

HERBERT MUSCHAMP

The Ominous Message of a Box on Union Square

ONE UNION SQUARE SOUTH fails on three counts. The architecture is big and boring, the artwork glued to its main facade is pretentious, and the thinking that joined the two is out of date. This is the worst example yet seen of a formula that has helped to drain the life out of New York architecture in recent years: the use of public art to cover up for uninspired buildings. What we also have here is a crisis for the Municipal Art Society, the venerable civic organization that brokered this unhappy consortium of art, architecture and real estate development. If anything of value can be salvaged from this failure, it is the opportunity to examine the circumstances from which it arose.

Designed by the New York firm Davis Brody Bond, the 475,000-square-foot building occupies a conspicuous site on West 14th Street between Broadway and Fourth Avenue. The building sits on axis with Union Square West and is visible from much of the length of Park Avenue South. The subway station below is a transportation hub. It is one of the most privileged spots in lower Manhattan.

The design adheres to zoning restrictions for mixed-use development. A 21-story residential tower rises above a wider five-story commercial base. The dull box of a base is, as they say, packed with program, meaning, in this case, that it houses a Virgin Megastore, a Circuit City, a Starbucks and a multiplex movie theater. Different materials — metal and glass for the base, brick for the tower — heighten the contrast between the two parts. To diminish the impression of bulk, the tower is fragmented into vertical segments of varying heights. Recessed areas between the segments are faced with glass.

"Metronome," a public artwork by the team of Kirsten Jones and Andrew Ginzel, covers a 10-story-high area at the base of the building's northern facade. This mixed-media work, primarily fashioned from brick, metal and glass, also incorporates special effects made with lighting, steam and sound. The theme is time and place. Its most dramatic element is a composition of

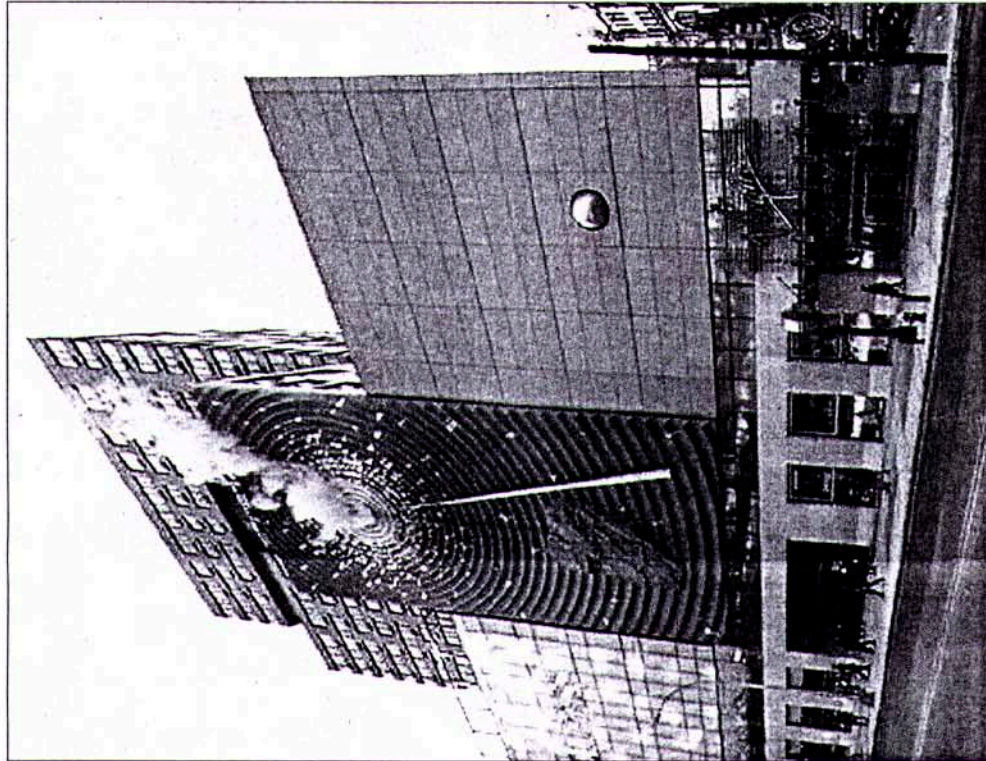
A highly visible building offers an example of a formula that has been draining the life out of New York architecture.

concentric circles, rendered in gold-flecked brick, that ripple outward from a round opening in the wall.

