

Union Square: An Urban Renaissance

Remarks on the 20th Anniversary of the 14th Street Local Development Corporations Harvest in the Square, September 1996

Twenty years ago would we have dared to gather in this place? The once grand Union Square Park was a haven for derelicts and drug dealers. "Needle Park" was its nickname. This beautiful pavilion was deteriorating, graffiti were rampant, weeds choked the grass and gardens. The boarded-up S. Klein on the Square symbolized a neighborhood in decay and despair. The Drapery Building behind us lay dormant; the streets around were littered with signs of callous neglect. There were no restaurants on the square and some of the remaining businesses were on the verge of leaving.

The group of citizens and neighbors we honor tonight played pivotal roles in the most striking urban renaissance of the last generation. They are symbols of a wider crusade that involved many of you because we literally joined hands to take back our neighborhood and transform it into one of the hottest places in Manhattan. The catalyst for this grass roots movement was "Sweet 14", the 14th Street-Union Square Local Development Corporation (LDC) and its partner, the city's first and perhaps most respected Business Improvement District (BID), which was created.

Blessed with generous private donations, over \$250,000 every year, a talented staff ably led these past seven years by Rob Walsh, a broad based board of people who really care, the help of four Mayors, many Deputy Mayors and dozens of city commissioners, the LDC stands as a beacon of hope and an example of what can be accomplished through an effective public/private partnership.

Today our neighborhood is the place to be. Con Ed and Guardian stood their ground. The stunning Zeckendorf Towers started the physical renewal by establishing a design vocabulary that evoked past glory. The park came back to life as a place for ordinary citizens, young and old, to gather. The subway station below, as we speak, is undergoing a \$60 million renovation. The BID keeps our streets clean and safe. A parade of new businesses, large and small, has created a vital urban shopping center. Everyone loves the Green Market, which has become a place to slow down a bit, exchange stories, laugh and enjoy a taste of the country. And we are graced with fabulous new restaurants which make our neighborhood more cosmopolitan as well.

But our journey of improvement and revitalization is as much about people as it is about physical space. Our neighborhood's defining characteristics and strength is its diversity. The very word "union" symbolizes the spirit and moral purpose that have animated our work together. We welcome a mix of commercial, residential, professional and institutional uses. Our neighborhood is a center for the creative – architects, publishers, public relations specialists, graphic designers and software developers fill the buildings of this neighborhood. We are New York's academic hub – the New School has grown and so has Cardozo Law School, NYU, Baruch and Cooper Union. We are New York's off-Broadway capital with theaters including the Vineyard, Variety, and CSC Repertory, and there are more on the way.

We also have the very best of hospitals in Beth Israel, St. Vincent's, New York Eye and Ear, and Carlini serving thousands of people each day.

We are crossroads young meets old, the privileged help those less fortunate, African-Americans, Latinos and whites make common cause, and hope replaces cynicism. Earlier this week, a number of us here proudly joined Vice President Gore in the dedication of Genesis Apartments in honor of the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Our steadfast support of that controversial project sent a powerful signal. New York does not have to be segregated along race and class lines – the promise of America as a land of opportunity still has meaning.

Nor have we given up on the historical role the New York City public school system can play in making the best of America accessible to new immigrants and Americans who have faced discrimination and poverty. The LDC and BID have worked hard to make our neighborhood high school, Washington Irving, once again an avenue of advancement for its 2,700 students, reflecting some 40 nationalities.

But our job is not done, will never be done. As the new millennium approaches, I ask all of you to join in our efforts at the school, in the park, on the street to sustain and enhance all we have achieved to make this neighborhood a great place to live, work, study, play, shop and eat.