and necessity of urban open space in cities was clear to the early population of Brooklyn, who noted the positive effects on social, physical and psychological health, and on happiness for city dwellers. Many community members also recognised the power of placing monuments in the public square where the commemoration of a great citizen of the city in the space would both bestow honour but also enrich and endow the civic heritage and memory of the city. In our own time, we especially appreciate the value and role of urban squares and parks as spaces for well-being, happiness and communal life as we reflect on the long period of risk and isolation in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the necessity of collective civic spaces where our communities can build – and nurture – new social bonds is ever more apparent in this moment of political polarisation. In these spaces, heritage and memory are a foundation that can be drawn upon or challenged as communities seek justice and equity; adding, adjusting and revising the civic heritage and memory in a place for future generations to reflect and build upon.

The pandemic has reinforced our human need for outdoor rooms in our cities where we see each other and recognise our common humanity, both in everyday active life as well as critical social/political moments. If we are to rebuild/revitalise our urban open spaces, we must re-establish or reinforce the culture of the square in our communities. The nuances of design that contribute to the active use and civic meaningfulness of the urban square need rediscovery and reinforcement. Historic spaces are important to study as they reveal the specific urban morphological culture of a place. Study of historic spaces also helps us understand how these spaces worked, especially to help us appreciate the transformative impact that prioritising cars has on these spaces.<sup>84</sup> Study of the structural context of historic spaces helps us rediscover the value of a highly connected spatial network that maximises mobility, accessibility and active use by the community. Analysis of historic spaces also provokes questions of treatment and capacity to accommodate diverse activity that can help communities as they seek to make active, flexible, inviting and – critically – inclusive spaces that nurture our social and civic lives.<sup>85</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>These terms derive from Aldo Rossi's theoretical basis for analysis of urban form in Rossi, *Architecture of the City*, 21–34. The civic buildings of early Brooklyn acquire the characteristics of urban artefacts as defined by Rossi.

<sup>2</sup>For an overview of the approaches to examining urban morphology, see Chiaradia, 'Urban Morphology/Urban Form'. This study draws upon the examination of the ground plan as well as the three-dimensional space defining nature of urban fabric, but also the operational aspect of urban morphology in regards to the interaction of the city administration, urban designers and the lay people of the community that contribute to the discussion of the development/evolution of Brooklyn.

<sup>3</sup>Brooklyn's importance derives especially from its role in maritime industry and trade, but also its position as one of the most populous American cities.

<sup>4</sup>Gotham is a major source for key historical analysis. Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*.

<sup>5</sup>Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 5.

<sup>6</sup>See Kelly and Nanning, *Indian Villages*.

<sup>7</sup>Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 24–6.

<sup>8</sup>Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 50, 64–5.

<sup>9</sup>Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 70. The authors note the difference between the English colonies of New England and the Dutch. This conclusion is also reached based on the rapid expansion of the city

and its shift to a dense urban environment, as evidenced in the plans and surveys of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

<sup>10</sup>The only challenge to this culture is the superblock that breaks the rules of block sizes and interrupts the street network, but this counter urban morphology failed to override the power of the 1811 plan's urban form.

<sup>11</sup>Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 50. Also see the 'Duke's plan' survey of 1661 for reinforcement of this interpretation of the space here: *Map of New Amsterdam in 1661*.

<sup>12</sup>Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 85, 104, 108, 109.

<sup>13</sup>This space is also labelled as Delancey's Square, named after the Tory landholder James De Lancey, *Gotham*, 282, in other versions of the survey, like this one: Ratzer, *Plan of the City of New York in North America*.

<sup>14</sup>Ballon, *Greatest Grid*, 40–1.

<sup>15</sup>A few smaller open spaces are evident at complex intersections in the irregular street networks south of the executed 1811 grid.

<sup>16</sup>For Gramercy Square, now referred to as Gramercy Park, see Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 577. For Stuyvesant Square, see the NYC Parks history of the space here: City of New York Department of Parks & Recreation, 'Stuyvesant Square,' <https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/stuyvesant-square/history>. For Hudson Square, see Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 374.

<sup>17</sup>Kelly and Nanning, *Indian Villages*.

<sup>18</sup>Brooklyn Parish is referred to as 'Brooklyn Square' in General Johnson's notes regarding the boundaries of Olympia in Stiles, *History of the City of Brooklyn*, i.382.

<sup>19</sup>Population in 1800 based on NYC Planning Department data found here: City of New York, 'Total and foreign-born population New York City, 1790–2000'.

<sup>20</sup>Lott, *Map of the Property of Jacob and John Hicks*.

