
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 22-14

Buchanan School Plaza/Peter Bug Shoe Academy

1320 E Street and Peterbug Matthews Way SE
Square 1042, Lot 0842

Meeting Date: November 17, 2022
Applicant: D.C. Historic Preservation Office
Affected ANC: 6B

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate Buchanan School Plaza/Peter Bug Shoe Academy at 1320 E Street, SE, a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. Buchanan School Plaza is eligible under District of Columbia criteria B (history), D (architecture and urbanism), and F (work of creative masters). The period of significance extends from 1968, when the plaza opened, to 1997, twenty-five years before the present date.

The Peter Bug Shoe Academy, historically known as Buchanan School Plaza, sits on the southwest corner of the same block as the former Buchanan Elementary School in the Capitol Hill neighborhood. It is District owned. The plaza was originally a little over double its current size, having extended to the north at a point nearly equal to the northernmost point of the present-day Buchanan School building. It originally had play equipment, a basketball court, and a building housing bathrooms, a snack bar, and recreation office. The play equipment was removed by the 1980s, leaving a small grassy field that has recently been developed with townhouses. The sunken court, the building, and periphery sculptures and wall features remain intact today.¹



Peter Bug building from E Street SE

¹ The names “Peter Bug” and “Peterbug” have historically been used interchangeably.

Historical Background

Buchanan Plaza, built in 1968, was one of the most significant inner-city projects undertaken in DC by First Lady Claudia “Lady Bird” Johnson as part of her Beautification program. Beautification had the twin goals of enhancing entranceways to cities to make them more appealing at a time when people were leaving urban areas, and improving inner-city neighborhoods with landscaping, playgrounds and clean-up projects. Washington became the pilot city for her national program and Buchanan Plaza became the pilot project for her inner-city playground improvement mission. Her attention was first brought to the site in 1966 while on a “broken windows” tour led by Walter Washington, who was a member of the Beautification Committee and would later become the District’s first Mayor. Another committee member, philanthropist Brooke Astor of New York, provided the majority of the funding for the new plaza.

Astor had funded another playground project in New York City at the Jacob Riis Houses. Riis Plaza was designed in 1966 by architect Simon Breines and landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg, along with sculptures by William Tarr. All three men were hired to work on Buchanan Plaza. Riis Plaza became known as one of the most revolutionary playground designs of the twentieth century. It was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine and won multiple design awards. Friedberg, as the plaza’s landscape architect, gained particular praise that would follow him for decades. He became one of the nation’s most highly esteemed and recognized landscape architects, and received the 2015 ASLA Medal, the highest honor of the American Society of Landscape Architects.

Riis Plaza helped launch Friedberg’s career and served as the template for Buchanan Plaza. Simon Breines said the “facilities were almost identical.”² With Riis Plaza now almost completely lost, the remnants of Buchanan are the best-preserved examples of either plaza. Both Buchanan and Riis Plazas were known as Adventure Style playgrounds. Such playgrounds briefly became popular after World War II as alternatives to traditional playgrounds of standardized, mass-produced, purpose-built equipment. Adventure Style playgrounds featured open-ended features, like concrete pyramids, tunnels, and stepping stones, that could better expand children’s imaginations through their versatility. For example, the sunken basketball court at Buchanan Plaza was intended to be used not just for basketball. As Lady Bird Johnson described it during the plaza’s 1968 opening, “By its very shape and facilities, it can be used for theater, dancing, for music, for water play, for producing your own programs.”³

Ten years later, the plaza had fallen into disrepair as District departments disagreed on who should maintain the site. Capitol Hill resident and community activist John Matthews, known by the nickname “Peter Bug,” saw an opportunity for the abandoned site. His training was in education and his specialty was shoes. He turned the building that previously had the snack bar, restrooms, and recreation office into the Peter Bug Shoe Academy. There, young people were taught a trade and were encouraged to be creative. While the building became their after-school workshop, the sunken court became their proving grounds as the students donned roller blades that they built. In

² Simon Breines, “A Second Opinion on the Lessons of Riis Plaza’s Fate,” *Architecture* 75, no. 4 (April 1986): 88.

³ The White House, “Press Release: Remarks of Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson at the Dedication of the Buchanan School Plaza,” May 7, 1968, Mrs. Johnson—Speeches, Reference File, LBJ Presidential Library.

