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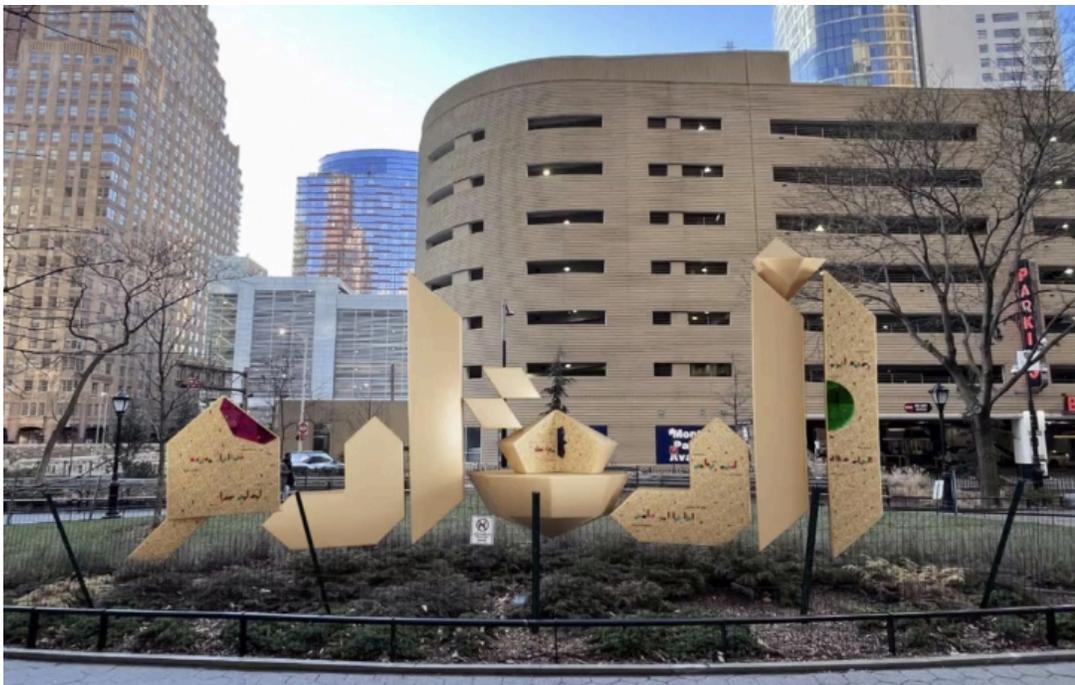
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Abstract Art Honoring Literary 'Little Syria' Gets Go-Ahead for Local Park



Sara Ouhaddou's installation design for Elizabeth H. Berger Plaza includes this large piece comprised of sculptural forms of invented letters. The unreadable characters are meant to represent the words "Al Qualm," Arabic for The Pen. Rendering: NYC Parks Department

By **CARL GLASSMAN**

Posted Aug. 30, 2023

A permanent art installation that honors the literary heritage of [Little Syria](#), the long-vanished Syrian and Lebanese community of Lower Manhattan, got the city's go-ahead this month, a dozen years after one persistent activist began pushing for a memorial to a group of Arab-American writers. It will be the city's first park monument that honors a historic community, a Parks Department official said.

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French-Moroccan artist Sara Ouhaddou’s multi-piece installation, “Al Qualm: Poets in the Park,” will be set in Elizabeth H. Berger Plaza, the recently completed park at the triangular intersection of Trinity Place, Edgar Street and Greenwich Street. The plaza is close to where, between the 1880s and 1940s, the Arab-American community flourished along Washington Street, from Battery Place to Liberty Street.

The Public Design Commission approved the project on Aug. 14.



Renderings of the two seat-backs to be installed in the park. Each will be inscribed with the artist’s unreadable abstract representations of verses from Little Syria’s notable writers. Credit: NYC Dept. of Parks & Recreation

For the three works, Ouhaddou invented an abstract, unreadable alphabet that corresponds to Arabic letters. “Calligraphy that is not read, but felt,” is how she describes it. Along the seat-backs of two long park benches, the multi-colored letters will form abstract representations of verses from notable writers of the vanished community, set against a gold background. A gold-colored, nearly 19-foot-long sculpture of her made-up characters, as tall as 7 feet, is meant to represent the word Al Qualm, Arabic for The Pen. Parkgoers wanting to understand the work will find translations of Ouhaddou’s calligraphy, as well as a history of the area, on a sign in the park. An app will offer further information.

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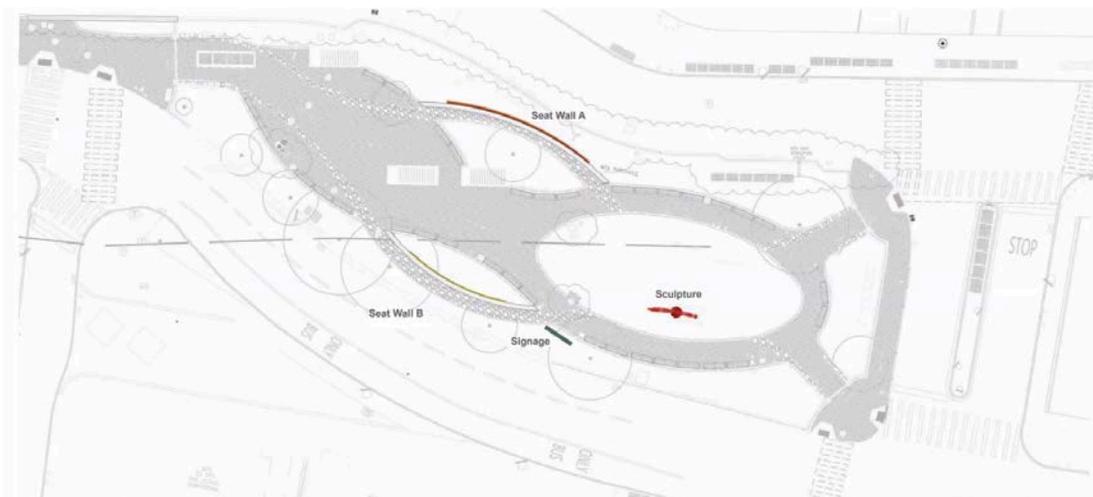
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Elizabeth Berger Plaza and a scheme showing where the three artworks and signage will be located. Credit: NYC Dept. of Parks & Recreation