<sup>21</sup>Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 449–50. The authors describe Pierrepont's vision for Brooklyn Village on the bluff, now the neighbourhood of Brooklyn Heights.

<sup>22</sup>Stiles, *History of the City of Brooklyn*, i.55. Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 449–50.

<sup>23</sup>Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 272. See also Armbruster, *Olympia Settlement*. Stiles, *History of the City of Brooklyn*, i.381–2 discusses the notes of General Jeremiah Johnson regarding early Brooklyn's development. Stiles cites Johnson as claiming the layout for Olympia to be based on a survey and plan first made in 1787.

<sup>24</sup>Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 272. The plan sets up unusual alleys and lanes in addition to the streets. Logically, these alleys would service maritime industry buildings near the waterfront, explaining their presence in the plan in contrast to the planning of Brooklyn Village on the bluff of Brooklyn Heights.

<sup>25</sup>Lott and William M. Stewart, *Map of the Village of Brooklyn*.

<sup>26</sup>The 1811 plan for New York ignored localised conditions in favour of the macro-order of the system.

<sup>27</sup>Stiles, *History of the City of Brooklyn*, i.385.

<sup>28</sup>Pierrepont's proposal for a promenade was a significant topic of discussion in the local papers, including the article: 'About that square'.

<sup>29</sup>The urban planning for these three developments, which meet at a winding Fulton Street, produced a few new nodal points, including one at the intersection of Fulton, Main and Sands Street. This space, at the top of the climb up from the waterfront, had great potential for an emergent square, but instead of seeking natural opportunities for open spaces to help resolve the complexity of the incremental planning and reinforce the primacy of Fulton Street, the nodal point never transformed into a clear urban square. More nodal points emerged as the triangular block was established for City Hall. See this 1836 map of New York and Brooklyn for the formation of this nodal point: Stiles & Co., *Topographic Map*. This nodal point, at the top of the hill up from the ferry landings at Fulton Ferry and the new ferry landing at Main Street, became the logical geographic target for the terminus of the Brooklyn Bridge.

<sup>30</sup>There are blocks in this facsimile that are undivided, but there is no evidence that these are intended as open spaces.

<sup>31</sup>Stiles, *History of the City of Brooklyn*, i.235. Reference to Spooner in presumably the *Long Island Star*. Additional articles in the local papers similarly lament the lack of squares, including 'April showers'. See also: 'Summer excursions'. The positive effect of public open space on health is discussed here: 'Local items'.

<sup>32</sup>See Butt, *Map of the City of Brooklyn*. See also Sherman and Smith Stiles, *Map of the City of Brooklyn, as Laid Out by Commissioners*.

<sup>33</sup>The need for efficient circulation connections was exasperated by the geographic pinching of early Brooklyn by the turn of the East River combined with its critical linkage to Manhattan. It is the critical threshold, especially for the commuter traffic between the cities/boroughs.

<sup>34</sup>These plans do not reflect any conceptual ordering system, either on the order of the 1811 plan for New York, or even a less rigid structure, which was evident in many American city plans developed in the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century.

<sup>35</sup>The site was debated in the *Daily Eagle*, with petitioners suggesting the advantage of locating City Hall at the site of Fort Greene, with its highland situation and its geographical position anticipating the expansion of Brooklyn to the east. See Cross, 'Report of the minority'.

<sup>36</sup>See the 1816 map of the village of Brooklyn for the initial layout of the block and streets: Lott and Poppleton, *Village of Brooklyn*.

<sup>37</sup>The proponents for the alternative site of Fort Greene mention the diminutive scale of this site as part of their argument for moving City Hall to the Fort Greene site. Cross, 'Report on the City Hall'.

<sup>38</sup>Ostrander, *City of Brooklyn*, 84.

<sup>39</sup>In the 1830s the first park was finally added adjacent to the navy yard on a low wetland site unsuitable for townhouses. Otherwise, only the urban nodal points mentioned here, including the one at Fulton Ferry, provide any semblance of urban open space at the time City Hall was in development.

<sup>40</sup>A number of maps and surveys in the 1830s and 1840s show the triangular footprint of City Hall, including the 1836 one previously referenced.

<sup>41</sup>Ostrander, *City of Brooklyn*, 84.

<sup>42</sup>This configuration, while clear in its general shape is not formally resolved geometrically, with angles that force the placement of the building off-centre from both the southern segment but also the northern apex.

<sup>43</sup>Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 582–3.

