

STATEMENT BY CAROL GREITZER ON UNION SQUARE PARK
AT ART COMMISSION HEARING, Monday, May 15, 2006

Union Square Park was named a national historic landmark in 1997 by virtue of having been the site of the first Labor Day parade and because of the ongoing free speech activities in the north plaza. Central to all this is the Palladian pavilion which served as the platform for many of these events – and also has been a sheltered recreation area for parents and children. These traditional and historic uses have been compromised in recent years by the neglect of the Parks Dept., which allowed the building to deteriorate to the point where it is now used as a comfort station and storage area.

The plans before you today are being proposed to accommodate a private restaurant - changes we believe would be an alienation of public park land that should not be countenanced by any government body. This small, heavily-used 3-1/2 acre park lies at the juncture of several communities - Chelsea,, Gramercy Park, Greenwich Village, Flatiron district – and is surrounded by restaurants – eighteen eating places right on the square and over 100 more within a few blocks. We have identified numerous educational, cultural and recreational uses for the Pavilion. As a matter of policy, the City has no business taking this facility away from the public.

The design changes are incompatible with this Palladian structure and are proposed for the benefit of restaurant occupancy. Especially inappropriate are the cantilevered balconies on the south side, put there, in the words of a Parks official, to provide more seating space for restaurant customers. Further, in order to maximize commercial space within the pavilion, the plan calls for a free-standing comfort station – a structure that will damage the existing symmetry in the north plaza. This “outhouse” – a further encroachment of park land - will require moving a wall in the northeast corner and may jeopardize space used by the farmers market. If there were no restaurant, the pavilion could house Parks Department needs, restrooms, and provide space for the public.

This entire procedure has meant that the community’s desire to finally get a remodeled, enlarged playground has essentially been put on hold. And instead of including parents, kids and child experts in the planning process, the designers have shown us a bunch of pictures of what they describe as state of the art equipment. There has been no consultation and a lack of transparency.

I strongly urge the Commission to reject this plan.