Clouds of steam gush from the gaping hole, while musical tones issue twice a day from a long horn that extends diagonally from the steam toward the street below. The cosmic dimension is further amplified by a sphere, half black and half gold, that revolves in sync with lunar phases. On the left side, an immense, illuminated digital panel incoherently tracks some chronological measurement not worth thinking about. A simulated boulder, a souvenir of modern Manhattan's Precambrian bedrock, lodges like an asteroid fragment in the relief's rippling rings.

Above the smoke, a hand protrudes into space. The hand is modeled from the equestrian statue of George Washington that dominates the southern end of Union Square Park and is intended to represent the square's social history. The place was named for the reunification of the United States achieved by the Civil War. Later it became the epicenter for the country's radical politics, the scene of rallies, protests and soapbox oration. A debate about art and architecture may lack the bloodcurdling urgency of the tempest over Sacco and Vanzetti. But for those who care about the state of the city's architecture, One Union Square South provides provocation enough.

The folks who designed this art and architecture package are not bad guys. Davis Brody produced some of the finest residential projects of the 1970's. Waterside, on the East River front of midtown, and River Park Towers, in the Bronx, remain that dec-



"Metronome," a 10-story artwork, stands at the base of One Union Square South.

ade's finest high-rise contributions to the New York skyline. With their notched corners and flaring upper stories, these clustered towers are triumphs of scale.

Jones and Ginzel, too, have demonstrated a good grasp of scale in the past. In 1994, the team created a delicious work for the new Stuyvesant High School at Battery Park City. Souvenirs of each graduating class were encased inside bricks incorporated into the tiled walls of the school's lobby. This past year, they completed work on a series of tile-size mosaic eyes for the Chambers Street subway station. Both projects draw on the comic tension between extra-small elements and the extra-large spaces in which they are dispersed.

Scale, however, has defeated both teams at One Union Square South. Despite the efforts to break down its bulk, this building bears no appreciable spatial relationship to Union Square or to the Civil War and City Beautiful-era structures that surround it. "Metronome" is also defeated by a poor sense of scale. The artists' basic miscalculation was to assume that a large surface called for comparably big forms. Billboard designers can make this approach work, and perhaps a commercial sign would have worked better here. Wouldn't you prefer a sultry cloud of CK One to "Metronome's" blast of nothingness, especially if the billboard photo of malcontent waifs were routinely changed?

THE art and the architecture overlap but scarcely interact. Think, by contrast, of the Doges' Palace, where the pink-and-white brick diaper pattern of the facade (on a scale with Jones and Ginzel's previous work) is interrupted by large windows, of irregular size and placement, that correspond to the functions of the rooms within. Program should have also driven the design of One Union Square South. Theaters, shops, other public spaces and the circulation between them could have offered a perpetually changing spectacle to the surrounding cityscape. Instead, program is packed inside the box

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A Box on Union Square

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with little care for its visual potential.

Zoning and commercial space design are largely at fault here. But the architects and artists cannot be accused of pushing the envelope they were given in an imaginative direction. And this is a cause for alarm, because, from its inception, the project had the support of the Municipal Art Society and the Public Art Fund, two civic groups that enjoy estimable reputations as stewards of aesthetic quality. Their role in the Union Square fiasco deserves a close look.

In 1995, the Municipal Art Society was approached by the Related Company, the developer of One Union Square South, for guidance with the project. Related was trying to do the right thing. The company saw that a building at this prime location deserved to rise above the usual commercial container.

The society responded by polling a group of architects with the question: What firm, besides their own, would they recommend for the job?

Those who received the most votes were then invited to participate in a limited design competition. Human nature being what it is, this approach tilted the odds toward a lowest common denominator design. A safe but scarcely inspired choice, Davis Brody Bond was unlikely to outshine any of the architects who were polled. No one would place their work on architect's cutting edge.

Moreover, it has been some years since New York itself has supported architectural innovation. Here's a recent illustration. Oculus, a newsletter put out by the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects, is not known for beating up on its members. Last month's issue contained reports on four new buildings with varying degrees of creative ambition. The least venturesome, designed by a local firm, received a favorable review. Two, by out-of-town firms, were roughly panned. The fourth, designed by an architect with offices in Paris and New York, got a mixed notice.

