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Baruch Students Break Out the Ray-Bans



SUZANNE DeCHILLO/*The New York Times*

Baruch College's new plaza used to be a street: East 25th Street between Lexington and Third Avenues, which is flanked by Baruch buildings.

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Columbia University has its verdant quad, New York University has Washington Square, but until recently, Baruch College, the City University of New York's outpost in the Flatiron District, had no outdoor space to call its own.

The college is housed primarily in buildings that flank East 25th Street between Lexington and Third Avenues, where students would dodge traffic — an estimated 20,000 street crossings a day, not all of them legal — to get from class to class.

But in December, the school received permission from the city to permanently close its East 25th Street block to vehicular traffic. Since then, it has been reconfigured into an outdoor plaza, of the sort familiar to travelers in Michael R. Bloomberg's New York.

On Thursday, Baruch turned its annual Spring Fling into a celebration of plazahood.

Students streamed out of buildings, nearly filling the block. Alicia Keys's "This Girl is on Fire" rang out from steel drums, and a Ferris wheel offered riders a different view of the 17-story William and Anita Newman Vertical Campus on the south side of the street.

On an average day, the amenities of the plaza are more quotidian: movable tables and chairs providing a place to study, some planters and boulders to break up the long block. But students said they were very pleased to have even the simplest of spaces to gather outdoors.

"Everyone's a little bit happier," said Chris Catalano, the president of the undergraduate student government. "This time of year, people would love to be outside, but we didn't have that option. People would be crammed in the cafeteria desperately searching for a seat — it kind of gets crowded in there. You'd wind up seeing people just sitting on the sidewalks; anywhere they could find a seat."



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A Ferris wheel at Thursday's Spring Fling gave students a different view of the campus.



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Students filled the former street in celebration on Thursday.

Mitchel B. Wallerstein, the school's president, was delighted to preside over the occasion. "It's been a dream of many of the presidents before me to create an outdoor campus environment," he said. "Fortunately the current mayoral administration has had this plaza program and was very open to the idea."

Baruch has resurfaced the black roadway in beige and plans to raise it to curb height to make the space feel more permanent. The folding tables and chairs look like those in other city pedestrian zones, but are painted Baruch blue-and-gray.

Despite the school branding, Mr. Wallerstein cast the plaza as a winning proposition for the school and its neighbors, some of whom opposed the change.

"This part of Manhattan has the least amount of public space in the city," he said. "This adds to the public space for the whole community."

The plaza is open 24 hours a day; the school plans to hold art fairs, concerts and other events in collaboration with the neighborhood. (Baruch also has three buildings between East 22nd and East 23rd Streets.)

While a game of ultimate Frisbee is not as likely here as it might be on larger, greener campuses, Baruch students said they were happy with what they've got.

"This is a commuter school," said Valery Pinette, a student. "So it's really great to create some kind of community." She added, "We don't have a campus, per se, so this is just what we get. And I think we deserve it."

John Shapiro, chairman of the Pratt Institute's Center for Planning and the Environment, said that outdoor common space was essential to higher education.



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The volleyball net was set up only for Thursday's festival, but the street is now open only to pedestrians round the clock year round.

"To say it boosts morale suggests that it's dessert; I'm suggesting that it's protein," he said by phone. "Students need a place to let it all out. They have erratic schedules. They are at a highly social period of their life. A lot of learning is experiential."

He added: "In the end of the day, we want that direct light, we want that feeling of the passage of the seasons, the changing of time during the day, the people watching."

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