

UNION SQUARE PARK

New York City, New York

Heather Ruszczyk
Emily Grigg-Saito

Developing Public
Gathering Spaces



Union Square Park has long been a landmark park for New York City: bustling and always active, it is a distinctly urban park, not an escape from the city, but truly enmeshed in it. Millions of pedestrians utilize this space, and its surroundings are prime real estate for retail and residential alike. Alive with visitors to its Greenmarket as well as the millions who use the 14th Street Union Square subway hub, it acts as both destination and thoroughfare.

Union Square Park has historically been a gathering place for the people of New York City to exercise free speech. Throughout early stages of development, the planning intent has been to provide free and open public space. Through its long life as a New York City park, Union Square changed from an affluent neighborhood, to a crime ridden area. Dynamics within the park reflect these changes. Since the 1970's, the local community has been working to revitalize the park and establish it as an area flourishing with people and activity. The last phase in this series of improvements is scheduled to finish in Winter 2010.





City Statistics

City Population:
8,214,426

City Area:
303 square miles

Density Level:
26,402.9/square mile

Park Acreage:
3.593 acres

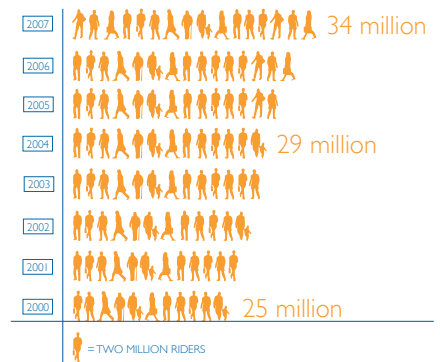
Park acreage per 1000 residents:
4.6

Governing bodies:
New York City Department
of Parks and Recreation

Located on the southern half of Manhattan, Union Square Park sits between 14th and 17th Streets at the intersection of two major thoroughfares, Park Avenue and Broadway. The square also sits at the boundaries of the Grammercy, Chelsea, Greenwich Village, and East Village neighborhoods; all of which are pedestrian accessible from the park.

Below the park is the 14th Street and Union Square Station, the city's 4th largest subway station, and where the L, N, Q, R, W, 4, 5, and 6 subway lines intersect. Not surprisingly, foot traffic through and around the park is heavy, and many pedestrians pass through the station. A study conducted by the Union Square Partnership found a 26% rise in ridership from 2000-2007.

SUBWAY TURNSTILE COUNTS



“It wasn’t that long ago I would walk to Union Square Cafe in the morning in 1985-1986 and, invariably, there would be the chalk outline or someone who’d been shot the night before outside the Underground, which is now a Petco. So, you know, was Petco replacing the Underground a bad thing, a good thing?”
- Danny Meyer, CEO of Union Square Hospitality Group

Moving from south to north, the main subway exit comes out onto an open plaza, stepping up towards the central greenspace of the park. The southern plaza is home to the popular winter craft market, as well as other street performers and vendors. Roughly occupying half of the park’s acreage, the greenspace in the park remains true to its late 19th century design, and in addition to traditional park visitors, hosts a popular outdoor yoga class. The northern side of the park has received attention in the past year over the redevelopment project (see below), but the northern edge has always been an area of high activity at the park’s Greenmarket, a farmer’s market that runs four days a week throughout the year.





In addition to the high level of activity and ever-changing programming throughout the park, the visibility from one side of this park to other further incorporates the park into the neighborhood. Notable anchors in the park are the pavillion on the north end and its new playground; the George Washington statue; main subway exit; and Ghandi statue. The expensive housing (3.195 million for a two-bedroom in 2008 according to *The New York Times*) and big retail (Petco, Barnes & Noble, DSW Shoe Warehouse, Filene's Basement, and Gap, among others) are both draws and examples of how much the neighborhood has changed in the past 30 years.

Developing Public Gathering Spaces

"The southern part of the square has become the equivalent of the Spanish Steps in Rome, where people just gather together. There is no better place for people-watching."

- Mitchell Moss, New York University Professor of Urban Planning 2008



Union Square Park North End Redevelopment Project

In December 2008, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates (Landscape Architect) and Architecture Research Office (Architect) completed the redevelopment of the North End of Union Square Park, which included a playground, new plaza design, renovation of the existing pavillion, and new restroom facilities. The existing plaza, home to Union Square Park's Greenmarket, was raised to sidewalk level, with a new pavement pattern. Lighting was updated to match the park's south side, and small flowering trees, Japanese pagoda trees, and larger shade trees were also added. The large playground was created to replace two existing playgrounds, and in doing, doubled the playspace size. The pavillion renovation added offices and restrooms, as well as community/concession space.





