Prior to its recent renovation, the north end of Union Square Park faced several challenges. The sheer density of traffic and uses within this section of the park are complex, and balancing the interests of constituencies in terms of allocating space, resources and uses is difficult. Constituencies include the Greenmarket\(^1\), residents and families, businesses, community activists and preservationists keen on preserving the park’s historical integrity. Enhancing and beautifying what already existed in that section of the park while accommodating firmly established uses by the leading constituencies were chief among concerns.

The park faces an evolving context, given the substantial increase in housing around the park over the past two decades, for example, and growth within it of the Greenmarket. Its evolving history is also a matter of consideration. The north end of the park was historically a plaza used for rallies and protests and is landmarked as such. Nonetheless, contemporary users see it more as a recreational space.

**Park History**

Long one of the city’s great public spaces, Union Square Park is known to New Yorkers both as a stage for historic events and a hub for daily activity. Originally opened in 1839, the current renovation of Union Square Park has been ongoing since 1986. The first phase\(^2\) rebuilt the area south of 16th Street, creating new, redesigned paths and new lighting. In 2002, the second phase reconstructed and expanded the park’s southeastern triangle and southwest border. The third and final phase redeveloped and expanded the outdated playgrounds, rehabilitated the historic Pavilion, and redesigned the north plaza to support Greenmarket farmers and to provide greater use of parkland.

The area’s business improvement district (“BID”), originally named the 14th Street Business Improvement District, was created in 1984, the first in New York City after City Council passed a law to permit them. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the BID took on a lot of issues, including rezoning to permit mixed commercial and residential uses, a characteristic of many buildings surrounding Union Square.

The North End Project is the result of collaboration between the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation and the Union Square Partnership, today’s name for the district’s BID, with review and feedback provided by community stakeholders. The final project design by the landscape architecture firm, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, was approved in 2007 after meeting the required regulatory approvals. The Parks Department managed the construction phase of the renovations.

The park had undergone several dramatic transformations; the neighborhood had changed substantially in the 1990s with the advent of several new residential developments in the area. Also, there were major renovations of the interior of the park. The hedge was taken down, the path configuration changed, and the plaza was redone. Traffic patterns in the park had changed, as well. The park had been more like a civic landscape, with its flagpole, statues and plaza, so it started to need new amenities like playgrounds. They were then retrofitted in place in the best form possible.

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1. The Greenmarket is Union Square’s farmers’ market.
2. The park, according to George Kroenert, Capital Projects, NYC Parks, is “too big and busy to reconstruct all at once. There is also a fatigue factor with the community when construction goes on for too long.”
In the 1830s, Union Square Park was established as a fenced strolling park in an oval configuration that filled the center of the irregular space while leaving ample perimeter circulation for wagons and trolley cars. In the 1870s, as the north end of Union Square was increasingly being used for processions and public gatherings, the protective fence around the park was removed, leaving the planted park vulnerable to overflow activities. In reviewing plans for a renovation of the park, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, in the role of consultants to the Parks Department, called attention to the conflict of uses and suggested that:

“The paved area on the north might be enlarged by a certain reduction of the area of the pleasure ground. With a suitably planned fixed platform for speakers, music and committees, from fifteen to twenty thousand people could be gathered in this enlarged area, without danger of injury to the pleasure ground.”

The creation of the approximately 1-acre plaza and subsequent elevation changes within the central park (occasioned by the construction of successive subway lines) resulted in a highly active ground-level park perimeter with a large open space paved in cobbles that extended from the new northern edge of the park, where a portion of the oval had been clipped off, to the edge of the sidewalk across 17th Street. It is unclear if this proximity of pedestrians and street traffic presented a conflict

The pavilion was designed at grade with the subway, and it included a dingy and decrepit basement, where the Parks Department had its office. Despite its shortcomings, however, the pavilion itself was one of only a few left in the city.

Adding a restaurant to the pavilion area brought adult activity to the park in the middle of the day and later. It also provided visibility to the shortcomings of the concessions area where the restaurant operated. It was run by the owner of a coffee shop just off the park. The building was almost completely unusable, and service station shacks were added on in a crude sort of way.

The playground was also inadequate. The farmers market was makeshift and jury-rigged in reclaimed space. To add insult to injury, the use of the area was extremely heavy. It had become crowded, due partially to the increased usage by NYU and the New School stemming from their growth. For example, the Greenmarket alone is estimated to sometimes have half a million people a week and 200,000 on a single Saturday.