<sup>44</sup>Bowling Green is the strong example for a dominated square. Also notable is the first site for New York City Hall on Wall Street, the current site of Federal Hall, also provided a space dominated by City Hall. In this case, the space was the subtle widening of Broad Street. This subtle relationship has largely survived and can be appreciated today with Federal Hall on the same site. St Paul's/Hudson Square is another example of a dominated square, with a church on the primary east–west axis.

<sup>45</sup>Contemporary articles in the *Daily Eagle* advocate for the decorative treatment of the space, meaning the introduction of landscape. 'Local intelligence', 2.

<sup>46</sup>Some examples of surveys that record names of urban spaces in Brooklyn and Manhattan but do not clearly indicate a name for the square at Brooklyn's City Hall: Magrane and Harrison, *Topographical Map of New York City*. See also *Phelps' New Map of the City of Brooklyn*.

<sup>47</sup>City Hall Park and City Hall Square are both mentioned, but it seems to vary arbitrarily based on the story narrative or quotation from a city resident/official. Searches in newspaper archives confirm it was referred to as City Hall Square as late as 1942, but also City Hall Park and City Hall plaza, Borough Hall Square, Borough Hall Plaza, Borough Hall Park. There seems to be a lack of an officially designated and accepted name for this space until the development of Cadman Plaza. This name honours Reverend Samuel Parkes Cadman, another Brooklyn preacher like Beecher. For more, see the Parks Department site here: City of New York Department of Parks & Recreation, 'Cadman PlazaPark', <https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/cadman-plaza-park-and-brooklyn-war-memorial/history>. The current name of the space immediately adjacent to the building is Columbus Park, a section of Cadman Plaza divided and given this name in 1971. In another name change to this territory, the historic name of Fulton Street was removed from its remnant street along the west side of the current open space, losing a valuable historic link to the heritage of the site.

<sup>48</sup>For early engravings prior to photography, see Eno Collection images in the NYPL Digital Collections, including Bornet, 'Borough Hall, Brooklyn'. See also Lossing and Barritt, 'Nassau Fire Insurance Company'.

<sup>49</sup>See more at the Brooklyn Public Library: <https://www.bklynlibrary.org/digitalcollections/items/?search=Kings+County+Supreme+Court+House>, *Kings County Supreme Court House*.

<sup>50</sup>The Hall of Records and the Municipal Building.

<sup>51</sup>This photograph captures this unique civic centre: Irving I. Underhill, *Borough Hall, Brooklyn*, 1935, Photograph, Brooklyn Public Library, Brooklyn Collection, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/brooklyncollection/3745653337/>.

<sup>52</sup>Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 1229. The authors note that 250,000 people crossed the bridge every day by 1890, with much of this traffic passing through City Hall Square.

<sup>53</sup>Parsons, *The City of Brooklyn*.

<sup>54</sup>The Henry Ward Beecher Monument was installed in the ornamental lawn in 1891, but only after debate about the suitability of this site. For example, see 'The Statue of Beecher'. The installation of the monument was an important event for the young city and was mentioned in the following decades as a landmark for gatherings and commemorations. Its rededication years later still drew a large crowd: *Dedication Ceremony for the Memorial Statue of Henry Ward Beecher*. Despite its importance, the Beecher Monument's placement in the square was not stable or sacred, with calls to move it starting shortly after its installation. It was eventually moved twice, first to the apex of the triangle in the 1940s, and then later to the far edge of a wide, paved walkway some distance from Borough Hall. This monument was a frequent discussion point in the local paper, including in 1916 when a commentator noted in a headline that the poetic inscription on the back of the pedestal is unreadable as the lawn is not meant for public access and the paved areas are too far away (see 'How Many Persons'). This comment reinforces the lack of stability/clarity of the design treatment of this space evident in so many changes to it.

<sup>55</sup>'Park or city?'

<sup>56</sup>Archive photographs capture many of the civic events staged on the steps of Borough Hall in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

<sup>57</sup>The Brooklyn Public Library archives document this condition over many events in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A search for Armistice Day provides several photographs from the 1930s and 1940s where the awkward staging of the event is evident, *Armistice Day*. Additional events confirm this condition, including *Saluting Volunteer Firemen at 1934 Annual Parade and Procession at 1937 Annual Volunteer Firemen's Parade*.

<sup>58</sup>This view in particular captures the narrowing of the north end of the space and the shifted alignment of the streets and how the urban structure provides spatial closure/terminating views of the fabric to the north. Other views reinforce the sense of enclosure of the space: Hubacher, *Brooklyn Borough Hall*. See also Hubacher, *View from the Steps of Brooklyn Borough Hall*.