Translation: artistic quality and ambition count for less than local standing. A mix of xenophobia and philistinism, the newsletter displayed the kind of artistic protectionism that has prevailed here for some time. It allows less talented commercial New York firms to think that

they are as good as the field's most fertile minds. Or perhaps even better than them. Aren't the stars of architecture merely fashionable? goes the unstated argument. Aren't our plodding local talents more down-to-earth, more socially responsible, less captivated by passing fancy? No. But this mentality explains why New Yorkers with an interest in architecture have to spend so much time on planes.

The Municipal Art Society has done little to break this all-in-the-family stranglehold. In recent decades, the society has been chiefly identified with the cause of architectural preservation. Thanks to its efforts, landmarks like Grand Central Terminal have been spared. But if the group wants to be thought of as an arbiter of architectural taste — if it wants the authority to recommend architects to developers, for exam-

Playing it safe is all about these days.

ple — then it will also have to accept some responsibility for the deterioration of this art form in New York in recent years. One Union Square South arouses scant confidence that the society can bump up the level of performance.

Founded in 1893, the Municipal Art Society is a fruit of the City Beautiful movement which also produced Chicago's Columbian Exposition that same year. The integration of art and architecture was fundamental to the group's original mission. In 1977, the Public Art Fund was founded to reinvent this ideal for the modern city. It was conceived to create visual counterpoints to the severe forms of modern design. The fund reflected the same enlightened initiative, and was created by some of the same people behind the enactment of Percent-for-Art legislation.

But public art is supposed to supplement architecture. It is not meant to replace it. Which is to say, the Municipal Art Society has been letting down its side of the City Beautiful equation. If this group's responsibility is to uphold standards of architectural quality, the New York cityscape is visible proof of its shortcomings. I leave aside for now the ethical issues raised by the organization's

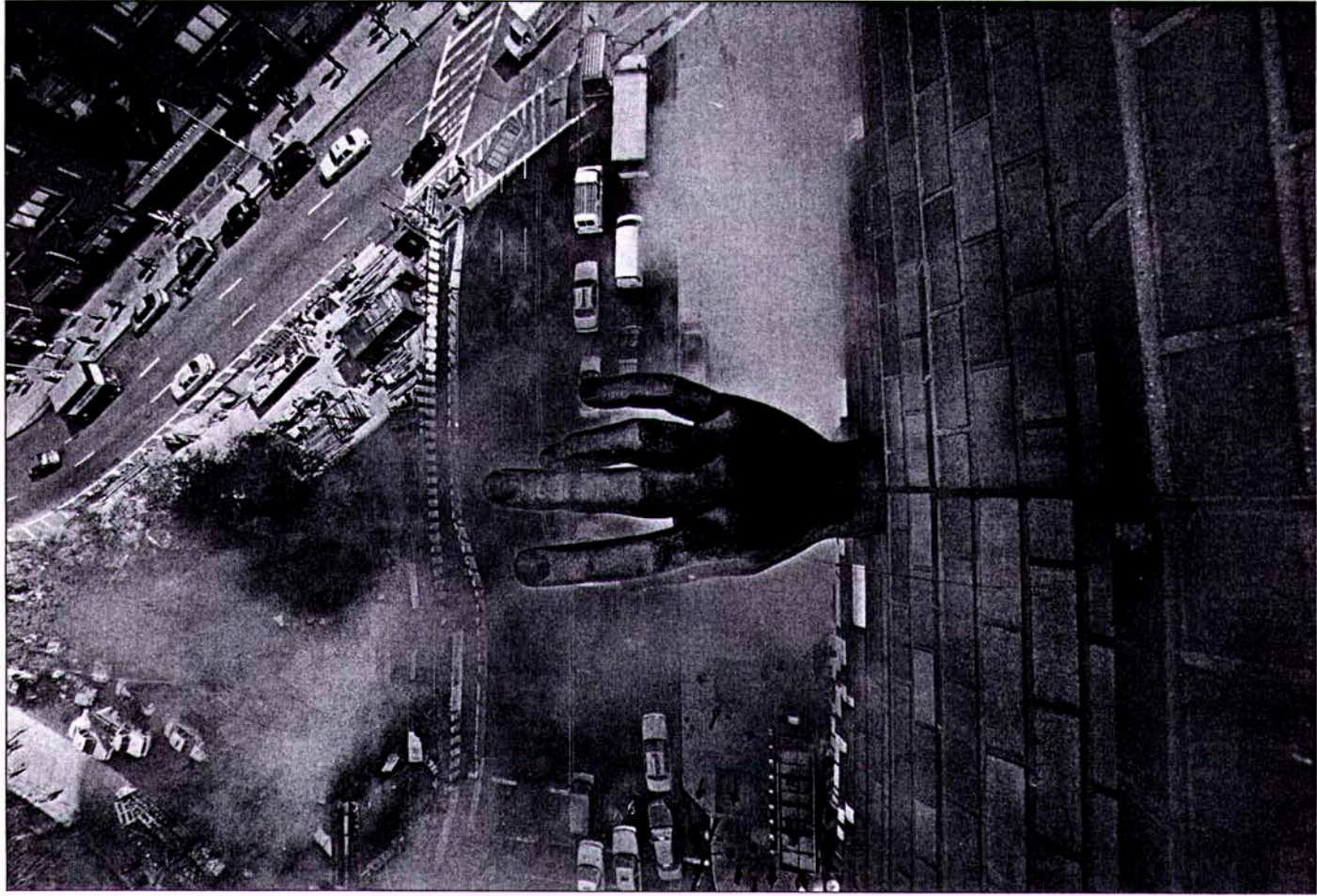
practice of recommending architects (including its own board members) to commercial developers. But the stunning provincialism of New York architecture since the late 1960's is a cultural scandal that public art programs cannot cover up, any more than a cloud of smoke can mask the banal design of One Union Square South.