"Some folks have the strange idea that Union Square Park, the site of social and political activism in New York, should remain the park of the people. Others have been trying for years to reduce or eliminate the "troublesome" more open public plaza areas to the north, west and south of the greener areas of the park. These same people also think some of its public space should be handed over to private business."

-Union Square Community Coalition

Developing a Public Gathering Space for New York City

Early Planning

- 1871 | Olmsted re-design to "meet the public requirement of mass-meetings"
- remove all fencing and enclosure
 - widen sidewalks
 - create open space

Recent Developments

- 1976 | Local farmers market, GreenMarket
- 1985 | Movement to major renovations under NYC mayor Edward Koch including new plaza at south end, adapting park for accessibility, central open green space for activity and improved lighting condition
- 1986 | Additional homage to public figures with Gandhi memorial at southwest traffic island
- 1994 | Transition to commercial development in the area calls for improved conditions of north pavilion including two new playgrounds and restaurant space
- 2008 | North End Development plan including redesign and repaving of the northern plaza to better accommodate farmers market, redevelop and expand play ground and restore the pavilion, provide ADA accessibility throughout the park

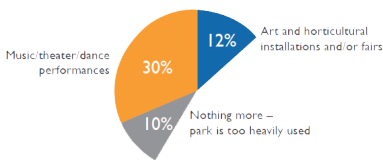
Recent Issues

Union Square is governed by active community groups, eager to have a say in the coveted park. The North End Development, which began in 2008, was proposed to complete the changes begun in the 1980's to revitalize the park and neighborhood. The major goals of the initial plan were to increase the amount of play area, improve the open plaza, and developing the pavilion into a restaurant, which would not only attract more people to come and stay at the park, but also provide more passive surveillance.

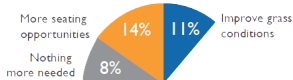
With pedestrian activity rising dramatically over the past 5 years (59% greater activity since 2003), there was a need to create more shops, dining, and entertainment opportunities, creating a higher profile with more affluent users. The location of the park, as an intersection of major arterials and transit infrastructure, lends well to establishing the area as an alternative to Times Square and other major confluences in the city. The proposal to implement these changes was repeatedly stalled by local groups like the Union Square Community Coalition, fighting for the original intent of the park as a space for gathering and community, not consumerism.

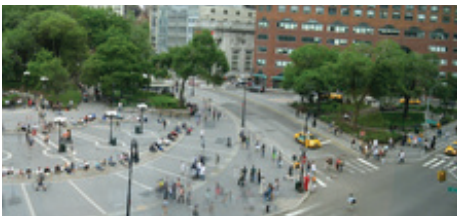
The efforts of these groups resulted in changes to the original plan, including reducing the size of the renovated pavilion/restaurant and dedicating that space to play areas. They also halted the planting of additional trees in the open northern end, which would impede on the necessary openness of the square. This allows for a maximum amount of free and open space in which to address the parks original intent, as a gathering place. The northern end of the park was scheduled to re-open in Winter 2010. The total cost for the project is estimated at \$20 million.

MOST REQUESTED PROGRAMS IN UNION SQUARE PARK



MOST REQUESTED IMPROVEMENTS TO UNION SQUARE PARK





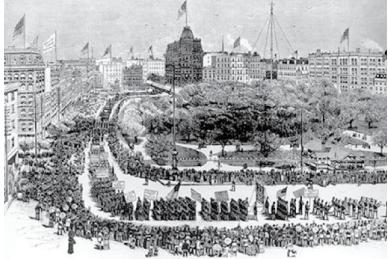
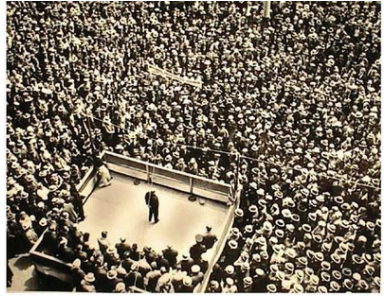
Developing Public Gathering Spaces

In the Spirit of Gathering

Union Square Park has long been the predetermined site of demonstrations and rallies in New York City. The first major demonstration was a patriotic celebration in 1861 after a major union win in the Civil War. At the time, it was the largest public gathering to date, with 250,000 rallying and celebrating.

During the first Labor Day celebration in 1882, Union Square Park enforced its reputation as place of congregation. 10,000 workers marched through the streets of New York and gathered in the park to rally. This historical event largely contributed to the naming of Union Square Park as a National Historic Landmark in 1997.

