

# **Allegheny Public Square Park History**

## **Compiled by the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh**

### **CURRENT SURROUNDINGS**

- Children's Museum: New building circa 2004; Old Allegheny Post Office (Italianate c.1898) and the Buhl building (Art Moderne c.1939)
- Office building – along south property line (c.1960's/70's)
- Allegheny Center – brick residential buildings (c.1960's)
- Carnegie Library, Allegheny Branch (c.1890 – Richardsonian Style)
- Build connections across Allegheny Square to the Commons

### **Site History**

**Allegheny Public Square** (as it is now listed in the City Park register) sits within Allegheny Center in front of the Children's Museum on Pittsburgh's North Side. Allegheny Center, and the current configuration of Allegheny Public Square, is the result of urban renewal efforts of the 1960's. The renewal efforts included the demolition of over 500 buildings and the reconfiguration of the city grid and traffic patterns, including the transformation of Ohio and Federal Streets from vehicle to pedestrian right-of-ways. The result is a pedestrian oriented campus of mixed use development.

Allegheny Public Square is located at what was once the southwest corner of a unique and historic "four block" city center formerly known as the Diamond. The Diamond was at the center of a 36 square grid of the City of Allegheny. The 36 square grid was in turn surrounded by the Commons, which is now a city park. Residential neighborhoods surrounded the Commons, and the hills to the north and river to the east / south / west demarcated natural boundaries.

The four blocks of the Diamond were designated as public land in the original 36 square grid plan as laid out by John Redick. Public uses of the four blocks evolved over time and included the Allegheny City Hall on the northwest block, the Carnegie Library and Carnegie Hall (c. 1888) on the northeast block, a market house on the southeast block and Allegheny Diamond Park on the southwest block. Allegheny Diamond Park was laid out in a traditional manner with crossing paths, plantings and an elaborate cast-iron fountain at the center. The park served as a public 'town square' in the center of Allegheny City. The park became known as Ober Park when brewery owner John Ober paid for its landscaping.

Following the annexation of Allegheny City by Pittsburgh in 1907, and subsequent demolition of the City Hall building, Ober Park was redesigned in the 1930's (by Ingham and Boyd) as a formal forecourt to the new Buhl Planetarium (which sits on the site of the former City Hall building). It should be noted that the uses of the four blocks remained "public" up until the 1960's.

After World War II, urban renewal dramatically changed the configuration of the 36 square grid and the Diamond was erased. The public market house was replaced with a private residential tower. An office building (Allegheny One) was built along the southern edge of the park physically intruding on the original right of way thus altering the public space considerably. Traffic patterns were significantly changed as was the design and name of the plaza itself. In its current configuration (Allegheny Public Square c. 1967 by William Breger) no traces of the historic landscaping efforts remain.

## ANAYLSIS OF HISTORIC DESIGNS

### 1) Allegheny Diamond – c.1800’s

- Flat topography
- “Town Square” layout: the “X” path system (dominant geometry)
- Ornate cast iron fountain at center of Park
- Shade trees (elms) around central circle
- Seating eventually is installed around the central circle
- Street trees at perimeter – sidewalk to street
- Flower beds to reinforce center
- Plaques, signs along edges, convey information – “Town Square”
- Strolling space, Public square
- Simple curbs define patterns

### 2) Ober Park – redesigned when Buhl Planetarium was built in 1939 (Ingham and Boyd)

- Flat topography
- Oriented to Buhl Building – Park design by same Architects (Ingham and Boyd)
- A “formal forecourt” to the Buhl
- Stone patterns at walkways
- Flowering trees / hedgerows define circulation
- Fountain moved off center point but still the “central’ feature
- Fences / walls / hedge rows define circulation and presumably to keep people off the grass
- Strolling
- Fence around perimeter

### 3) Allegheny Public Square – redesigned in the 1960’s (William Breger)

- A concrete-paved square, minimally studded with trees and dominated by a simple sunken fountain, located at the bottom of three stepped concentric concrete rings – these rings, in turn, are enclosed by three concrete steps in a square plan.
- Changes in levels and rectangular geometry are the dominant features
- Sunken, hard surface plaza
- Fountain at center – tall jet with lower fountains cascading towards the center (not working)
- Concrete and brick – no lawn
- Almost no attention to vegetation and shade trees
- Trees / shrubs in large pots and planting beds with flowers have been added over time as attempts to ‘soften’ the hard scape

TIMELINE	1800’s	1930’s	1960’s	2007
<b>Southwest Block of the Diamond</b>	Allegheny Diamond	Ober Park	Allegheny Public Square	Allegheny Public Square
<b>Northwest Block of the Diamond</b>	Allegheny City Hall	Buhl Planetarium	Buhl Planetarium	Children’s Museum
<b>Northeast Block of the Diamond</b>	Library/Theater	Library/Theater	Library/Theater	Library/Theater
<b>Southeast Block of the Diamond</b>	Market House	Market House	Residential Building	Residential Building