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May 9, 2006

To: Commissioners of the City of New York's Art Commission and  
its Executive Director

TESTIMONY FOR A PRELIMINARY HEARING  
ON THE UNION SQUARE PARK PLAN, MAY 15, 2006

During the Great Depression, parks and their pavilions were designed as public amenities to enhance the quality of life for City residents. At that time, the Parks Department's architect designed a replacement for the site's original structure. The resulting plan was designed to give a beleaguered public a simple yet beautiful pavilion with an emblematic design for free and open access to and from the park and adjacent square through the pavilion. As such, the pavilion's design combines a tribute to the balance and symmetry of Palladian architecture that is simple enough to serve a multiplicity of public uses. The pavilion stands elegantly perched above the park and square as an invitation for all to admire and to utilize as a backdrop for demonstrations, concerts, performances, children's non-playground activities, community events and for shelter from sun and rain.

The pavilion is part of the rich labor and social history that helped earn the park the designation of a National Historic Landmark in 1997. The current proposal would dishonor that history and make unaesthetic and undesirable structural changes not essential for the general public's use at the north end of the park.

After decades of neglect, the Parks Department cites the pavilion's deterioration itself as the excuse for changing the building's public purpose to accommodate, instead, a seasonal restaurant for private benefit during the seasons of heaviest public use of and need for park space. The proposed design with its ill-conceived add-ons, fails on at least two counts to satisfactorily address the aesthetic form and functional use of the pavilion.

The first problem is evident regarding the placement of public bathrooms. The latest proposal would locate them along the Park Avenue South side of the park. The new stand-alone structure, like a public outhouse, is completely unsympathetic to the symmetry of the pavilion. The best place for them remains the original design's central location where the plumbing is already in place inside of the pavilion--especially when one considers the extremely long trek small children would have from the west side of the playground to an add-on exterior building.

The second problem concerns add-on balconies to the south side of the pavilion. The cantilevered balconies, not suitable to the style of the pavilion itself, are only called for to add ten more seats to benefit the restaurant despite the inappropriateness of their presence on the pavilion's south walls. The Department already would allow the restaurant to use moving carts and/or takeout counters, plus an evening bar to ensure economic success.

Defacing the lovely pavilion's simple architecture with balconies should not be an option for adding ten more seats for a restaurant.

Despite all the proposed changes to the pavilion, there still can be no assurance that the pavilion, in the long-run, would be sustainable as a private restaurant. It is therefore, a mistake to renovate the pavilion with such specific single-function changes instead of just returning it to its former grandeur that is simpler, less costly and would provide for flexibility for a great variety of uses now and in the future. An alternate plan for renovating the pavilion for public use has not yet been offered to the public in response to its pleas for more public space. Do we need another depression for the City to get its priorities straight?

Finally, trees planted along the west side of the park may interfere with the ability of farmers bringing their trucks into the market, and trees planted along the north side of the pavilion, may, despite their loveliness, unacceptably limit the openness of the square's traditional space for large demonstrations.

Thank you.

The Art Commission of the City of New York  
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