

# Greenwich Village Block Associations News

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## The Fountain & the Ghost of Robert Moses

by Luther Harris

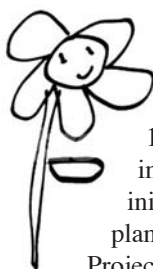
The iconic Washington Square fountain and arch are the park's signature ensemble. Since the park's 1970 redesign the fountain has become a world famous gathering and performance space. NYC Parks plans to destroy it employing specious claims and scare tactics redolent of the **Robert Moses** era. (Moses claimed that, should his roadway through the square be denied, nearby streets would be clogged with cars — a ruse that failed.

NYU's 1990 study *Drawing a Circle in the Square* analyzed this fountain phenomenon. Over a 4 year period, using time lapse photography, the study observed the gathering and dispersing crowds among the fountain, statues and abutments. Visitors numbered 19,000 on a typical (Cont'd on page 7)

## TWO SQUARES: ORPHANS IN A STORM

by Shirley Secunda

When Mulry Square's reconstruction was completed in 2001, Villagers sighed in relief. Mulry, the confusing intersection of West 11<sup>th</sup> St., 7th and Greenwich Aves., had daunted pedestrians for years. Ultra-wide street crossings, traffic in 6 directions, poor sight lines and high-speed turns had led to a host of pedestrian accidents, including the tragic death of a mother and child hit by a truck as they crossed Greenwich Ave.



(Cont'd on page 6)

The community begged the Department of Transportation (DOT) to fix this deathtrap. In 1994 a concrete plan for improvement had been initiated by the non-profit planning and design group, Project for Public Spaces. This

## Memory Lane

In the winter of 1965 **John and Michelle Phillips** of the *Mamas and Papas* were staying at the Hotel Earle at 103 Waverly Place (now the Washington Square Hotel). The gloomy skies and seasonal chill dampened their spirits and inspired John to write *California Dreamin'* which shifted their career into high gear. The name of the church where they stopped and prayed remains a mystery.



April 18, 1938 was a "fowl" day on Greenwich Ave. near Bank St. Sparrows and pigeons feasted on 3 tons of canary seed. Firemen, fighting the blaze of a burning truck, were

forced to throw cartons of seed into the street; neighborhood birds soon heard the good news.

.... a sensational account of a mysterious (Cont'd on page 2)

**These good neighbor businesses wish you a wonderful autumn!**

**Hudson Bagels**, 502 Hudson St., (near Christopher), NYC. 10014 — *Bagels made on the premises — special soups made with organic vegetables & spring water.*



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*Businesses that support community efforts deserve neighborhood support.*

## No PEP Cheer Here

by Lynn Pacifico

*One morning a woman and her 7 pound dog stroll on pier 34. No one is around except for two men on a bench. There is no run for small dogs along the Hudson River Park; she lets it off the leash. The men walk briskly toward her. One man, dressed in baggy sweats and a hood, hides his face. The dog is frenzied with fear. Woman and dog run to escape. She faces them as they catch up. One man puts his hand in his jacket. Is he reaching for a weapon?*

**Sandi Schiffman** feels lucky she was spared a heart attack. The men were PEP officers working an undercover sting to catch dog owners — our tax dollars at work. She adds, “The officers chased us, NEVER identifying themselves. When I requested photo ID they asked for my identification, he had no idea where his ID was.”

She witnessed another incident: “One morning PEP Officer Pompascelli, continuously honking, sped by in a motorized cart. The area was crowded; he failed to slow, expecting people to get out of his way. By sheer luck no one was hit; many runners and walkers wore headphones.” He put everybody at risk just to ticket a dog owner. Speeding in their carts on the walkway is common behavior for PEP officers.

Sandi filed a complaint but learned it accomplished nothing; they “PEP officers have the support of their commanding officer, **Captain Calderone**.” Aware of many complaints, he has stated that “he does not care and if people don’t like it, they don’t have to walk along the river.” This attitude promotes disregard for the taxpayers who pay for the park.