The work honors a small literary society of influential Arab-American writers called [al-Rabitah al-Qalamiyah](#) (The Pen Bond), begun in 1916, reformed in 1920 and lasting until 1931. Among them was Kahlil Gibran, author of “The Prophet.”

The \$900,000 installation is privately funded by the [Washington Street Historical Society](#) whose president, Linda Jacobs, has written two books on the Syrian diaspora and whose grandparents lived in the community. “There are statues of Christopher Columbus everywhere, places he never walked,” Jacobs told Community Board 1 in July, when the board was weighing its advisory approval of the project. “This is two blocks from Washington Street and [the community] really was right there. The geographic connection is really important.”

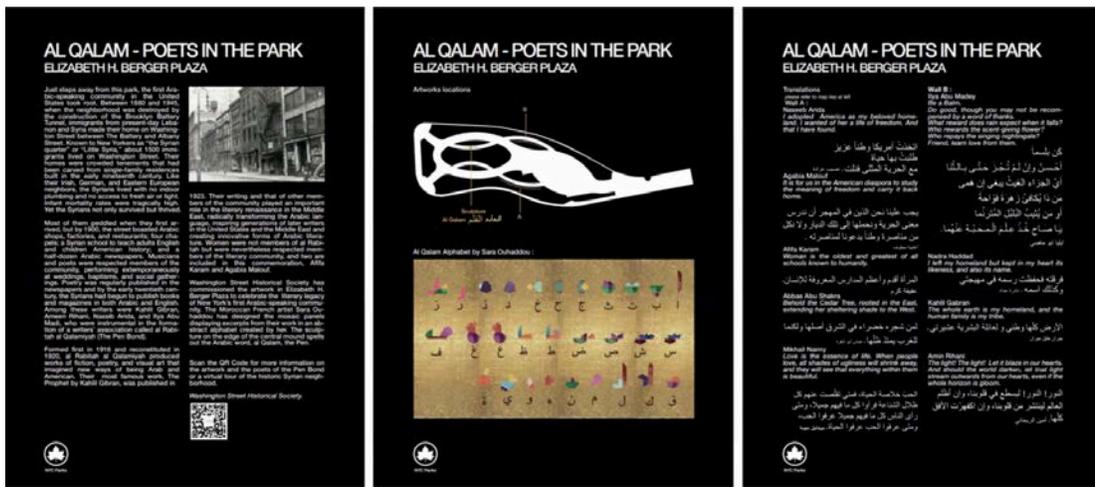
That community “hasn’t gotten its due,” said Jennifer Lantzas, public art coordinator for the Parks Department. “This is a really important step in the city acknowledging this element of New York City’s population, and its history.”



Details of the sculpture (top), and the mosaics that will be displayed on the bench seat backs (above). The names of the writers, in Arabic and English, as well the artist's invented calligraphy, will be written on the piece. Credit: NYC Dept. of Parks & Recreation

Community Board 1's Waterfront, Parks and Cultural Committee acknowledged the need to recognize the neighborhood's history, but was less than enthusiastic about the project when the proposal first came before it for [advisory approval](#) in March. Saying that it overwhelmed the relatively small park, the committee asked the Parks Department and Jacobs to come back with a scaled-down version of the installation. They returned in July after scrapping four proposed 11-foot-long mosaic panels inscribed with the artist's made-up letters. The proposal squeaked by the committee, 6-4, and won the overwhelming consent of the full board. But the board's resolution implored the Public Design Commission and Parks Department to try to "mitigate the impact" of the pieces and "be careful in approving permanent large-scale artwork to take over major portions of parks such as in this case."

During the March committee meeting, Todd Fine, a local activist who launched the quest to honor the neighborhood's literary past, expressed reservations about Ouhaddou's use of invented calligraphy.



Signage will give a background about Little Syria and its writers group, and provide a key to the artist's invented calligraphy. Excerpts from the writers' works, in Arabic and English, also will be shown. Credit: NYC Dept. of Parks & Recreation

“There’s going to be a question about whether New York City is truly embracing Arabic and Arabic language by not using traditional Arabic calligraphy, by not choosing something that Arabic speakers could even read,” he said. But at the July CBI meeting, he lent his support for the project. (Fine did not respond to an email request for comment.)

Fine is a scholar of the Lebanese-American poet Ameen Rihani and founder but no longer a member of the Washington Street Historical Society. In 2011 he began trying to convince city officials to erect a monument to Little Syria’s literary figures and joined others in an effort to preserve the old neighborhood’s [three surviving buildings](#). (The neighborhood was largely demolished in the 1940s to make way for the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel.) The monument push got a toehold in the park in 2013 when the Washington Street Historical Society raised funds to repair six Superstorm Sandy-damaged benches in the plaza. The group placed plaques on the benches, each with a quote that honors Arab-American culture.

In 2017, Ouhaddou’s concept won an [artist competition](#) for a monument design to memorialize the Little Syria writers in the then yet-to-be constructed park. It is expected to be completed sometime next year.

Comments? Write to carlg@tribecatrib.com.

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