Numerous occasions mark Union Square Park as the place to exercise the right of free speech. (See pictures to right) After the September 11 attacks, the square was swathed in vigils, candles, and pictures, becoming a spontaneous memorial to honor fellow citizens of New York City. A great amount of pride exists in what the park represents because it has hosted such historically significant public events by the people.



A Brief History of Union Square Park

First named Union Place in 1815, this former field became a public common space. In 1839, a developer transformed Union Place into Union Square Park, formalizing the park-like aspects of the space. It existed as a fenced oval planted area with a central fountain and tree-lined walks extending to the street corners. As downtown New York City spread, the area around the park began to develop and Union Square became a host to residential, cultural, and commercial activity. In 1872, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux were commissioned to re-envision the space as an 'open glade with clumps of trees' in order to make the space more fit for public gathering. Early uses of the park for public gathering included the first Labor Day celebration in 1882, in which 10,000 people celebrated on the grounds.

By the turn of the century the square became primarily commercial development. In 1929, the park was completely demolished to make way for the new Union Square subway station. The square became a major connection for New Yorkers. Improvements to the park were made when it was reconstructed, including the addition of a pavilion at the North end and the siting for *Independence*. The park became of showcase of monuments to famous public figures.

Over the years, the Union Square area transformed and the park deteriorated, ridden with drug dealers and crime. Movements to revitalize the neighborhood in the 1970's led to the establishment of a farmers market in 1976. The slow rebuilding of the park since the 1980's is beginning to once again bring the neighborhood back to its flourishing potential, with much of the activity centered around the park. In the past 10 years, many major retailers have moved into the neighborhood, bringing lots of people and activity. Active neighborhood groups maintain the livelihood and usability of the park and a proud community reside in Union Square.

In 1997, Union Square Park was named a National Historic Landmark due to its staging of numerous historical gatherings.





**Union
Square
Community
Coalition**

The Future of Union Square Park

Union Square Partnership promotes support of local businesses. Their initiative, called the Business Improvement District (BID) aims to establish Union Square Park as a destination for all New Yorkers. Surveys conducted by the partnership showed a need to accommodate the increased pedestrian activities. Working closely with the city

Union Square Community Coalition takes a more grass roots approach to their campaign to keep the park true to its original intent. The fight against privatization and for maintaining the public space for public use, including open space, playgrounds, and other civic purposes. Below is their proposal for suggested uses of the pavilion, besides a restaurant.

1. Children's pavilion
Return the pavilion to its original intent and former use as an indoor/outdoor sheltered recreation
2. Year-round free access for people of all ages
Utilize the basement for yoga, arts and crafts, senior programming, community events
3. Free-speech rallies and demonstrations.
Return the pavilion to its original use as a staging platform for speakers at free-speech rallies
4. Community special events.
Host movies, theater, summer concerts, dance, photography, art shows, workshops for children
5. Exhibit space for permanent and temporary art exhibitions.
Create exhibits highlighting the important role Union Square has played in New York City's rich history of public assembly, free speech, and social activism.

Resources

Union Square Partnership - unionsquarenyc.org

New York Department of Parks and Recreation - <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/unionsquarepark>

Union Square Community Coalition - www.unionsquarecommunitycoalition.org

"Plans at Union Square To Enhance Its Place in History" <http://www.nysun.com/real-estate/plans-at-union-square-to-enhance-its-place/30120/>

"Living Around- Union Square- People Converge, and Interests Compete- NYTimes.com" http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/28/realestate/28livi.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1&sq=union%20square%20partnership&st=cse&scp=1

"The Trust for Public Land; Total Parkland per 1,000 Residents, by City" http://www.tpl.org/content_documents/citypark_facts/ccpe_TotalAcresperResident_09.pdf

"Design Trust for Public Space: A Conversation between Paul Goldberger and Danny Meter" http://www.designtrust.org/media/events/200802_quasi-public/Quasi-Public_02.26.2008_transcript.pdf

"Union Square Partnership Pedestrian Activity Report Summer 2008" http://www.unionsquarenyc.org/documents/Ped_final_000.pdfhttp://www.unionsquarenyc.org/documents/Ped_final_000.pdf

"Union Square: The 'Epicenter of the City's Energy' - September 25, 2006 - The New York Sun" <http://www.nysun.com/new-york/union-square-the-epicenter-of-the-citys-energy/40241/>

"Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Inc. | Union Square Park" <http://www.mvvainc.com/#/PROJECTS/7/79/>

"New York (city) QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau" <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36/3651000.html>

"Union Square Park and Greenmarket - Great Public Spaces | Project for Public Spaces (PPS)" http://www.pps.org/great_public_spaces/one?public_place_id=24#