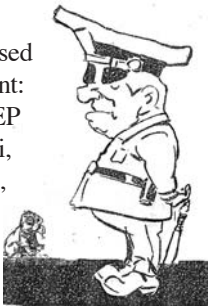
Dogs are not allowed in the Hudson River Park’s bathrooms. One day, when I needed to use the restroom, I secured my dogs to the railing outside, asking my friend to watch them. A PEP officer said I could not do so. Why? It makes no sense.

PEP officers’ bullying behavior is apparently condoned by Hudson River Park officials. Officers patrolling our

public recreational spaces should display common sense when dealing with park users. Minor infractions should not elicit a heavy handed response; it often seems that officers make up their own rules. After all, their purpose is to make our park experience pleasant and safe. It seems the PEP patrol has decided that the Hudson River Park is its fiefdom. Perhaps, it is time to investigate policies that encourage this attitude. Perhaps, a few officers should get their walking papers.

**Memory Lane** — *cont’d from page 1* affair at 13 Carmine Street (the Village Bistro) about parts of a human skeleton found under an ailanthus tree in the rear yard. The “probable murder...was deemed to be a common place burial. The bones crumbled to dust...upon exposure to air indicating they were of significant age. At one time burials were frequently made in the open fields up town, which are now densely populated; these bones, which may have “walked the earth contemporaneously with those of Barnum’s rottenest mummy were probably honestly buried after an honest funeral with honest mourners.” *reported in The New York Times in June 1866.*

Village luminaries including **John Reed** and **e.e. cummings** once lived in Patchin Place. In 1916 fashion icon **Elsa Schiaparelli** (who became the world’s fashion arbiter in the 1930s) and husband Count Wilhelm Wendt de Kerlor moved into an apartment there. Daughter Maria Luisa (mother of actress **Marisa Berenson** and the late photographer **Berry Berenson** — a passenger on one of the planes downed on 9/11 — stayed with a nurse in Connecticut while mama picked up artistic friends like **Man Ray** and **Marcel Duchamp**. Schiaparelli landed her first job in fashion selling **Paul Poiret**’s couture out of a hotel room in NYC; she moved back to Paris in 1922.



## Mini News

On Thursday, June 23 the GVBA held a forum for the Manhattan Borough President candidates at the Village Community School on West 10th Street. **Assemblymember Scott Stringer** won the Democratic primary and faces Republican **Barry Popik** in the general election.

The August 29th edition of *The New Yorker* carried a piece by Ben McGrath on the Sex & the City Tour and its agreement with the Perry Street Block Association. The piece touched on filming in Greenwich Village and how film companies do contribute to the community. For info go to [www.gvba.org](http://www.gvba.org)

The **Carmine Street Block Association** held *Meet the Chefs* on Sept. 17. Proceeds go to various community groups.

The **Perry Street Block Association** held a memorial dinner for **Martin Brodsky** on Sept. 19 at St. John’s in the Village on Waverly Place.

The **Central Village Block Association** sponsored a free jazz concert by the **Arntzen family** on Cornelia Street Aug. 9.

### New NYPD Program

The NYPD is expanding its Auxiliary Police program to play an active role in patrolling the NYC subway system. Auxiliary Police are uniformed volunteers who patrol (in pairs) as extra eyes and ears for the Police. They do not carry guns; they do use the same radios as regular Police Officers and they receive extensive training in Police Science, Criminal Law, Self Defense (including baton), First Aid and CPR. This is a rewarding way to help keep our community (and our subway system) safe. Applicants must be permanent residents (or U.S. Citizens) or at least have a valid visa issue by INS and be between 17 to 60 years old (older volunteers can help with administrative duties).

Please join us as we work together to make our community a safe place for all! For further information please contact the NYPD Transit District #2 Auxiliary Commanding Officer, **Bob Aiello** at 917-816-4529. ([raiello@acm.org](mailto:raiello@acm.org))

## UNION SQUARE PARK UPDATE

by Carol Greitzer

The week after Labor Day seems a fitting time to discuss the future of world famous Union Square Park, the site of the nation's 1st Labor Day celebration and of countless free-speech demonstrations. In this role Union Square gained its designation as a National Historic Landmark; ironically, that aspect of the park is jeopardized. Those of us who have been fighting the NYC Parks Department/14<sup>th</sup> St. BID plan to cede part of the park to an exclusive restaurant and to privatize the Pavilion are grateful for the GVBA position opposing this proposal. This support, together with that of many others — 20 elected officials, including our 3 Manhattan representatives — helped us score impressive victories. NYC Parks has given up the notion of a year round restaurant and will cede the entire sunken area south of the Pavilion to create a much enlarged new playground.