<sup>59</sup>The debate for the relocation and routing of the Brooklyn Bridge Depot is one example. See 'Daggett's scheme'.

<sup>60</sup>The images in Figure 10 are three examples of plans for this territory of Brooklyn. All the plans focus on vehicular traffic moving efficiently through/past this territory. On the left, Figure 10 shows: *Map Showing Proposed Extension*. In the middle of Figure 10 is the lower Manhattan/Brooklyn portion of a larger urban study for the whole city: New York City Improvement Commission, *The Report of the New York City Improvement Commission*. On the right: City of New York City Planning Commission, *Study for Brooklyn's Civic Centre and Downtown Improvements*.

<sup>61</sup>This concept for a civic centre was much discussed in the local papers in the early decades of the twentieth century, with the need for a new courthouse and municipal building linked to the improvement of the approach to the Brooklyn Bridge and the idea of developing an impressive arrival in Brooklyn from the bridge. Examples of this discussion include: 'O'Keeffe Gives Out Courthouse Plans,' 5. See also, 'The courthouse and the bridge' and 'Municipal building on the Bridge Plaza?', 2.

<sup>62</sup>Brooklyn follows a national trend in this regard, often linked to the Columbian Exhibition in 1892 in Chicago, with Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett as lead urban designers invited by many cities for the creation of their new civic centre. The concept of the civic centre sees a large open space flanked by impressive governmental and institutional buildings. The discussion can be followed in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, with 1912–13 marking an intense period of this discussion. See note 61 for links to specific articles. This article specifically discusses the City Beautiful movement led by Daniel Burnham and a scheme for Brooklyn following this planning approach: 'Another city beautiful', 4.

<sup>63</sup>This type of large-scale redevelopment project falls under the rubric of 'urban renewal'.

<sup>64</sup>The figure ground diagram showing building footprints contrasted with unbuilt land in Figure 11 provides a clear view of this open space. Most striking is the proportion of unbuilt space; the interventions in the mid-twentieth century resulted in more than 200 acres of land that has no buildings or low-density development, with the majority of this land occupied by landscape, roads or access ramps. Some of this landscaped space is more ornamental than habitable, surrounded by traffic infrastructure.

<sup>65</sup>The discussion in the local newspaper documents the regret of the loss of activity and vitality to the lower portion of Fulton Street leading down to Fulton Landing after the ferry is discontinued, with a pledge to ensure the same does not happen for the rest of Fulton Street. See 'The courthouse and

the bridge', 6. This goal is undermined by the later demolition of the historic mixed-use fabric, the consolidation of blocks and the internalised planning configuration of the commercial buildings adjacent to Cadman Plaza West.

<sup>66</sup>These observations are based on the author's repeated experiences of the space as part of a decade of commuting through it.

<sup>67</sup>Sorrentino, *Brooklyn Dodgers Parade*.

<sup>68</sup>The evolution of this urban open space in Brooklyn is as much a political narrative as it is morphological, but this analysis will need to be explored separately, as it is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>69</sup>There was a shift of ideology in planning that justified changes that prioritised vehicular infrastructure over pedestrian access and use, a planning approach that lost sight of how to support active spaces in the city. The 1944 *Study for the Brooklyn Civic Centre and Downtown Improvement* makes this priority clear: 'a primary consideration was the routing of arterial highways, which should to a large extent determine the general plan of the section. The grouping of public buildings and their relation to highways, rapid transit and open spaces constitute other main features of the plan', Foreword.

<sup>70</sup>This disruption includes the de-mapped portions of Prospect, Sands, High, Concord, Nassau, Myrtle Street and the security restrictions on Johnson Street. Contributing to this quality is the negligible mixed-use fabric along the edges of the space in combination with inactive ground level façades of key buildings. The blank façade of the TD Bank building at Montague and Cadman Plaza West, and the lack of engaging shopfront at the J.P. Morgan building leave the pedestrian pavement largely unused. The empty lot next to J.P. Morgan, converted to an ad hoc landscape space, further erodes the potential for activity along this stretch of the space north of Borough Hall.

<sup>71</sup>This is noted to likely be a self-selected group who had the luxury of this participation.