2011 the *Hill Rag* called Peter Bug “practically a Capitol Hill legend.”⁴ Councilmember Charles Allen has called Peter Bug “an institution and a bedrock of...our community.”⁵

Evaluation

The Buchanan Plaza/Peter Bug Shoe Academy meets DC Designation Criteria B (History), D (Architecture and Urbanism) and F (Creative Masters) for its original 1968 development and use as Buchanan Plaza. Under DC Designation Criterion B, it is significant as the most ambitious, most realized, and most tangible remnant of Lady Bird Johnson’s inner-city Beautification program in DC. Under Criterion D, the property provides a prime example of the “Adventure Style” playground—an innovative approach to playground design that rejected the prescribed set of equipment and introduced more creative elements that encouraged freer and more creative play. Under Criterion E, the property is significant for its association with noted landscape architect Paul Friedberg, a leader in the playground revolution movement.

The property is also significant under Criterion B for its association with the Peter Bug Shoe Academy beginning in the late 1970s. The Academy’s historical mission and activities complemented and expanded upon the original purpose of Lady Bird’s Beautification program, Adventure Style playgrounds, and the ideology of Friedberg.

Architecturally, the sunken basketball court at Buchanan Plaza remains one of the oldest examples of its kind in the nation. The work of a master—Paul Friedberg—the sunken court forms a connection to his earlier examples now lost (like Riis Plaza and the P.S. 166 Playground in New York City) and to later examples that helped define the form of these modern urban spaces (like Peavey Plaza in Minneapolis and Pershing Park in Washington). Buchanan Plaza’s sunken court serves essentially as the “missing link” in Friedberg’s design history. Buchanan combines the experimental idea of Friedberg’s earlier works with new innovations and forms, like water features and planter/seating boxes, that eventually evolved into his most inspiring and notable projects.

The sunken court is also important not only for its form but its function. In accordance with his design philosophies as seen at places like Riis and Peavey, Friedberg sought to create versatile public spaces, especially in dynamic urban settings. The sunken court at Buchanan was designed not only for basketball. Sprinklers implanted in the steps turned it into a splash pool during summer and an ice-skating rink during the winter. The steps also doubled as seating, not only for watching games but also for watching performances. It was an amphitheater.

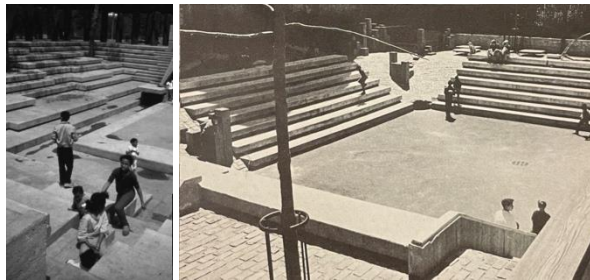
Usage as an outdoor theater was for the benefit of the community, but Friedberg specifically identified teenagers as among the greatest beneficiaries of the space. Compared to the traditional playgrounds of previous decades, what made Buchanan most unique in DC was its division of play by age group. Friedberg did this on purpose as he attempted to design a public space that all city residents could enjoy. There was the play equipment for the youngest kids, shaded benches along the roadways for adults and seniors, and the sunken court and amphitheater for teens. A dedicated area for teenagers, often a marginalized group for recreation planning, was the most unique feature of the site. The sunken nature of the court meant it required no fences, as Friedberg intended, which created a welcoming place.

⁴ Celeste McCall, “HillBuzz,” *Hill Rag* (January 2011): 24.

⁵ Charles Allen as quoted in Elizabeth O’Gorek, “Heart Attack Fails to Stop Peterbug: Noted Community Activist and Cobbler Thanks Rescuers After Spring Heart Attack,” *Hill Rag*, December 5, 2019, hillrag.com.

Unleashing the creativity and imagination of teens and children was a fundamental tenant of Adventure Style playgrounds and Friedberg’s ideology. Though lack of maintenance prevented Buchanan Plaza from reaching its full potential, the site had a renewal of purpose in 1977 when John “Peter Bug” Matthews began using it as a shoe academy and community center. Peter Bug Shoe Academy has operated out of the Buchanan Plaza building for well over forty years. At Peter Bug, children and teens use tools and materials to learn a trade and learn teamwork. They assist members of the Capitol Hill community. The Peter Bug Academy has also hosted performances, included local bands, upon a temporary stage installed in the sunken court. Peter Bug has also brought members of the community together during an annual Peter Bug Day Festival, which in recent years has coincided with the Juneteenth holiday.

Paul Friedberg’s Sunken Plazas



Riis Plaza (1966)⁶

P.S. 166 (1967)⁷



Buchanan Plaza (1968)



Peavey Plaza (1975)⁸

Pershing Park (1981)⁹

Peter Bug has helped endure a continuity of public service at Buchanan Plaza. That legacy began when the site was chosen for rehabilitation by Lady Bird Johnson’s Beautification program in 1966. Most of the other projects from that program were smaller in scope, such as small parks like Hobart Twins in Columbia Heights or the planting of flowers along major roadways and in traffic islands. Lady Bird Johnson Park on Columbia Island in the Potomac River is a rare example of a large-scale project remaining from the program, along with Buchanan Plaza.