That's the good news! The bad news is that NYC Parks still envisions a seasonal restaurant in the Pavilion itself, augmented by outdoor seating on the north where the farmers market is sited. A commercial enterprise here could jeopardize free speech activities and may interfere with the market. More than 100 restaurants lie within a few blocks of the park; there is no reason for a restaurant here. This is also a question of public policy. On September 7, when north plaza farm stands were summarily relocated to the south plaza to accommodate a commercial event sponsored by **General Motors**, many farmers sported T-shirts with magic marker signs like "Stop the Giveaway of Public Land."



The Pavilion is neglected but should be rehabilitated for desperately needed public use as a platform for rallies, a bandstand, a performance space and, particularly, as a sheltered recreation area. There will be a chance to testify when the Parks Department finalizes its design. It will make a presentation to the Parks Committee of Community Board 5 (CB5) and then to the Arts Commission. Surprisingly, CB 2 (across 14th Street from the park), CB 6 (a block away to the east) and CB 4 (2 blocks to the west) play no part in the official process although their residents use the park. CB 5 alone plays an official role. It has approved the plans, but many of its members were annoyed at not having been notified of the General Motors event. They were told, in effect, "It's a done deal." The NYC Parks Department seems to avoid advance notification of controversial items that should respectfully be referred to the boards — another instance is the failure to inform CB 2 about the Tisch/fountain connection in Washington Square Park.

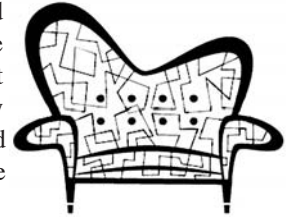
In a related development, the NYC Transportation Agency presented its long-awaited Union Square traffic study to CB 5. The focus was on 17<sup>th</sup> Street intersections, but people raised questions about 14<sup>th</sup> Street intersections as well. So far the Traffic folks seem to be limiting possible changes to minor signal adjustments, but Villagers should insist on having some input into this study.

## Teen Takeover

by Sharon Woolums

On February 5, 2004 a Planning for Results meeting attended by 34 residents was held at the Jefferson Market Library to help "provide excellent neighborhood libraries with customized service to meet community needs" according to its Mission Statement. Listed in the Library Service Priorities' heading was: "...to select the priorities that match the community needs to provide the services that matter most to the people of the community."

**Susan Kent**, who came from Los Angeles a year ago to become Director and Chief Executive of the New York Public Library, may be unaware of Village demographics. She intends to turn our well-used basement reference room into a teen lounge with comfy furniture and TVs to showcase music videos. The furniture would be nice indeed, but how about considering the elderly who need a comfortable chair and who, incidentally, may well be disturbed by the music!



According to 1990 statistics, Greenwich Village is comprised of 80% adults over 25 years of age. Our library devotes one floor to the kids as well as a wall on the top floor for young adult use. Ms. Kent's plan turns over two thirds of the existing space to one fifth of the population. The proportions are askew without considering that kids are in school most days and away on vacations and at camp in the summer.

**Marilyn Dorato** said, "One of the advantages of bringing a child up in NYC is the endless number of things to do. I have a home in an affluent New Jersey town; the teens there who aren't involved in athletics are often bored out of their minds....that leads to trouble. Maybe a teen lounge would be a good thing there." **Doris Diether**, a respected community leader, believes "there are enough places for teens to congregate and the library should be for everyone."

