

AIA New York Chapter

The Founding Chapter of
The American Institute of Architects



19 December 2005

Joyce Frank Menschel, President
Art Commission of the City of New York
City Hall, Third Floor
New York, New York 10007

Dear President Menschel:

On behalf of the AIA New York Chapter and its 4,000 architect and affiliate members in New York City, I am pleased to convey our support of the Washington Square Park renovation and restoration project being proposed by the NYC Parks Department. This project was presented to members of our Policy Board, who are authorized to take positions on behalf of our membership.

As a former Art Commission liaison I know the importance of the occasional outside voice, coming to the Commission with information, advice or design analysis. That the renovation of Washington Square Park is the first project in memory (at least a decade) where the AIA New York Chapter has come here to express its position is indicative of the importance of the project to our members, and the larger community of architects and architectural enthusiasts in this city.

Washington Square Park is one block to the north of the AIA's Center for Architecture, located at 536 LaGuardia Place. As neighbors we know its glories and its problems all too well. Many different issues have been addressed and resolved in a design process led by the Parks Department that has been singularly inclusive of the diversity of opinion reflected by the demographics and engaged involvement of those who live or work in Greenwich Village. The AIA New York Chapter and our Center for Architecture have attempted to assist in this process. Our space was used by the City Council to conduct a formal hearing on the design, a hearing at which George Vallonikas and Borough Commissioner Bill Castro answered many of the concerns pertaining to dog runs, fences, and mounds. Our Center for Architecture Foundation conducted a design charrette with neighborhood schoolchildren, providing a very focused group of young park users, expressing their strongly held beliefs on what makes a park fun for kids.

That said, we are here today to support the aspects of the redevelopment that are on the agenda.

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Specifically, the relocation and restoration of the Holley and Garibaldi statues merits support since the congregative spaces created will be more harmonious in their use, disposition and orientation. The statues themselves, facing south towards 536 LaGuardia Place, will have daylight better illuminating their superb sculptural qualities, while commemorating more appropriately the technological and political history that these two significant individuals represent.

More importantly we voice our support for the redesign and restoration of the fountain, which we particularly appreciate because of the proposed changes in grade that allow for full accessibility. It is an embarrassment to the City of New York that the fountain area is at present not fully accessible to people with disabilities. The new design goes beyond the basic requirements of ADA and our City's building code, to embrace the principles of Universal Design, taking equal access as the impetus to design excellence. As the 2004 recipient of the Paralyzed Veterans of America design excellence award, I can say that the AIA New York Chapter commends the Parks Department for felicitously resolving a complicated sectional, geometric and historical problem. We look forward to seeing the proposed improvements to the park proceed quickly, to complement the restoration of the arch, and the other park enhancements not on today's agenda.

Sincerely,

Fredric Bell, FAIA
Executive Director

cc: Jackie Snyder, Executive Director