**Project Goal**

The goal of the north end project was to complete an ongoing renovation and expansion of the Union Square Park that began in the 1980s. The specific improvements included expanded and improved play space, an enhanced pedestrian experience of the plaza, a rehabilitated Pavilion, and new public restrooms.

According to Matthew Urbanski, Project Principle with Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, “We wanted to balance the playground, the concession, historic restoration, the Greenmarket and the plaza and make it (work) with the southern end of the park.”

William Kelley, Director of Economic Development at the Union Square Partnership, commented that, “As we looked at the now stable neighborhood, we saw the developed park as the heart, soul and anchor of the district. We wanted to make a great neighborhood even better. We knew there were more families with children moving into the area, so we looked to enlarge and improve the playground. We also wanted the Greenmarket to be happier and better accommodated. And we wanted to be competitive. Some of the redevelopment is two decades old, so updating was needed, along with new maps and signs to guide and inform the public. We wanted the park to be as updated, beautiful and functional as possible for the millions that visit every year.”

The initial budget which started off as just a playground renovation was only $2 million, so money was a huge issue. It became clear as the scope widened. According to Kelley, “We raised $8 million privately, and the project cost $21 million, all told.”

**Project Features**

The north end renovation included the following improvements.

- New and expanded playground with equipment for children of all abilities
- Finished plaza with new utilities for Greenmarket farmers
- New shade trees and new flowering trees
- New light poles, both in and around the park
- New lighting for the Abraham Lincoln Statue and James Fountain
- Renovated pavilion to accommodate a seasonal concession and off-season community space
- New public restrooms

More detailed information about some of these improvements follows.

**Playground**

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3 Gleeson, Rachel and Berribeitia, Anita (editing), Yale University, New Haven, 2009, p. 214-220.
1 Letter to the Hon. H.G. Strebbins, president of the Department of Public Parks, signed by Olmsted and Vaux, New York, March 13, 1872. Document No. 35, Board of the Department of Public Parks, New York City, “A Communication from Olmsted & Vaux, Landscape Architects, relative to a review of the plan of Union Square,” entered March 27, 1872.
5 Abbreviation for Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates.
as public space was in many ways overwhelmed by its relationship to the roadway.⁶ To distinguish one from the other, stand-alone curbs were installed along 17th Street and fortified with metal barricades creating, in Matthew Urbanski’s words, a “permanent temporary condition” that was unsatisfactory in function and appearance.

What is most striking about the MVVA design for the north plaza of Union Square Park is that an extraordinary transformation of a space was achieved by a series of relatively ordinary design decisions.

Recognizing that even highly valued public spaces with long histories of use need to be responsive to contemporary conditions, the renovation of Union Square’s north plaza is less about civic beautification (although this was certainly one of the inspirations for the project) and more about an attempt to ensure the continued vitality of the space. Although the historic role of the plaza as place of gathering had been retained over the years – hosting the greenmarket, events, skateboarders, etc. – the line between park and parking lot had become increasingly thin. What would have become of the plaza if its dilapidated state had eventually succeeded in decreasing its popularity? Historically significant places safeguard their forms only so long as their uses remain relevant. The modest improvements in material and urban expression solidify Union Square’s North Plaza as a “permanent” fixture within the space, in terms of its identity and its function.

Another fundamental part of ensuring the continued relevance of the square as open public space was the street and plaza were graded as though they were a continuous space. The crown is not at the midpoint of 17th Street (which is also considered to be part of Broadway at this stretch). Instead, it is located in the middle of the space between the front of the Union Square Bandstand and the northern sidewalk.

As part of the plan, the two existing playgrounds were united into a single playground to enlarge the current play space. By combining the space of the concession and playground and breaking down stone walls, a 5,000-sq. ft. playground space became 15,000-sq. ft. MVVA worked with child development experts on its design. Built on a single elevation and divided into three connected rooms with distinct landscape and character, the new playground is accessible for children of all capabilities. The western section is for toddlers and includes a large swing set, climbing platforms with slides, and a sand and water play area. The center area is a highly active space featuring play equipment and a spray shower, and the eastern area offers a climbing and sliding dome, monkey bars and a tube slide for school-aged children.

Plaza

The plaza is elevated to sidewalk level with new hexagonal block paving and granite curbing. The hex-block design uses contrasting tones to create a large-scale geometric pattern on the plaza. The pattern of the pavers is inspired by the patterns people make as they move through the city. Also on the plaza, new water and electric connections are available for Greenmarket use.