The community is excited at the prospect of sprucing up; we are creative folks, capable of original ideas to make this an active place without penalizing the majority of library users and maintaining the integrity of the landmark building. Better bathrooms facilities would be nice and we do need more computers. Many would love an expanded Greenwich Village history collection "...to document and celebrate the history of the Village": one of the 23 Community Vision Statements from the Planning for Results event. One of the 4 Jefferson Market Branch Library Service Commitments listed was "enable people to explore the history of Greenwich Village." Much of the materials from one of the best reference rooms in town may have to go; there's no way we can squeeze all of it into the second floor without sacrificing important materials. Not one participant mentioned a special "teen room". This "teen lounge" does not address expressed community needs or desires.

Child Guidance Specialist **Elaine Abse** M.S.W., says, "Teenagers need to be brought up to respect books and reading, to respect the need for quiet, to respect the library." The golden rule of the library has always been "Quiet please"! It should stay that way!



## WOMEN'S HOUSE OF DETENTION

By Randall Dana

Some readers may remember the House of Detention for Women that once stood on the present day location of the community gardens behind the Jefferson Market Library. During the years 1875-1877, the Jefferson Market Courthouse as it was originally known, was erected along with a prison and market in the Victorian Gothic style. The complex was designed by noted architects **Frederick Clark Withers** and **Calvert Vaux** at a cost to the city of almost \$360,000 (\$5,593,087 in 2003 dollars)

By 1929 the prison and the market were demolished to make way for a modern 13 story prison facility for women. At this time the French originated Art Deco style was in vogue — in the United States the style assumed a streamlined mechanical form resembling a peculiar mix of Victorian with cubist and lines giving the impression of speed/motion. Vivid colors and geometric patterns were the norm. The new prison was designed in a simplified Art Deco style largely achieved by the use of decorative panels under the windows.

Certainly, the prison had seen a few “names;” **Mae West** was tried in the adjacent courthouse on obscenity charges when her Broadway play *Sex* was targeted by the Society for the Suppression of Vice. West received a \$500 fine and spent the night as an unwilling “guest” in the prison. By 1973 the city decided to demolish it. *The Daily News* featured a story about the start of demolition. A photo of **Mayor John Lindsay** wielding a sledgehammer striking the first blow to what was considered “that dark, wretched building” accompanied the piece.

Soon after, then aged 13, I happened to find the demolition going on; curiosity got the best of me. After the crew left, I found my way into the now open building by climbing through the sidewalk demolition scaffolding and “bridge.” Having previously explored a few other buildings, including the collapsed **Broadway Central Hotel** where I found various artifacts that I removed, I was sure the prison would contain artifacts that could be had simply by removing them. As I explored the floors of the doomed building's rows of cells I saw cell door locks that I couldn't remove — not without a cutting torch. There wasn't much of interest, but on each floor I saw a Faraday fire alarm box; without a sledgehammer I was unable to remove them from the brick and tile walls where they were firmly embedded.

Having gone into the building more than a couple of times, I found an interesting bronze decorative panel on the ground floor in the entrance over the door, I needed just a screwdriver to remove it. I found something to stand on and began removing the little sections, stacking them on the floor. At some point a security guard there to watch the tools and equipment discovered me and ordered me to leave. He wouldn't let me take the panels. However, I returned later that evening and slipped back inside under the cover of darkness, carried out the little pieces under my coat and rode my bike home.

Not satisfied that there were still artifacts I wanted but couldn't get, my dad and I went down to talk to someone in charge of the demolition crew; we found a fellow named

John who was the “shop steward.” I described the fire alarm boxes and asked if he could get some for me. If he knew I had explored the building in its dangerous condition. he didn't admonish me.

Pretty soon John presented me with one of the boxes, I gave him a five dollar bill for it, which for a kid in 1973 was a fair amount of money — about twenty two dollars today. I was excited and asked for more when he had time to get them for me: John reappeared from the cold dark hulk of the building one afternoon on the day he said to stop by — he had two boxes complete with partial electrical conduits and wires sticking out. They were warm, smelling of burned paint from where he had cut the pipes with a gas torch to remove them after breaking them out of the wall.

