Four Freedoms Park Highlighted on the Next Edition of Treasures of New York, Premiering on October 22 on WLIW21 and October 31 on THIRTEEN

Hosted by author and historian Douglas Brinkley, the film explores the architectural gem honoring the legacy of FDR

At the southern tip of New York City’s Roosevelt Island stands a proud memorial to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt known as Four Freedoms Park. Celebrating its one-year anniversary this month, the park is named after the stirring historic speech the President delivered to Congress on January 6, 1941 before the United States entered World War II.

Known as the Four Freedoms speech, Roosevelt warned that American’s security was at great risk from the Axis powers in Europe and Asia. If war was inevitable, the President said, the world needs to commit itself to four freedoms to prevent another war from ever happening again: freedom of expression, freedom to worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear.

Why the park was conceived, and how numerous obstacles to its construction were overcome, are revealed in the next edition of Treasures of New York: Four Freedoms Park airing Tuesday, October 22, 2013 at 10:30 p.m. on WLIW21 and Thursday, October 31, 2013 at 10:30 p.m. on THIRTEEN; with encore presentations on Sunday, October 27 at 6 p.m. and Tuesday, October 29 at 1:30 a.m. on WLIW21; and Monday, November 4 at 5 a.m., Thursday, November 7 at 5 a.m. and Sunday, November 17 at 2 p.m. on THIRTEEN. After the initial WLIW broadcast, the full episode will be available for online streaming at thirteen.org/treasures-of-ny. The website offers past episodes and conversations with visionaries behind New York’s greatest institutions.
Hosted by author and historian Douglas Brinkley, *Treasures of New York: Four Freedoms Park* explains how former U.N. Ambassador William vanden Heuvel, a longtime admirer of the 32nd U.S. President, was the driving force behind a New York City memorial to FDR. He was present at a ceremony in 1973 when New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller and New York City Mayor John Lindsey renamed the former Welfare Island after FDR and announced plans for a memorial. One of the country’s top architects, Louis Kahn, was chosen to design the project and, as his son, filmmaker Nathaniel Kahn relates, “it was a commission of a lifetime” for his father.

Kahn’s design laid out a set of granite steps leading to a point-shaped lawn with rows of trees on either side. At the tip of the point was envisioned a six-foot tall bronze bust of FDR and, beyond that, a structure Kahn dubbed “The Room.” The stately stone walls and 60 foot-square open plaza would provide spectacular views of the East River, Queens, and Manhattan, including the United Nations. Then in 1974, several setbacks occurred that put the plan on hold: key supporter Nelson Rockefeller became vice president and moved to Washington, D.C.; Louis Kahn died of a heart attack; and the city’s financial crisis sidelined discretionary projects like the FDR memorial.

But Bill vanden Heuvel persisted and was later joined in the effort by Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jr. However, it was the success of Nathaniel Kahn’s documentary about his father titled “My Architect” (2003) that renewed interest in Louis Kahn’s work and spurred Gina Pollara, a young NYC architect, to co-curate a Cooper Union exhibit about the FDR project. Suddenly Pollara and vanden Heuvel learned Alphawood, a Chicago foundation, would contribute $10 million towards Kahn’s design and advertising executive Sally Minard, who was named president, would announce several years later that over 50 million had been raised despite the recession. Construction finally began on March 29, 2010, 38 years after the initial ceremony, and lasted for 30 months.

Among the challenges facing crews during the three phases of construction was laying the foundation at the tip of the island below water level; and shipping the granite columns, often weighing 36 tons, by barge to the island as they were too heavy for the bridge. About 100 trained stone setters individually positioned 70 massive stones in “The Room,” Nick Benson then hand-carved an inscription from the Four Freedoms speech on one of the granite walls, the bronze bust of FDR was mounted, and landscapers planted 120 Littleleaf linden trees in perfectly aligned rows. On October 17, 2012, an array of political and cultural leaders gathered to dedicate the park and open it to the public.

Back in 1970, the editorial board of the *New York Times* wrote that the island was a good fit for an FDR memorial because it “would face the sea he loved, the Atlantic he bridged, the Europe he helped save and the United Nations he inspired.” Bill vanden Heuvel would agree, “I think he would have appreciated its beauty and the fact that the U.N. is the principal object of observation...this is what he believed in, that the nations of the world would come together.”
Treasures of New York: Four Freedoms Park is a production of WLIW21, in association with WNET, the parent company of THIRTEEN and WLIW21, New York's public television stations and operator of NJTV.

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Treasures of New York explores New York's cultural heritage by spotlighting its points of interest, distinguished establishments and notable figures. Treasures of New York: Four Freedoms Park is made possible by the Charina Endowment Fund, the Dyson Foundation, Anne and Vincent Mai and Bernard and Irene Schwartz.

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