



# Union Square Community Coalition

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY ART COMMISSION

15 MAY 2006

UNION SQUARE: NORTH END

Union Square Community Coalition

The plans and elevations for the proposed playground and restaurant at the north end of Union Square Park presented at Community Board Five's Parks Committee were not available in a form for distribution and review by community representatives. The following comments are therefore based on memory and notes made at that meeting. At a special meeting on April 19 the board of directors of the Union Square Community Coalition reached the following conclusions, which were unanimous or nearly so in all cases.

## 1. The Playground

The proposal is to excavate and lower the two existing playgrounds to create a new unified playground that would be entered from the elevated park to the south. We believe it makes more sense to keep the playground flush with the park to the south for greater accessibility, especially for the disabled and caretakers with strollers; moreover, this will better integrate it with the landscape to the south and the pavilion to the north which will provide direct access to public toilets and extend the recreation experience within the shelter of its arched vault and colonnaded pergola. Providing a 3-foot depth of soil will permit a greener playground, eliminate space-consuming ramps and steps and provide more play surface. Drainage will be improved and we will not be left with freestanding ashlar walls, which were not designed to be exposed on their uphill sides. There will be a greater opportunity to extend the landscape and make the playground truly integrated with the green fabric of the park.

## 2. The Exterior Restrooms

The Parks Department made clear that two renovated restrooms in the pavilion will remain open to the public. These will be easily accessible to the playground to the south, especially if the latter is maintained at the level of the park. Everything will then be at the same level and

there will be no need to build additional restrooms as proposed at the northeast corner of the park where they would unbalance the symmetry so carefully obtained by extending this corner to the east to match the one on the west. This proposed building with three separate entrances would be faced with a raised glass and metal screen wall having no design reference to any other elements in the park, neither the news kiosks, subway shelters or the pavilion itself. The excavation of the entire playground and loss of all trees just to hide partially the restrooms is both very expensive and wasteful of space for play and landscaping. With it we lose the opportunity to flank the Palladian pavilion with areas of green planting to make a statement that this is a classical building in a park setting.

If additional toilet facilities are needed they might be provided more conveniently and attractively and at less cost by stand-alone units under the recently initiated street-furniture program. These of course would need Art Commission approval and be free of advertising panels.

### **3. The Pavilion**

The pavilion is the mediating structure between the public place to the north and the park to the south. It provides both a visual gateway and a transition to the level of the park. These functions are lost in the proposed design. We are left with a more opaque wall and less transparency. Folding gates would close the formal arched opening. The south-facing steps have lost any function under this plan. We are opposed to the balconies protruding between the columns designed to create additional restaurant seating.

By contrast the 19th century ladies' pavilion provided ample access to the park with generous pathways from the north (photo). Even the 1930 design currently provides restrained access. Now the wall will be complete. The 1987 unrealized design by the Parks Department proposed the pavilion as a major entrance to the park. The proposed depressed playground appears to act as a moat separating the pavilion from the park, though it does set off the building and enlarges its scale. Raising the ground in front of it would deprive the cellar of sunlight and would require rethinking its relationship to the ground where it would develop a far more intimate and functional relationship to its surroundings and more effectively tie the park to the public space to the north.

#### **4. The Cellar Extension**

In order to accommodate the needs of the proposed restaurant for an outdoor-equipment and waste-storage facility and indoor kitchen, an extremely costly underground extension to the east is required. It would remove an opportunity to flank the pavilion with landscaping and eliminate potential playground space. Even the small and popular seasonal café at Madison Square provides an unattractive view there. (photo).

#### **5. The Bigger Picture: Union Square as a Public Place**

When the New York State Legislature created Union Square in 1832 as a "public place" it did so from building line to building line. The City Charter empowers the Department of Parks and Recreation "to authorize and regulate the use of and projections on and determine the line or curb and surface construction of all streets and avenues lying within any park, square or public place". The Parks Department has already begun this process along the north side of 14th Street and along the south end of Union Square West where the road bed was narrowed by one lane and granite Belgian blocks were installed.

Already there is an improvement in pedestrian access to this extremely busy square at this corner and it is a more beautiful place with a handsome granite fountain and planter designed by the department's own talented staff. What about the rest? We have not yet seen a design for the balance of the public place where there is now a metered parking lot and a yet-to-be-delineated proposed expansion of the plaza to the north. We support this visionary initiative. We are baffled by the proposal before you, which does not embrace this vision, but instead maintains the current hazardous traffic barriers and covers the plaza with strange random cigar shapes, and does nothing to alleviate the square from a horrendous traffic barrier. The design of a successful urban space must insure an experience where it is possible to enjoy it on foot. We have not been shown materials, patterns, curb heights, street lamps, seating, fountains, sculpture and other street furniture. Union Square should be one of the great public spaces of the world comparing with the Piazza Navona in Rome, the Campo in Sienna, or even closer to home, Trinity Square in Boston (photo). None of these, by the way, are

dotted with trees. Union Square has a unique role in the city's history as the only public space designated for public gatherings. It should serve as a window at the foot of Ladies' Mile where the major green statement should be confined to the park itself and where the great crowds and parades enjoy an unobstructed view of and access to speakers and mass events. The perimeter of the square would then become the locus of commercial activity, lined with trees, outdoor cafes, restaurants and commercial displays, leaving the park as a green oasis free of commerce where the demand for a quiet landscaped retreat is far greater than this small park can easily sustain (illustration). Finally, it is the historic architecture of the square including seven designated landmarks, which defines the walls of the square and frames the sky and sun. These are the values and visual forces of which we want you to be conscious in your deliberations.

Thank you,