I'm certain John wasn't going through this trouble and

*Top — A photo of the original 1875 prison with a partial view of the back of the courthouse.*

*Bottom — An original architect's rendering .*



work for the paltry five dollars per box, he was, after all, a well paid shop steward. No, he must have been amused by the kid and his dad who came around his equipment trailer asking for these items and just wanted to do something nice for a kid with a passion: it also kept — he mistakenly thought — the kid out of the dangerous building.

Soon, I had my eye on a large bronze medallion about 3 feet across over the entrance. It depicted the Seal of the City of New York. I asked John about it and he replied "That's brass, they won't let that go, brass and copper all get scrapped." He was speaking of the crew who, I suppose, made extra money scrapping metal on the job sites. Not having experience negotiating such matters with adults — or much of a budget — I didn't pursue it. I often wonder if it did get melted down for the mere 35 cents a pound brass went for back then. A similar plaque was priced recently at \$3500 in a salvage store.

John told me of upcoming jobs and their locations; I followed him, always buying something or other. One was the old Salvation Army Women's Lodge at 242 Spring St. where he taught me the fine art of bargaining. I pointed out a large terra cotta piece over a window and he gestured "how much?" by rubbing his fingers together. I held up the five finger signal for 5 dollars; he shook his head and held up 10 fingers twice for 20 dollars. I nodded "okay" and wondered where the extra unanticipated outlay was going to come from. The poor fellow spent the better part of a half hour on a cold January day with a jack hammer chiselling that out for me.

After a building on 52nd Street, the Great Northern Hotel on 57th Street, and a crumbling tenement on East 3rd Street, I lost track of him, but not before capturing his image at work with a crowbar in the setting sun one late winter afternoon, almost thirty years ago.



*The author's family has a long history in the Village, with ownership of the well known Peter's Backyard restaurant on 10th Street, Bertolotti's Restaurant at the former Poe House on 3rd Street (demolished by NYU) and two bars in Midtown off 1st Avenue. The Backyard Club and the TomCat Club. He resides in Iowa, building pipe organs, collecting antiques and creating architectural sculptures and reproductions as the owner of "Randall's Lost New York City" <http://www.lostnewyorkcity.com>.*

Resources and references; Book about the prison: *Hellhole: the shocking story of the inmates and life in the New York City House of Detention for Women* by Sara Harris New York: E.P. Dutton, 1967. Another web page of interest involving the Village history; Stanford White's "The Cable Building" and Broadway cable car line (Houston Street and Broadway)

## Diving Tank Behind Jefferson Market Jail (A 1920's cartoon)



(Idea of Captain Simms of Engine Company No. 18.)

During June's Gay Pride celebration new cable channel **Logoonline** distributed 5 inch stickers as part of its marketing campaign. Some of these stickers ended up on both private and public property. When the offices of **Councilmember Christine Quinn and Assemblymember Deborah Glick** complained to **Viacom**, the parent company for Logoonline, they were assured that stickers would be omitted from future publicity efforts and that Viacom would remove any offending ones. Despite these assurances and 2 calls to 311 about a sticker on a historic bishop's crook lamppost in front of 244 Waverly Place, remnants remain more than two months later.



By-lined articles express the author's view, not necessarily a GVBA position.

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### **St. Vincent's & Mulry Square — *Cont'd from page 1***

plan was developed in a series of workshops sponsored by CB2's Traffic Strategies Committee. Eventually, DOT's Pedestrian Projects Group participated. Out of this came strategies for extending sidewalk corners, reconfiguring crosswalks, retiming traffic lights and adding greenery in an effort to shorten crossing distances, simplify pathways and provide a safer, more attractive pedestrian environment.

The improvements first would be set up in an interim format – to provide instant relief and test the proposed changes. Based on these findings, they could fine-tune improvements during capital construction. What should have been a short-term trial lasting not more than a year continued for over 5 years. Small wonder the community was thankful when Mulry Square emerged in lasting form with slate pavers, new crosswalks and historic light posts, along with changes in traffic light phasing. Besides the safety features, landscaping on the expanded corners transformed it into a community friendly place befitting the gateway to one of the Village's main centers.