⁶ Photo from: Marisa Angell Brown, “Radical Urbanism in the Divided City: On M. Paul Friedberg’s Riis Park Plaza (1966),” in Mahdi Sabbagh and Meghan McAllister, *Perspecta 50* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 307.

⁷ Photo from: Gabriela Burkhalter and Kunsthalle Zürich, *The Playground Project* (Zürich: JRP/Ringier, 2016), 107.

⁸ Photo from: The Cultural Landscape Foundation, “Peavey Plaza,” <https://www.tclf.org/landscapes/peavey-plaza>.

⁹ Photo from: Pershing Park Determination of Eligibility Form.

Columbia Island, though, exemplifies only one half of Lady Bird’s Beautification program, which was the goal of planting flowering plants at major tourist areas and high-traffic roadways. The second major tenant of Beautification, of which Buchanan Plaza is now the largest and best preserved example, was the social mission of improving inner-city neighborhoods. Lady Bird sought to show inner-city residents that their neighborhoods were not unnoticed and had value. A goal of Buchanan Plaza’s design was to instill community pride. Through festivals and events, Peter Bug has continued that goal.

Beautification also wanted to mark the space as being unique, like its surrounding neighborhood. Friedberg’s design accomplished that, while William Tarr’s *Numbers* sculptures served as the transition point from neighborhood to recreation area, from daily life to fun. The sculptures’ sense of whimsy sets the tone for users of the space and encourages them to let their imaginations free. The sculptures form unique welcoming roles that are not found at other playgrounds in DC.



Two of the three William Tarr *Numbers* sculptures that edge the plaza. John “Peter Bug” Matthews is standing next to the sculpture at right.

Integrity

Buchanan School Plaza is a remnant of what was built in 1968, however the site retains its most historically and architecturally significant features. The plaza, which originally occupied one acre of space, now occupies one-fourth of an acre. The upper playground with its Adventure Style playground equipment is no longer intact and is now occupied by townhouses, though the sunken court, the recreational pavilion, and the sculptures survive. Although not fully intact, the remaining plaza retains key elements of the space envisioned by the designers to encourage creativity and non-linear thinking. Peter Bug Academy continues and expands upon that vision. The sunken court retains its sense as a distinct space separated by grade from its surroundings. A new retaining wall to the north abuts the housing development and retains the court’s sunken nature.

William Tarr’s three whimsical sculptures, though moved, retain their original form and function on the periphery of the site, welcoming visitors and immediately demonstrating that Buchanan Plaza and the Peter Bug Shoe Academy are not like other places. The building, though slightly modified by having its passageways enclosed, still remains well preserved in its general form and details, including the notable waffle roof and protruding brick patterns. It demonstrates a distinct 1960s aesthetic, connecting it to the period when Adventure Style playgrounds were in fashion and Beautification was in favor.

The building, intended to be a space of learning, also provided a snack bar where teens could earn money. In the same space, Peter Bug teaches teens a trade for the same reason. The building also originally contained a recreation office for the park's caretaker, a position which Peter Bug himself has essentially absorbed. Most Capitol Hill residents know of the site only through its use by Peter Bug. They go there for community festivals, performances, and education. Lady Bird Johnson, Beautification, Walter Washington, Paul Friedberg, and others helped plant the seed, but it was the Peter Bug Shoe Academy that nurtured what eventually grew at the site.

Boundary

The boundary includes only the remaining portion of the plaza. It does not include the entire original site of the plaza, much of which has been redeveloped into housing. The landmark's boundary is limited only to what is currently publicly owned, which is the entirety of Lot 0826 in Square 1042.

Period of Significance

The nomination proposes a period of significance starting in 1968 with the plaza's opening to 1978, when the park was abandoned by the city. Although the nomination highlights and recognizes the important role of the Peter Bug Shoe Academy, it did not include it in the period of significance since the property would be well under the fifty-year minimum requirement for listing in the National Register.

HPO believes it important, however, to more fully recognize the social and community importance of the Peter Bug Shoe Academy. It thus recommends a period of significance of 1968 to 1997, a period 25 years from the present which is the minimum requirement for listing as a DC Landmark.

Recommendation

HPO recommends that the Board designate Buchanan Plaza/Peter Bug Shoe Academy with a period of significance 1968-1997 as a DC Landmark. HPO does not recommend forwarding the nomination to the National Register at this time as it would be difficult to make a case for the property under Criteria Consideration A for properties less than 50 years old. Should the Board choose to have the nomination forwarded to the National Register, HPO recommends limiting the period of significance to 1968, the year of construction.