The society's neglect of architecture reflects attitudes in the city at large. In the 50's and 60's, architecture had the support of a cultural consensus once rooted in liberal arts education. That consensus is what enabled projects like Lever House, the Seagram Building, the Guggenheim Museum, the Ford Foundation Building and the CBS Building to be realized. It is also what enabled such projects to be criticized. The liberal consensus culture had room both for articially ambitious work and for robust attacks on it. Part of the consensus was the expectation of dissent, and not simply over the work of out-of-towners. What it didn't have room for was the habit of playing it safe.

Playing it safe is what urbanism is all about these days. What's left of the liberal consensus now rallies behind preservation and public art, two sacred cows that need no rallies at this point. Who can argue with preservation? Wouldn't that be tantamount to joining the vandals who pulled down Penn Station? And who but a Jesse Helms would oppose public art?

Yet between them, these two worthy causes have helped to generate a hostile climate for architecture, the most public of all arts. At Battery Park City, for example, an innovative public art program served as a fig leaf over the reactionary thinking that produced the development's retrograde, ersatz pre-war buildings. Reactionary? How dare you call us Reactionary! Why, we've just spent millions on projects by Mary Miss, Siah Armajani and Ned Smyth!

But when public art reaches the architectural scale favored by Miss, or by Jones and Ginzel, then the question naturally arises: Yes, but where's the architecture? On Union Square South, you can't miss the answer. Thanks to Jones and Ginzel, there's even a big target pasted on it. The answer is: There's no architecture here. This building has no idea what it is doing here. It has nothing fresh to say, not even an eloquent silence. It's just some space in a box with a leaky hole in it. □



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times
A giant hand protrudes into space as part of "Metropole," the public artwork at One Union Square South.

UNION SQUARE

Instant Gratification

To the Editor:

About two years ago, as construction on One Union Square South began, a man was passing out leaflets that implored the community to stop the "ugly building" ["The Ominous Message of a Box on Union Square," Jan. 2]. At the time I didn't pay much attention, since it is hard for a layman to project how a proposed building will fit into the neighborhood. As Mr. Muschamp correctly points out, this is why there are organizations like the Municipal Art Society. Instead, we should have listened to that pamphleteer.

I couldn't agree more with Mr. Muschamp as to the blight that this monstrosity has put onto Union Square. Thanks to "Metronome," the so-called public artwork by Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, it is not something we can even ignore.