What a disappointment to find those plantings in shambles only 2 years later. The Department of Design and Construction (DDC), confirmed that a DDC contractor had maintained them under an 18-month contract that had ended. This fulfilled DDC's obligation; the community was on its own. A series of inquiries to DDC and DOT revealed that a maintenance agreement was needed between one of these agencies and the community to keep up the plantings. A 501(c)(3) (nonprofit) group chartered with New York City would be needed to make financial arrangements. The final stipulation rounding off this Catch 22 was that whoever did the maintenance needed a \$1 million liability insurance policy.

DOT suggested the possibility of making the area into a Green Street, since it was obvious that no community group could afford such insurance. Green Streets, a cooperative program in which DOT redesigns (and DDC reconstructs) some of the small islands and triangles in NYC streets and the Department of Parks and Recreation does the landscaping and the necessary maintenance or issues permits to volunteers to do the same without requiring separate insurance.

What followed was a year of discussions with DOT and DPR's Manhattan Borough Commissioner's offices, culminating in a survey by Green Streets staff which concluded the Mulry Square plantings were "too scattered" and the DOT landscaping "not Green Streets appropriate" (without considering that the Mulry sites were providing widespread pleasure of greenery, and that Green Streets itself could improve the design). While this was going on, a DDC employee confirmed that St. Vincent's Hospital (which abuts Mulry Square) had committed to do the maintenance. In fact, this DDC person set up St. Vincent's maintenance agreement when the reconstruction was done. The person she dealt with was the Director of Facilities Management at St Vincent's.

We met with St. Vincent's Director of Facilities Management to explore the hospital's taking the very same Mulry Square maintenance

that it had committed to years before (unbeknown to us). The hospital was doing the garden at St. Vincent's Square across the street, and therefore was well equipped to maintain Mulry without much more effort. This Facilities Director admitted he had done the maintenance agreement with DDC but insisted St. Vincent's "had more money then," and "couldn't afford to do it now." He agreed to "run a hose on the plantings now and then" and "maybe throw some mulch on it." From the looks of things, it's doubtful this was ever done.

Mulry Square isn't the only place where St. Vincent's Hospital has reneged on its commitment. The healthy flowers and plantings that bloomed in the St. Vincent's Square garden have been obliterated by a tangle of ugly, unkempt weeds. The history of the push-and-pull battle to plant and maintain this garden goes back to the late 1970's when the Loew's Sheridan movie theater was torn down at that site. The property had always been owned by St. Vincent's; the hospital decided that now was the opportune time to take over the site for hospital uses.

While the hospital mulled over alternatives for a final scheme, it allowed the West Village Committee to create a community garden on the vacant site, albeit temporarily. This garden became a treasured amenity. When St.

Vincent's decided to turn the site into a parking lot, the community was up in arms. CB2 turned the lot down; St. Vincent's abandoned the idea. St. Vincent's came up with other options, such as a nurses' residence or an outpatient facility. Finally, aware of the growing community resentment toward having their garden taken away, St. Vincent's arrived at a middle ground use. The site would provide underground storage space; its development rights would be transferred to build

the main building taller. Above the storage space, a token garden was created, which is the one now a forest of weeds and overgrowth.

This isn't the first time that St. Vincent's has neglected its commitment to care for its leafy charges. Several times over the years the hospital failed to properly tend the St.

### ***The St. Vincent's Garden at 7th Avenue & Mulry Square***





*Tree pit care — St. Vincent's style*

Vincent's Square garden only to be reminded that it was not fulfilling its obligation to plant trees and flowers and maintain them. As long as the community persisted, the hospital fell in line. But while the community was pressing for action, there also was someone from the hospital with whom they could communicate.

St. Vincent's is responsible for two severely neglected foundlings, Mulry and St. Vincent's Squares. Where Sisters Evelyn and Margaret were once in charge, there is a corporate entity. Regardless of the new corporate structure, the hospital has the same responsibility to oversee the well-being of these precious open spaces which comfort and give pleasure not to only the community, but also to its own clients. Crying poor is a poor excuse for failing to fulfill a pledge to care for them, especially in view of the small cost entailed.

St. Vincent's Hospital needs a contact person to work with the community and respond to its concerns. The community, in turn, must work to keep its lines of communication open with the hospital and provide it with a constant reminder of its civic duties. We must be prepared to push and persevere for what the hospital should do as a matter of conscience.

