

Citizens For Union Square

A Voice For the Concerned Public

May 15, 2006

Testimony before the Art Commission of the City of New York
on proposals for the reconstruction of the North End of
Union Square (Manhattan) by the Department of Parks & Recreation

Madam President and Commissioners:

My name is Jack Taylor. I speak as an almost-50-year resident of the Union Square neighborhood.

The Parks Department is putting the citizens of the City of New York in the curious position of having to oppose trees. But like everything else, trees and where they are planted are subject to the issue of appropriateness and to their value aesthetically and historically.

Less than a month ago the Landmarks Preservation Commission heard proposals by the Parks Department to redesign Peck Slip, since 1810 a street in what is now Manhattan's South Street Seaport Historic District. The department's plans included the introduction of trees to create traffic islands and to repave sidewalks with blue-tinted concrete. It is no exaggeration to say that the Landmarks Commissioners were aghast at these proposals and took their individual turns to denounce them.

Similarly, in the North Plaza of Union Square, trees are historically and aesthetically inappropriate, and so is the proposed repaving in a pattern and with materials utterly foreign to the locale.

We urge you to remember that Union Square is a National Historic Landmark designated for the role of the North Plaza, combined with one block of 17th Street, in accommodating mass demonstrations, rallies, parades, political and social protests, and the exercise of citizens' rights of peaceful public assembly and free speech. An unhindered and unadorned space has been maintained there since 1882 and even earlier.

With one exception: In the mid-1980s trees were planted where the North Plaza and 17th Street meet. They died within four years.

No amount of pruning will keep trees from handicapping and obstructing the kind of public assembly for which the North Plaza has been famous around the world for 125 years, since the first Labor Day parade. London's Trafalgar Square, Paris's Place de la Concorde, Rome's Piazza del Popolo -- to say nothing of our own National Mall in Washington -- are internally treeless for great gatherings. Their physical periphery is enough to grace the place -- and so are Union Square's eight landmarked buildings and the gateway to the Ladies' Mile Historic District.

Let's keep the North Plaza free and open.

Thank you.

157 East 18th Street
New York, NY 10003

Telephone: 212-475-2850