

**Business Improvement Districts in New York City have led a renaissance in turning once grimy zones into a place where everybody wants to live, work and play.**

IT IS gradually cementing a reputation as New York City's greenest neighbourhood.

That's Union Square, with its endless list of vegetarian restaurants, spas, yoga studios and gyms besides organic dry cleaners and a furniture gallery that sells products made from reclaimed wood.

Shoppers at Whole Foods Market, a retailer of organic food, are given a 10 US cent (33 sen) refund if they reuse their shopping bags.

Union Square is also the site of the city's first Greenmarket, where local farmers gather four times a week to sell their home-grown produce, while bakers whip out their jams and cheeses.

Free yoga classes are offered at the public park during summer.



**Improving quality of life:** Shoppers looking at the home-grown produce offered for sale at Greenmarket in Union Square.

More significantly, Union Square is Gotham's first Business Improvement District (BID), which began in 1984. Its mission: to improve the neighbourhood's quality of life through better maintenance, beautification and sanitation to ensure cleanliness and safety for all.

Funds come from a special assessment paid by property owners in the area. The BID is essentially an organisation of property owners and commercial tenants who are determined to promote business in their neighbourhood.

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg had been a big proponent of BIDs, said Commissioner of the New York City Department of Small Business Services Robert W. Walsh.

There are now 58 BIDs in the city; some small, others run on a multi-million budget.

“It is the private sector coming together, getting people to make the neighbourhood better,” Walsh told a group of foreign journalists last week.

Such collective efforts had led to the changing face of Union Square, which was not a pretty sight in the 1970s with crime and prostitution.

“There was almost a sense of desperation back then,” he said.

Today, the Union Square Partnership (a non-profit organisation that acts as a liaison among residents, business and government leaders) has a glowing report card to show.

“It has become a crossroad of the city. About 30 million people travel through the subway transit point here every year,” said USP executive director Jennifer Falk.

Although its shady past is history now, Falk said they were still on the look-out for things to do to improve the neighbourhood.

To ensure clean sidewalks, a sanitation team will check the area seven days a week, 12 hours a day. Garbage is collected and the streets are swept, illegal signages and flyers taken down. Graffiti is removed once a week.

Another eight teams are in charge of security. These public safety officers patrol the district on foot from morning till night, keeping an eye on any unlawful acts.

Last year, the USP collected about US\$1.4mil (RM4.7mil) in assessment revenue besides spending about US\$518,882 (RM1.7mil) on safety and US\$462,094 (RM1.5mil) on sanitation efforts.

A host of community events are planned all year round. Besides “Art in the Park” where artists show off their creativity, there are also free walking tours provided every Saturday, focussing on the history of Union Square, which includes the original home of Macy’s and Tiffany & Co.

The latest BID, set up in 2006, is the Flatiron/ 23rd Street Partnership in Manhattan. With a US\$1.6mil (RM5.3mil) budget and about 4,500 businesses, it has emerged among the top 10 BIDs in New York City.

Flatiron, of course, is the famous building so named because it takes the shape of a clothes iron. (It was also the location of the *Daily Bugle* office in the *Spider-Man* movies.)

“It is one of the most photographed buildings in the world,” said Jennifer Brown, executive director of the Flatiron Partnership.

The neighbourhood boasts now of a wide range of restaurants and retailers. “It is also a fast growing residential area,” Brown said, citing a 47-floor condominium block currently under construction, which some celebrities are said to have shown interest in.

H. Alper Tutus, the Turkish owner of a souvenir shop called “Memories of New York”, readily testified to what he said were amazing changes to the area.

“I have been here for almost 14 years. Back then, there were many homeless people. Security and cleanliness were a big headache,” he said.

The revival of the neighbourhood had led to better business for him. As Brown put it: “You won’t see overflowing bins here.”

Surveys are carried out to detect cracked sidewalks, broken streetlights, malfunctioning traffic lights and potholes.

Regardless of weather conditions, a clean team makes sure the place is cleared of litter and graffiti.

Other projects include beautification programmes and reaching out to homeless people.

They take care of their backyards; never mind that the streets are not paved with gold.