Mulry Square is named for Thomas Maurice Mulry (1855-1916), a Greenwich Village businessman and philanthropist who was active in the St. Vincent de Paul Society and deeply involved in the welfare of foundlings. How fitting it would be to follow the Mulry tradition in caring for the neglected foundling that carries his name as well as its equally ignored cousin and neighbor.

*Editor's Note: According to New York Magazine (Sept. 26, 2005) St. Vincent's CEO and president David Campbell makes a yearly salary of \$1, 254,952.*

According to July 31st's *The Daily News*, 2 of NYC's 10 noisiest bars are in Greenwich Village — **Groove** on MacDougal St. and **Ye Waverly Inn** on Bank St. **Councilmember Eva Moskowitz** — who issued the report — says that each bar on the list claims that all the noise complaints came from just one person. Hmmm!

## Washington Square Park Fountain — *cont'd from page 1*

summer day. The photos illustrate the high degree of order created by the performers and the park's asymmetric design. **Professor Richard Schechner**, authority on performance spaces and director of the study, named this marvel the Fountain Theater and said: "To destroy this would be a crime against New York City."

The Fountain Theater's evolution began with the fountain's installation in 1852. Placed at the intersection of the park's main formal pathways, it mirrored Thompson and 5th Sts. — earlier planned through the space. The intersection and fountain were off center from 5th Ave., although 5th Ave. was by 1852 the toast of the city's streets; the fountain's position has been unchanged for over a century and a half. Marking the spot where the potter's field gallows stood, it is the most historic Village site.

In 1869 the park was redesigned under Olmsted's naturalistic design theory. Gaining curvilinear pathways and plazas; the fountain fit nicely as the middle element in the plan for 3 asymmetric main plazas. It could have been shifted in 1889-90 when **Stanford White** designed the marble arch. White sited the arch in collaboration with **Calvert Vaux** and **Samuel Parsons, Jr.**, (who were respectively the city's Landscape Architect and Superintendent of Plantings); they retained the asymmetry.

With the 1890s' bicycle craze, the city built a slightly raised stone platform around the fountain to provide a defined gathering place; its low height — a few inches — deterred the intrusion of bicycles, carts and carriages. On this circular platform folksingers gathered after WWII followed by the Beats, then by anti-war and civil-rights protesters. **Jane Jacobs** dubbed it a "theater in the round" in her seminal 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*; she said of neighborhood parks: "the finest centers are stage settings for people."



In the later 1960s Jacobs became involved with the park's redesign following its closing to traffic.

More than an acre of asphalt had to be reclaimed for park use. Jacobs' friendship with Mayor Robert Wagner Jr., which had been instrumental in eliminating the traffic, became key in transferring control of the redesign from the Parks Department, headed by **Newbold Morris**, who was Robert Moses's successor and ally, to 9 local architects.

The team, led by landscape architect **Robert B. Nichols**, celebrated the gathering space by designing a grand plaza or stage in the freed-up space around the fountain. By creating a shallow sunken plaza and surrounding it with a low rim abutment, seating would be provided; the stage would be better defined and protected from the square's users on bicycles, skateboards, roller-blades and scooters. Nichols modeled the new plaza on Central Parks' centerpiece, Bethesda Terrace: the Washington Square fountain plaza is larger and more popular than its sister space in Central Park.

The Fountain Theater remains powerfully relevant; the whole theater — its fountain, sculptures, plazas, pathways and abutments — should be preserved as a historic cultural landscape. Parks plans to raise the fountain to grade level and center it on the arch, destroying the plaza, its rim abutment and its trees. In a campaign that would make Moses proud, Parks makes assertions based on pure speculation and factual misstatements. Here are several examples (there are many):

**Abutment seating:** Parks claims seating around the fountain plaza is 30 inches high and available only to the young with upper body



strength. In fact, this seating faces the plaza; one need take only a few steps to the park side of the abutment where the seating is 15 inches high. One can sit and swivel around to face the fountain. The rest (about half) of the abutment seating around the trees is 18-22-inches high.