<sup>72</sup>The current resolution of the bridge approach is along Adams Street, a block east of Borough Hall, without any sight line between them. The approach is also ignoble, a stretch of roadway along service access points to buildings, like the post office, without any particular quality to celebrate the bridge or the moment of arrival in the borough. This result was explicitly endorsed by the 1944 City Planning Commission *Study for the Brooklyn Civic Centre and Downtown Improvement*: 'Former concepts of important bridge approaches have been altered by the volume and nature of swift-moving automobile traffic. The approach to Brooklyn Bridge, like the space around the old Fulton Ferry house, was a place where people gathered and lingered. There is no lingering on the crowded approaches to modern city bridges, and the main volume of bridge traffic will go around the plaza', quoted from the 'Suggested Map Changes' section of the report. Later in this study, a claim is made that instead of the approach, a site line of the eastern tower of the bridge would connect it to Borough Hall, but this view was never likely to be possible without significant demolition of Brooklyn Heights' fabric.

<sup>73</sup>The 1944 study extensively discusses the virtues of civic centres, grouping the buildings, making a clear spatial assembly that is recognisable but also represents the ambitions of the community. But the clear priority for roadways and expressways was achieved, while the continued visioning and completion of a worthy civic centre never happened. Only four civic structures were added to the space: the New York State Supreme Courthouse (1958) by Shreve, Lamb and Harmon; the Brooklyn Public Library branch (1962); the Federal Courthouse by Cesar Pelli (2006) and the New York City Emergency Management building (2006). These buildings do not achieve the architectural definition or provide any sort of spatial dialogue between them, qualities argued for in the 1944 study, but the most potent result was the demolition and undermining of the existing civic place.

<sup>74</sup>The one study that appears to be both sympathetic to the original civic centre and adds to the composition, rather than work against it, is that by Bennett for a new courthouse forming an intentional northern boundary to the forecourt, maintaining the spatial definition but also reinforcing street definition along Fulton and Washington Streets. This proposal would have defined an open space complex with the forecourt and the space of Cadman Plaza, a solution that still seems compelling today as it improves both spaces in regard to definition and sense of place. For a view of this proposal, see Bennett, *View from Brooklyn Bridge*.

<sup>75</sup>Fulton Street was radically transformed from a pedestrian scaled main street of mixed-use fabric with shopfronts to a sterile and broad roadway largely hostile to pedestrian circulation.

<sup>76</sup>Fulton Street to the east was also severed by the heavy traffic corridor of Adams/Boreum Place and the chaotic intersection at this transition, separating the space around Borough Hall from the active pedestrian use of Fulton Mall.

<sup>77</sup>Community heritage is complex and often problematic, but it is important to reflect upon for its potential to help us learn from the past.

<sup>78</sup>A comparison of US Census Bureau data for King's County in 1950 and 1970 shows the white population shrinking by 24 per cent while the non-white population increases by 320 per cent. See the NYC Parks Department history of the statue here: City of New York Department of Parks & Recreation, 'Columbus Park'. The new name is also suspect as it is linked to the relocation of a well-travelled sculpture of Columbus previously forgotten in a storeroom in Central Park.

<sup>79</sup>This rough assessment is made using news footage and image searches on Google and reviewing the most frequent places captured in these sources.

<sup>80</sup>Storyful, 'Thousands march'. See also Patil, 'How a march'.

<sup>81</sup>In the discussion of a suitable site for the Beecher Monument in 1887, one speaker states in the article 'Park or city?': 'as for placing the statue where the people can see it is concerned, it seems to me that most of the people that pass City Hall Square are business men, who go hurrying past with their minds intent on something else than the thoughts which should be inspired by the statue of a great and good man. They have not time to stop and look. Ladies and children avoid City Hall square as much as possible. They pass up and down on either side, but seldom or never cross over it. . . . I believe that even the purpose that has been mentioned of placing this statue in the heart of the city will be defeated by erecting it on City Hall square. The grand centre of the city will at no distant day be transferred . . . further up the line of Fulton Street.'

<sup>82</sup>The evolution of this urban open space in Brooklyn is as much a political narrative as it is morphological, but this analysis will need to be explored separately, as it is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>83</sup>This is especially important in the face of the trend for Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS), where developers are controlling our urban open spaces.

<sup>84</sup>The investigation of Brooklyn reveals the significant priority of making space for cars rather than pedestrians and what this means for an urban territory.

<sup>85</sup>While most of the spaces discussed here are public squares or plazas, a deep analysis of the public and political nature of these spaces is beyond the scope of this article. This aspect of the production of public space must be considered in a more extensive discussion of these spaces. In the interest of providing a detailed case study, an in-depth discussion of the urban history of Manhattan Island and Brooklyn is also beyond the scope of this article.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The author is the guest editor for *Architecture\_MPS's* special issue *Re-imagining the city: urban space in the post-Covid city* this article is published in. All efforts to sufficiently blind the author during the peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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