Another change was to make the plaza space to the north five feet wider. There had been no sidewalk. The Department of Transportation painted it out in a test and did a traffic study, and then agreed to move the curb line north about five feet. The Greenmarket was also very concerned they would get less space and that was a trust issue. The project was able to give it more space than it had previously, and at the end the Greenmarket was very happy and supportive.

Landscaping

The park’s north end features extensive new landscaping. New Japanese Pagoda trees now line the northern and western perimeters of the plaza. Reaching a maximum of 40 feet, the trees complement the urban scale created by the buildings that surround the square. The playground area is also enhanced with new large shade trees and new small flowering trees.

Lighting

New lighting matches previous renovations to the south. Bishop’s Crook historic light poles replace standard cobra head light poles around the perimeter. In addition, new Riverside Type “B” light poles were installed around and within the northern and western portions of the park.

Pavilion

The rehabilitated Pavilion houses new offices for Parks Department personnel who service the park on the lower level. The upper level may accommodate a seasonal concession and off-season community space. Damaged structural elements were repaired and the clay tile roof was rebuilt. A new elevator makes the building accessible for people with disabilities, and the existing restrooms were renovated.

Restroom Facility

A restroom facility with men’s, women’s and family restrooms was constructed on the playground’s northeast corner. The structure is designed to blend into the park’s existing context, incorporating an existing ashlar wall into its north and east façades. Men’s and women’s restrooms will be accessible from the plaza, while the family restroom will have

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⁶ The street and plaza were graded as though they were a continuous space. The crown is not at the midpoint of 17th Street (which is also considered to be part of Broadway at this stretch). Instead, it is located in the middle of the space between the front of the Union Square Bandstand and the northern sidewalk.
Traffic Changes

The eastbound lane of traffic on 17th Street was eliminated and replaced by a pedestrian lane and a bike lane. Also a pedestrian plaza was added across the street from the northeast corner of the park.

Looking Back

The challenge of Union Square Park's north end renovation was to envision a solution that could allow many uses. There was no invalid activity in the park; all of the pieces were set the way they were. What was done in each case of a major activity in the park was expedient and reasonable, but the total picture didn't make the best use of the space. It had to be reconfigured. The playground, for example, was inadequate, and the Parks Department was not happy with the way it looked. It was undignified, compared to the rest of the park.

“Our job was a synthesis of all vectors going on there that would make everyone happy - all vital, legitimate uses,” stated Urbanski. “Our biggest challenge was figuring the proper configuration of each element. The playground needed to be bigger, the concession less, and the Greenmarket the same. We had to figure out the correct proportions, since they were not predetermined. It was an education process for everyone. You don’t march in with a vision if you’re a good designer. The total has to be greater than the sum of the parts.”

The north end renovation was a very intense project, according to Urbanski. “The level of use there is astonishing. When I show photos, I have to say to people that they’re not photoshopped. I see this project as the perfect encapsulation of park and public space of its type.”

In agreement, Kroenert added, “We had to do a delicate dance among a lot of users.”

designing for resilience. The trees are planted in a continuous trough rather than individual pits, allowing for sufficient soil volume to support growth and expansion. In addition to being more park-appropriate than rolled asphalt, or concrete, the asphalt block units that pave the surface of the plaza are easy to repair in sections as might be made necessary due to future utility upgrades or other underground developments. The new plaza’s distinctive overlay of light-colored rectangles that read against a dark background tone will be created through two different tones of standard asphalt block.

The plaza’s relationship with the Union Square Park pavilion, once a reviewing platform for parades, was closely considered while avoiding a faux historical effort to derive the patterning of the vast urban plaza from the architectural order of the relatively petite pavilion. The insistently symmetrical park pavilion, which was renovated as part of this project, and the nearly symmetrical raised park are located asymmetrically within the plaza. The MVVA design addresses this lopsidedness by continuing the “bluestone” line of the historic park footprint from the south (a gesture initiated by Parks Department renovations in the early 2000s), thus creating a subtle moment of classical centrality around the Bandstand Pavilion and allowing the remainder of the park perimeter to function as nonhierarchical space, without boundaries or divisions. Whereas this type of contemporary tracing of history might sometimes be read as absence or nostalgia (the park used to be this big), the better reading would be to recognize the bluestone line as a reminder to us of a watershed moment in the evolution of the public space.