

## People Converge, and Interests Compete

By C. J. HUGHES DEC. 26, 2008

UNION SQUARE PARK wasn't named to honor the labor movement — or the winning side in the Civil War, for that matter. The label has more prosaic origins: when city planners laid out the square in the 1830s, it sat at the union of three major roads, where stagecoaches picked up routes leading to Albany or Boston.

The traffic that circumnavigates its thumb-shaped green space these days has slightly less room to maneuver. Over the last two decades, New York has gradually increased the park's size to its present 3.6 acres by adding castoff lots and absorbing parts of streets. The change has been one factor turning the park — with its statues of former presidents, long lines of benches and rows of thick oaks — into a destination spot.

Yet when vehicles converge on one spot, there can be collisions, and the same is true of interests at the square. One example is the battle over its \$20 million renovation.

The Union Square Partnership, a coalition of 100 businesses, has a plan to restore a Classical-style pavilion at the northern end to accommodate a seasonal restaurant. (An earlier restaurant, in intermittent operation for almost a decade, had been next to the pavilion rather than inside it.) The Union Square Community Coalition, formed in 1980, opposes that plan and has sued to stop it. This month, a state Supreme Court judge began hearing arguments.

"The last thing we need here is a restaurant," said Marjorie Berk, a 40-year resident of the area and a co-founder of the coalition, which she described as having a few hundred members.

In Ms. Berk's opinion, a better use of the pavilion, with its tall central arch flanked by narrow columns, would be as a site for children's birthday parties or educational slide shows. "There are so many better things it could house" than a restaurant, she said.

Jennifer Falk, the partnership's executive director, declined to comment on the dispute. But she pointed out that the two groups were in agreement on other aspects of the renovation. For example, two former playgrounds, which totaled 5,000 square feet, will be combined into a 15,000-square-foot version. And the park's northern edge already has a swath of new six-sided paving stones, framed by the first 9 of 50 trees ultimately to be planted, Ms. Falk said.

"We look forward to seeing the same kind of progress as we've seen on the north side in the new year," she added.

Then there are the residents who haven't taken sides in the case. One of them, Carol Marin, moved to the neighborhood in 1994, trading a cramped Tudor City studio rental for an airy 2,500-square-foot condominium. Her unit cost \$800,000, she said, estimating that today it might fetch \$5 million.

The crowds that pack the park for antiwar protests or Election Night parties can be noisy, she said. At the same time the bookstores, blue-jean boutiques and high-end markets have raised the neighborhood's living standards. "Commercial establishments can destroy the integrity of the park," she said. "But that's not to say we haven't enjoyed a hamburger every once a while at the restaurant."

### WHAT YOU'LL FIND

There have been conflicts over activities in the park ever since the 1870s, when an entrepreneur tried to set up a soda fountain, according to Michael Shapiro, whose doctoral dissertation at the University of Massachusetts focuses on the neighborhood. Then, in the 1960s and 1970s, drug dealers operated behind the park's tall hedges; graffiti sprouted on many surfaces, and bench boards were ripped out for firewood, according to residents.

Architecturally as well as historically, the park and its environs are eclectic. On streets radiating off the park, Romanesque high-rises, with rough-hewn arched windows, offset Beaux-Arts towers, their friezes graced with shields. Along Irving Place are elegant brick row houses with bulging bay windows.

Then, betokening the midcentury era, there is the facade of 29 Union Square West, with its aqua-colored panels, and the white-brick Victoria, a 496-unit co-op that went up on East 14th Street in 1964, but only recently added "Union Square" to its name.

Zeckendorf Towers, a 624-unit red-brick condo topped with pyramidal points, was built in 1987 and is widely viewed as a catalyst for the area's turnaround. It offers residents a blockwide sundeck, a fitness center and a three-lane pool.