I disagree, though, with Mr. Muschamp on one point. While "Metronome" is used to cover up an uninspired building, it conceptually fits very well with the building's "program." The concentric circles with the gaping hole strongly resemble a stereo speaker. The commercial space below is occupied by a Virgin Megastore. The digital panel gives the time down to milliseconds, the gauge by which we judge the efficacy of computers. The space below is occupied by Circuit City.

What we have here, and will live with for much of the next century, is an architectural rendering of the American culture of the 1990's. Union Square is bombarded with instant gratification through the aluminum and plastic flash of throw-away consumerism. The violation of our space that this "public art" has committed is to take "the shopping mall" and turn it inside out. Do the artists think we need to be reminded that we don't live in Paramus, N.J.?

JOHN FAWCETT
New York

Ruminations on Time

To the Editor:

While there is much of merit in Mr. Muschamp's review of One Union Square South, and of the general anemia affecting architecture and public art in New York, I wonder if it was his intent to be so dismissive of the work "Metronome."

He refers to a portion of the work

as "an immense, illuminated digital panel" that "incoherently tracks some chronological measurement not worth thinking about." Had he thought about it he might have found that it is, in fact, a large and very elegant digital hourglass, based on a 24-hour clock; time "pours" from the numbers on the right (which show the time remaining in the day) to the left (which shows the time elapsed in the day). While these seconds are flying by in a digital blur on one part of the work, a simulated boulder reminds viewers of the lazy passage of glacial time, which, over eons, formed the bedrock of Manhattan. The other elements are likewise very thoughtful and sophisticated ruminations on time, its passage and the ways in which we mark it.

JEFFERY RUDELL
New York

Make It Beautiful

To the Editor:

While on the subject, I encourage Mr. Muschamp to look at some of the urban-design atrocities being committed by the city itself. Take the intersection of Park Avenue and East 33rd Street. Can the huge signs that say "Pedestrians Prohibited" and the barrier fences be justified in the center of the most pedestrian-oriented city in America? How about the expressway-style signs at Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn? Is the plaza in Long Island City at the foot of the Queensboro Bridge anything more than a colossal piece of asphalt?

The fact that these important pieces of our urban puzzle are being designed and built without any input from New York's deep pool of artistic talent is absurd. Let's see if the Municipal Art Society and others can be true to their "City Beautiful" roots and make the city beautiful.

MICHAEL KING
New York

A Respect for Context

To the Editor:

Mr. Muschamp correctly assesses One Union Square South as a colossal failure on several counts. He aptly notes that "despite the efforts to break down its bulk, this building bears no appreciable spatial relationship to Union Square or to the Civil War and City Beautiful-era structures that surround it."

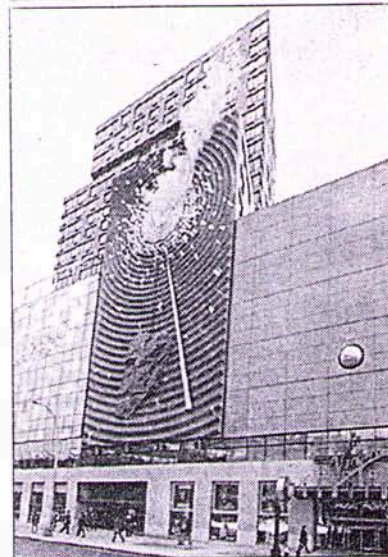
Quite true! It is mere common sense that what succeeds in Union

Square and throughout lower Manhattan is a respect for context. But it is important to recognize that historic preservation is a cornerstone of such sensitivity in planning. So why does Mr. Muschamp refer to historic preservation as a "sacred cow" in no need of support? The loss in recent years of several historic structures in lower Manhattan is proof enough that this is not so.

The construction of One Union Square South required the demolition of the previous structure, 58 East 14th Street, which still contained significant portions of the legendary Union Square Theater. East of the square a series of banal New York University dormitories and other developments have been built or are under construction on the ruins of Luchow's, the Palladium and the Jefferson Theater, thus solidifying the destruction of all traces of this once-great theater district.

This autumn a final urgent call to save the historic Coogan Building in North Chelsea went unheeded, so that a series of incredibly mediocre towers could proceed unhindered on the newly up-zoned portion of Sixth Avenue between 23rd and 30th Streets.

