

# Celebrating the Four Freedoms

An Interview with Ambassador William J. vanden Heuvel,  
Chairman, Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Park



**EDITORS' NOTE** Bill vanden Heuvel served as Deputy U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations from 1979 until 1981 and as U.S. Permanent Representative to the European Office of the UN from 1977 to 1979. He is Senior Advisor to Allen & Company. Ambassador vanden Heuvel is a graduate of the Cornell University Law School where he was Editor-in-Chief of the Cornell Law Review, and later served as Executive Assistant to General William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan, Special Counsel to Governor Averell Harriman, and Assistant to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and Chair Emeritus and Founder of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute. He has received honorary doctoral degrees from Hofstra University, Roosevelt University, and Hunter College. In May 2002, the Special Exhibits Gallery of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum in Hyde Park, New York, was renamed in honor of Ambassador vanden Heuvel who also received the Four Freedoms medal on that occasion. In October 2003, he received the Theodore Roosevelt Distinguished Service Medal.



H.E. William J. vanden Heuvel

**PROPERTY BRIEF** Designed by architect Louis I. Kahn, the Four Freedoms Park ([www.fdrfourfreedomspark.org](http://www.fdrfourfreedomspark.org)), is presently under construction on the southern tip of Roosevelt Island, New York City and will be completed in the fall of 2012.

## How did the Four Freedoms Park project originate and where does it stand today?

President Franklin Roosevelt gave the State of the Union Speech on January 6, 1941, which the world knows as the Four Freedoms Speech. We were not yet in the war, but Roosevelt knew our involvement was a likelihood. He addressed himself to Americans and the world to say that the only way to justify the terrible cost of lives and resources of World War II is to create a different world centered around the four freedoms, which are the core concepts of American democracy: freedom of speech and expression; freedom of worship; freedom from want; and freedom from fear.

After the President's death, those who were close to him organized the Four Freedoms Foundation to carry that message forward. New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller proposed that a special memorial be built to the President and that it be named Four

Freedoms Park. He dedicated the five southernmost acres of Roosevelt Island to that cause. New York Mayor Lindsay and Governor Rockefeller invited the private sector to participate as an equal partner in raising the funds to build it.

Louis Kahn was chosen as its architect. In 1973, Governor Rockefeller, Mayor Lindsay, and 500 distinguished guests dedicated this land to the Four Freedoms Park.

Then Rockefeller became Vice President and went to Washington, Louis Kahn finished the drawings and died unexpectedly in 1974, and New York City was approaching bankruptcy.

The project lay fallow. In 2005, I became Chair Emeritus of the Roosevelt Institute and decided to see if this park could be built. A video called *My Architect* by Nathaniel Kahn was produced and received significant national attention, leading several people to ask what they could do to help build it. I went before the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation, which then designated the Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Park, LLC as the developer of the Memorial.

Citizens began to come forward offering important gifts of funds. By this time, the estimated cost of the project and the construction of the Kahn design was at \$50 million. There were real doubts that the necessary funds could be raised. We overcame those doubts. We have raised more than 90 percent of the budget, two-thirds from the private sector.

The state and city have played significant roles. Former New York Governor David Patterson, himself disabled by blindness, identified with Franklin Roosevelt and became a major advocate. Through his leadership, the state of New York appropriated \$6 million. Mayor Bloomberg made this part of his Waterfront chain of parks, and the city council and the Mayor worked to give \$11 million to this project.

A *New York Times* article on a Louis Kahn exhibit at Cooper Union in 2005 received public attention and brought a phone call from a Chicago foundation, Alphawood. After detailed discussions regarding our plans, Alphawood gave us funds to hire an executive director and to open an office. In January 2010, the founder of the Alphawood Foundation, Fred Eychaner, extremely pleased with the progress we were making, pledged \$10 million, giving us financial credibility and the confidence that the Four Freedoms Park would be built.

We began construction in March of 2010. We will finish in September 2012. It will then be maintained as a state park.

Roosevelt Island residents have insisted upon a commemoration of President Roosevelt in a wheelchair. FDR, stricken by polio at the age of 39 and denied the ability to walk or stand alone ever again, was nevertheless elected President of the United States. He is the icon of the disability community. We quickly agreed to their proposal.

Along the way, the National Endowment for the Humanities suggested that this world-class monument could be a pioneering experiment in the teaching of American history. We are developing an audiovisual presentation of the Roosevelt era in 125 different chapters that will be available to the visitors to the park and the universal audience of the Internet through the use of modern technology.

Those who visit the construction site mention the spiritual dimension of Kahn's work. Everybody who has been involved in it finds it a work of inspired fulfillment. It is more than a gift to New York City; it is an enduring gift to the nation. The park is 200 yards from the United Nations, which Roosevelt founded, and it looks out across the seas to the nations of the world that he helped save.

Cornell University was recently selected to build a major graduate science institute just seven acres from the Four Freedoms Park. We will work closely with Cornell, hopefully to build a dock, which will give ferry boats or water taxis a place to stop. This will integrate Roosevelt Island much more closely into the city than it has been. And our park will remind a lot of people what the Four Freedoms mean as we look to solve the problems of the world.

## Do you hope to step back and be less engaged at some point?

I will stay as involved as necessary. I have had the great privilege to serve our country in public responsibilities, thanking America for the wonderful opportunities that were given to me and my family.

Many children will come to the park and be able to reach back into the Roosevelt era and understand that every generation has a special challenge, and that this country is the last best hope of mankind, as our Founding Fathers believed. If they can understand that and be inspired by the challenge of democracy, the Four Freedoms and America will endure. ●

*The Four Freedoms Park site at the southern end of Roosevelt Island overlooking the east side of Manhattan*