More recently, 8 Union Square South opened in the area. It was developed by the Claremont Group, and its nine sugar-colored stories were completed in 2007. Also, there is 15 Union Square West, a former Tiffany's store, which Brack Capital is currently converting into a 36-residence high-end condo with its own 50-foot pool, and three ground-level stores.

The project is 30 percent sold since last spring, says Shlomi Reuveni, the Brown Harris Stevens agent handling sales.

"Gramercy Park may be beautiful," he said, "but Union Square has vibrancy."

Most of the housing stock is rental — everything from 50-year-old walk-ups to luxury high-rises like One Union Square South, built by the Related Companies with 33 stories, offering studios to three-bedrooms. The building is dark brick; its most recognizable feature, perhaps, is the 15-numeral digital-art installation blazed across its midsection, which can be seen from many Union Square approaches.

### WHAT YOU'LL PAY

Though activity has stagnated in Union Square over the last two years ago, prices seem to have remained robust.

Through mid-December, seven studios sold, as compared with 18 in all of 2006, when the market was peaking. But in those two years the average price leaped to \$1.78 million from \$679,740, according to data prepared by Robert Manzari, a broker with the Corcoran Group.

Six two-bedrooms sold this year, versus five in 2006, and the average price has climbed to \$1.80 million from \$1.53 million, the data show.

Only one-bedrooms seem to have suffered price-wise, slightly. The 13 units that traded hands in 2008 had an average cost of \$940,746. The 18 that sold in 2006, on the other hand, cost \$944,917.

The area has “really held its own nicely since the days of being known as ‘Needle Park,’” Mr. Manzari said.

When it comes to rental prices, though, they are all over the map. Ms. Berk, for instance, pays “under \$2,000” for the rent-stabilized one-bedroom that has been her home since 1968. But three-bedrooms at One Union Square South, according to its Web site, start at \$9,895.

#### WHAT TO DO

The square was once the site of May Day rallies — with Socialists, arm in arm, singing “Joe Hill” at its northern end. The nation’s first Labor Day event was held there, too, in 1882, according to the Parks Department.

But those days are long gone. Young arrivals like Lindsey Miller, a financial services worker who closed on a two-bedroom in the Victoria in December, are more partial to the establishments that have flat-screens tuned to football. These include SideBar, on East 15th Street, where a sidewalk chalkboard recently advertised “All Games All Day!” and \$10 pitchers of Bud Light.

The square’s fancy markets, lining 14th Street, are also regularly packed. Among these are Trader Joe’s, Whole Foods, and Garden of Eden, where ice is piled high with whole red snapper (\$9.99 a pound).

Four days a week, the park plays host to the Greenmarket, which is the city’s largest and oldest farmers’ market. On summer Saturdays there are as many as 80 vendors.

#### THE SCHOOLS

At Public School 40 last year, 88 percent of fourth-graders met standards on state English exams, 99 percent on math exams.

For Grades 6 through 8, there is Middle School 104. Last year, 65 percent of eighth-graders met standards in English, 73 percent in math.

Washington Irving High School has 1,768 students this year, and a troubled record. The graduation rate for the class of 2007, which had 294 students, was 45 percent; about one in five students dropped out, according to city education data. The school received an F in the city’s last annual review.

On the SATs there last year, averages were 394 in reading, 398 in math and 383 in writing, versus 488, 503 and 475 statewide.

#### THE COMMUTE

Eight subway lines converge in Union Square: the L, N, Q, R, W, 4, 5 and 6. The station is Manhattan’s fourth-busiest, with a 2007 ridership of almost 34 million. Seven bus lines serve the neighborhood, all of them sidling up to the park at some point.

#### THE HISTORY

Of Andy Warhol’s Manhattan “Factories” — offbeat performance spaces — two were in Union Square, according to Mr. Shapiro. One was at 33 Union Square West, in the Moorish-style Decker Building; another was at the top of the park, above what is now being used as a pet store.

A version of this article appears in print on , on Page RE7 of the New York edition with the headline: People Converge, and Interests Compete.