I think it is unfair to lay all the blame for such mistakes as One Union Square South on the Municipal Art Society and the Public Art Fund. Such nonprofit groups do not hold all



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

"Metronome," on the facade of One Union Square South.

the aces in the game of real estate. They at best mitigate the worst excesses thereof.

LAURENCE FROMMER
New York

Art Society's Role

To the Editor:

The Municipal Art Society agrees with Mr. Muschamp's call for better commercial architecture. However, we would like to clarify some points regarding One Union Square South.

The Union Square Community Coalition first sounded the alarm about the building originally proposed for this very visible site. At their request, the society approached the developer (not the other way around), urging that this site deserved more than a standard development solution.

The society did not design the building. That isn't our role. What we did, instead, was encourage the developer to consider different design options. We asked two dozen architects to make recommendations from among their peers; the developer then commissioned three well-respected architects from that list to prepare proposals for the site. From those proposals, he chose the design firm of Davis Brody Bond.

The architect, not the society or the Public Art Fund, proposed incorporating a complementary sculptural design. Mr. Muschamp may or may not like the resulting work of art, but it was very much a design response to the building's site. The building closes the Park Avenue vista on the south just as Grand Central Terminal caps it to the north: the sculpture corresponds to the large sculptural group on Grand Central's south facade.

Finally, the architects who serve on our board no doubt were surprised to hear that the society promotes commissions for its own board members since, as often as not, the society opposes projects designed by its own members. Rather than proposing architects for specific commissions, we often sponsor design competitions for such important projects as Times Square, the West Side waterfront and Columbus Circle. On occasion, we hire architects to explore creative alternatives for large projects.

Commercial development in New York unquestionably needs to be better. Debate is crucial to that process, but so is a balanced accounting of the facts.

KENT BARWICK
New York

The writer is the president of the Municipal Art Society of New York.

Architect's Response

To the Editor:

As the architects for One Union Square South, we obviously disagree with Mr. Muschamp's criticism of the building and "Metronome."

The original list of architects selected to submit designs for the project included such firms as Robert A. M. Stern and Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer, hardly the "lowest common denominator" of design firms. We won that competition largely because we proposed that a large public artwork be created for the facade of the building. Davis Brody Bond was not selected simply by a poll, nor because our firm was a safe choice, as Mr. Muschamp implied.

He also does not mention that a second competition was held for the public artwork. Of the several artists asked to submit drawings and maquettes by the Public Art Fund, the team of Andrew Ginzel and Kristin Jones was selected.

It is one thing for Mr. Muschamp not to like the building or the artwork. It is quite another to attack our reputation and use our work to build an argument based on incomplete facts and specious associations between events. Davis Brody Bond has continued to expand upon our founding legacy of innovative and responsible design. To suggest otherwise is to indicate a lack of familiarity with our work.

STEVEN M. DAVIS, F.A.I.A.
New York

The writer is a partner in the New York design firm of Davis Brody Bond.

Public Art

To the Editor:

One Union Square South and "Metronome" provide Mr. Muschamp with the ammunition he has been seeking for some time to attack New York City's architectural failings. However, to lay the blame for uninspired buildings at the feet of public art in general and artists in particular is disingenuous. Starting with the singular example of "Metronome," Mr. Muschamp goes on to claim that public art has "helped generate a hostile climate for architecture." The spectrum of contemporary art

practices brought under the umbrella of public art is so much wider than Mr. Muschamp's "supplement" to architecture. (Think Keith Haring on Park Avenue, Rachel Whiteread's "Water Tower" in SoHo or Barbara Kruger's billboards throughout the city.) It is an open dialogue that enriches our public spaces and public lives.

SUSAN K. FREEDMAN
TOM ECCLES
New York

The writers are the president and director, respectively, of the Public Art Fund.

Union Square's Name

To the Editor:

As a senior at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pa., I recently completed an architectural and historical study of Union Square. In his excellent article, Mr. Muschamp states that the square was given its name because of the "reunification of the United States achieved by the Civil War." My research indicates that the area that was to become Union Square was acquired in 1832, well before the Civil War, by the New York State Legislature to serve as an intersection of two streets. The square was named for the "union" of Albany Post Road (Broadway) and Boston Road (Fourth Avenue). It was the center of a fashionable district by the 1850's. Incidentally, in 1861 the square served as a gathering place for supporters of the Union cause.

AMELIA G. BAKER
Scotch Plains, N.J.