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# Passing Time Union Square

No genuine public square is really complete without a time piece. Public clocks are a necessity in Gotham where the concrete and glass towers obscure and distort the passing rays of the Sun and our urban work/play schedules disconnect us from the natural rhythms of the Earth. It's odd then, that New York City should have so few clocks in public spaces, although most New Yorkers are probably too cynical to ever trust such a thing. Anyway, Union Square Park is about to get an innovative time machine designed by the internationally known artist team of Jones & Ginzel. The clock will be built into the facade of Union Square's newest real-estate development — Union Square South, a \$150 million, 500,000 square foot residential and retail/entertainment complex.

While it is not unusual for a private real-estate developer to include public art in a project, it is unusual that The Related Companies, the developer, opted for a public review process rather than simply relying on the developer's own taste. Union Square South is an as-of-right development, meaning that the project did not require any prior community or city agency approvals. So, it was some what surprising that the developer voluntarily opened up the design process for outside review — a decision that led the developer to scrap his original plans. But this is not your typical developer, and this is not your typical neighborhood.

After years of growth and revitalization, the Union Square/14th Street neighborhood is politically galvanized, its community leaders are connected and well respected for their efforts in cleaning up the park and attracting new businesses to the area. Add to this a Chief Executive Officer of The Related Companies, Stephen Ross, who was Chairman of the Municipal Art Society. MAS is a civic organization dedicated to the protection and enhancement of the built environment, and encourages community review and participation.

This all started when The Related Companies' initial plans for Union Square South were met with disappointment and concern. The Union Square Community Coalition and MAS convinced the developer to sponsor a competition to find a 'world class' architect to design something more in keeping with this prominent site. Ultimately, the scheme submitted by the New York firm of Davis Brody Bond was selected. Strangely enough it included a major public art component, an 'Art Wall' that would serve as the building's vocal point. At this point, The Related Companies retained the services of the Public Art Fund, a nonprofit organization, to develop an artist selection process. An Advisory Board made up of local representatives, art experts, MAS and the architects reviewed over 100 submissions, from which six were commissioned to create formal proposals. In the end, the artist team of Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel were selected.

Jones & Ginzel have worked collaboratively since 1983 creating temporary and permanent site-specific installations for a diverse range of public sites throughout the world — the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, the Aquario Romano in Rome and for the 1991 Triennale in New Delhi. Closer to home they have created permanent art works for Stuyvesant High School in Battery Park City, and for the MTA's World Trade Center subway station. Central to their work is their fascination with time and memory.

Rather than simply put up a traditional time piece that is occasionally referenced by the harried pedestrian late for an appointment or a date, Jones & Ginzel have proposed a time piece that considers all the dimensions of time — geologic, historic and cosmic. Its components are a massive

granite boulder, steam, sound, a 24-hour digital clock, and a black and gold orb.

Architecturally, the facade is divided into three distinct fields reflecting the different interior uses. Visually, the most significant aspect of the facade is the brick art wall, measuring 100 feet in height and 60 feet across. The Art Wall bisects the glass and metal skinned commercial sections of the building, creating a vertical tie-in to the brick-clad residential tower. Concerned about maintaining the visual connection to the tower above, the architects requested that the artwork not cover the brick but work with it. Jones & Ginzel proposed a fluid-like rippling surface, concentric waves (up to 12" in relief) of brick emanate from a dark circular void which hovers about two-thirds of the way up the wall. Like ripples on a pond, the waves are tighter and more active towards the epicenter and calmer, flatter towards the edge. Caught in the waves' are flecks of gold. According to the artists one might 'read' the surface as an explosion forcing the waves out from the center, or an implosion sucking everything into the void.

The void, or eye, pulses with light and expels steam. At noon and midnight the steam erupts into a volcanic blast accompanied by the sound of a horn. A long, tapered horn is angled across the lower two-thirds of the wall. Both the steam and the horn represent the decaying, ephemeral nature of time — an anticipated moment arrives and then fades away. Above and below the eye are symbols of enduring time: a granite boulder, representing the ancient bedrock of



Manhattan, interrupts the brick surface at the bottom of the wall, and above, the colossal hand of George Washington gestures to the city. Or, could it be that George's hand is gesturing to himself — Henry Kirke Brown's 1856 equestrian statue of Washington is located directly across the street in the park.

On the left glass wall (the facade of United Artists' 14-theater complex), time is portrayed as something that is at once advancing and retreating. Here time is displayed in large numbers which count the twenty-four hours of the day while simultaneously subtracting the time remaining, so at noon the clock will read 12000000.00000012 and at midnight 24000000.00000000. Since time is displayed down to hundredths of a second, the middle will be a perpetual blur of numbers. Finally, the eastern wall will be in sync with celestial time; a large black and gold sphere will turn with the phases of the moon. In its totality the time piece offers a perspective on time that is both mysterious and complex.

While the artist team has many obstacles to clear, like finding a place that can cast 18 inch curving bricks, their time piece promises to further distinguish Union Square as a unique and lively public space. In so many ways, Union Square is already a contemplation on time and public memory. Consider, the canopy of trees now turning to a darker green after weeks of a bright Spring green preceded by months of baren-ness. Likewise, the farmers market with its changing stock of produce and plants reminds us of Nature's cycles of dormancy and bounty. Then consider the architecture surrounding the park as another concept of time, one that chronicles the City's social, economic and political history. One might argue that such considerations could occur with any clock, say even the one on the Met Life tower overlooking the park, but I don't think so. Jones & Ginzel have deliberately set about the creation of a time piece that reflects upon the vastness of time and its multi-dimensional flow. Their clock illustrates how time, as a vertical line that ascends into the heavens and descends into the Earth, pierces the present physical world connecting us to our past and future, to the physical realm and to the cosmos.

Scheduled to be completed by 1998, it will be interesting to see if the outside review process yields a final design that is distinguishable from other commercial real-estate projects. Perhaps it is unfair to expect anything different in terms of the outcome, but one thing is definite, the city benefits from public discussions about the physical form of the city and the relation between buildings and the public realm. It is about time that we begin to focus on how new architecture and contemporary art, in relation to historic sites and classical aesthetics, reflect the energy and dynamism of the city and its residents.—Jim Clark

Left: Architect Davis Brody Bond's designs for Union Square South, chosen by The Municipal Art Society on behalf of The Related Companies, L.P. Below: A monumental public ArtWall designed by the artist team of Jones/Ginzel for Union Square South. Images courtesy Communications/Marketing Action, Inc., NYC.