**Handicap access:** Parks claims the sunken plaza lacks handicap access because the ramps are too steep. In fact, the 50 foot wide northern ramp incline is code compliant. The ramps are steps that Parks covered with asphalt rather than fix properly. The handicapped are incensed that their condition is used to sell the plan, which they oppose; The Mobility Impaired Artists at Westbeth have joined the community lawsuit against Parks.

**Health of the trees:** Parks claims that the *saphora japonica* trees planted in bays around the plaza are unhealthy because their roots are encased in concrete. Not so. A third of the bay surface is open to the park; the bay wall is only 18-22 inches high at a distance from the tree trunk of 4-7 feet. According to Robert Nichols, the landscape architect who designed the plaza in 1969 and who recently visited the square, poor care is the problem — the trees have not been fed or inspected by an arborist to determine, for example, if the roots could grow deeper. There is nothing wrong with the tree bays.

**Peripheral fence:** Parks claims a fence is essential for security and to protect peripheral greenery.

The 6th Precinct which runs the 24 hour surveillance cameras and undercover cops say the fence is unnecessary and that the park is the safest public space in the city. While the existing 30 inch high pipe rail enclosure may be inadequate, a 30 inch

decorative iron fence, such as the one surrounding Tribeca Park, is sufficient. Parks says that all the other neighborhood parks have high fences and ignores Tribeca Park; this demonstrates Parks' misunderstanding of Washington Square's unique character: a combination village green, theater and tourist mecca. The square's Olmstedian design has worked wonderfully without a high fence for 135 years.

### Use as a gathering and performance space:

Parks claims its redesign will improve park use. This claim appears to be based on speculation, contrary to all evidence. In *Drawing a Circle in the Square* the study proved that the park's current layout is perfect; it should stand until an equally competent study proves otherwise. The park's design has accommodated both normal crowds and the anti-war protest gathering in 2003 numbering some 200,000. Its asymmetric quirkiness reflects the

neighborhood and contrasts Parks' design. As art historian **Jessie McNab** puts it: "The imposition of a vast, geometric paved cruciform system extending from the fountain plaza at the compass points, of the same material as the fountain plaza and at the same level as the plaza reflects the style of **Andre Lé Nôtre** (1613-1700) with straight long walks between disciplined plantings, typical of the taste of the French *ancien regime*. It has no place in Washington Square."

Parks' plan will, according to a GVBA position letter, turn the fountain into a pedestrian traffic island. Virtually, all of the city's arts community including the Fine Arts Federation, Municipal Arts Society and Historic Districts Council oppose Parks' plan. Concerted action can stop Robert Moses redux.



*The Washington Square Park fountain and the arch.*

*Photos courtesy of Hubert J. Steed*

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## DOINGS

**Terry Howell**, Christopher Street Patrol vice president, helped nab a trio of purse snatchers at midnight, August 2. Howell chased one suspect while the other two fled in a taxi. All three were apprehended....☺ Worry no more that singer **Billy Joel** may be homeless. He bought the **Seward Johnson** Perry Street townhouse — with lap pool — for \$6,000,000.... ☺ No doubt about pooch power. According to the *New York Sun* real estate broker **Gary Friedland** has developed a unique sales strategy. His dogs, Daisy and Huck, wear jackets featuring his company's logo and draw ooh, aahs and sales.... ☺ Is the Gotti family looking to become Village restaurateurs? **Victoria Gotti** hosted a Heaven on Earth celebration (whatever that is) for son John at 49 Grove. She was spotted on Bleecker Street with photographer in tow.... ☺ Singer **Carly Simon's** sumptuous Village home is featured in the October issue of *In Style* magazine. Since they don't tell the address, neither will we....☺ Villager **Candace Busnell** (who wrote *Sex & the City*) has a new book out — *Lipstick Jungle*....☺ Brat pack actor **Andrew McCarthy** sold his Bedford Street townhouse (near Christopher) for \$3.25 million....☺ **West Village Dog** held a benefit at the Brass Monkey Bar on September 21 to raise money for animals affected by Hurricane Katrina.