The Iconography of Patriotism
George Washington and Abraham Lincoln in Union Square

Joanna Merwood-Salisbury
School of Architecture, Victoria University of Wellington
Joanna.merwood-salisbury@vuw.ac.nz

An original component of the 1811 grid plan for New York City, Union Square has acquired an association as a place in which the ideals of American republicanism and democracy are both signified and enacted. The square is occupied by a central lawn, a series of statues, a small building to the north, and an open plaza set aside as a place for public meetings. Using the concept of “urban semiology” described by Roland Barthes, this paper is concerned with two things: the ways in which the signifying function of the square has been attributed variously to the statues and to the open space of the plaza; and the ways in which the signifying elements were first created, then altered and appropriated by different urban actors at different times over the past two centuries. Exploring the question of agency, of the mechanisms through which signification is achieved, the focus will be on the ways in which the statues and the open space of the plaza have served as symbols, icons, and indexes of political ideas. Concluding with the early Cold War period, when the symbolic expression of global politics across all forms of culture from media, to the arts, to architecture and city planning, was at its bluntest and least nuanced, the paper will discuss the nineteenth and early twentieth century history of the square in order to understand how and why the use and meaning of Union Square continues to be so contentious.

Keywords:

Located on Broadway between 14th and 17th Streets, Union Square in New York City includes both a major subway interchange and a landscaped park. Recently renovated by landscape architects Michael Van Valkenburgh and Associates, it plays host to a popular farmers’ market, and to formal and informal public gatherings on the southern end, seen here. (Fig. 1) Situated between social history and the history of urban design, this paper investigates the square as both a real public space and as the symbol of competing ideas about the operation of democracy in the United States. Employing Roland Barthes’ concept of “urban semiology,” it emphasizes the fluidity of signification and the misalignment between functional purpose and semantic meaning in the design and redesign of Union Square from its founding in the early-nineteenth century to the 1950s.
Three built elements within the square have been chosen to illustrate the production of urban icons: statues of Presidents Washington and Lincoln, and the paved rectangular area to the north, known as “the plaza.” Employing Charles Sanders Peirce’s categorization of three different forms of sign, the statues and the plaza are considered “symbols, icons, and indexes” of the concepts of republicanism and democracy. In keeping with Barthes’ belief that urban signification is not fixed, this analysis recognizes the numerous actors engaged in the struggle to control the use and define the significance of Union Square, including not only city authorities and influential private citizens’ organizations, but also labour unions and members of political parties, each representing distinct classes and perspectives. This semiotic reading supports Henri Lefebvre’s argument that, “space is permeated with social relations; it is not only supported by social relations but it is also producing and produced by social relations.” (Lefebvre 14).

Created as part of the plan for the expansion of New York City drawn up in 1811, and “improved” or landscaped in the 1830s, Union Square gained its enduring association as a symbol of national political values during the Civil War. (Fig. 2) This was the moment that the square’s functional and semiotic roles began to diverge. On April 20th 1861 Union Square was the site of a giant public meeting following the attack on Fort Sumter in South Carolina by Confederate troops nine days earlier, the attack that began the Civil War. The central focus of the rally was the statue of George Washington located just outside the square, at its southeastern corner. Newspaper reports estimated the crowd at between 100,000 to 250,000 people, and placed great emphasis on its inclusiveness. “It was a gathering of all classes of our citizens,” reported the *New York Post*, “old and young, merchants and mechanics, professional men and labourers, who gathered to express their determination to uphold the union and the Constitution.” (*New York Post* 1861). A carefully choreographed act of urban theater, well-publicized in national newspapers, this gathering was designed to communicate a message of unification and stability in a deeply divided and unstable city.

In 1861 the statue of Washington was a relatively new monument. Founded in 1811, “Union Place” as it was labelled in the commissioner’s plan, held no special meaning when it was first developed. (Ballon). (Fig. 3) While other squares such as Tompkins Square Park and Washington Square were deliberately set aside as tokens of the Commissioner’s intent to provide public parks modeled on older urban squares such as those in London, Union Place was created out of necessity. An uneven trapezoid in shape, it was an expedient solution to the problem of several roads coming together forming an overly complex traffic intersection. For many years it was nothing more than an uneven ground where cattle grazed. In the early 1830s entrepreneurial local landowners successfully petitioned the State Legislature to have Union Square, as it was renamed, “improved” or landscaped. By 1832, its odd shape made regular and the ground flattened, it was planted and surrounded by an iron fence.

Union Square gained its first symbolic element ten years later when an ornamental fountain was installed in the center, commemorating the opening of the Croton Aqueduct which bought fresh water to the city from upstate. (Gandy 19-76). (Fig. 4) Frequently described as an “ornament to the city,” Union Square became the center of a wealthy residential area, surrounded by fashionable houses and the churches of the urban elite. (Belden 33). While the area to the south was commercial and congested, Union Square was genteel and leafy. It signified as a marker of social position: to live in the vicinity and to promenade there on warm afternoons was to belong to the “upper ten
thousand,” the elite of New York society, whose members were characterized not by their noble birth but by their possession of money, taste and good manners. (Bristed). In 1856, that association with elitism began to change when the statue of Washington astride his horse was erected on the southeastern corner of the square. (Fig. 5) Considered in terms of urban semiology, the statue of Washington gave Union Square a new meaning, one quite distinct from its original function as an attractive amenity intended to spur real estate development. Created by sculptor Henry Kirke Brown, this monument was originally proposed in 1833 as a part of a wave of civic memorials coinciding with the centennial of Washington’s birth. Like most public statuary of this period, these memorials were not state-controlled projects but the work of private citizens associations. At the time the Union Square statue was commissioned, the square had no special significance in Washington’s biography, rather it was a convenient open location, one frequented by the affluent New Yorkers from whom the organizing committee hoped to extract financial contributions.

Employing Charles Sanders Peirce’s categorizations of signs into three different types - symbol/icon/index - we may say that the statue of Washington was an icon because it took the form of a physical likeness intended to venerate its subject (the etymology of “icon” is from the Greek eikōn or, “likeness, image”). As seen in this 1903 engraving, Washington sits astride his horse with his head bare, his hat under his left arm, and his sword sheathed. The statue evoked imperial precedent, depicting Washington as a heroic emancipator (the sculpture is said to be modeled on the classical statue of Emperor Marcus Aurelius on the Palatine Hill in Rome).

But as with other statues of Washington, this icon was also symbolic. As art historian Kirk Savage has noted, soon after his death Washington became a mythical figure embodying the virtues of the archetypical republican: he was pious, temperate, and industrious. (Savage 225-242). In a short period of time his name and likeness became symbols of republicanism itself, in other words he was a conventionally agreed upon signifier of that political ideal. In this way any statue of Washington signalled broadly the republican belief that the best form of government was self-government, or democracy.

As we have seen, this statue assumed national importance when it was employed to drum up support for the Union cause during the American Civil War. (Fig. 6) During these years Union Square exchanged its identity as a proto-suburban space on the edge of a growing city for a position at the center of the political world. This statue lent the square enormous national significance when it became the locus of a series of huge rallies designed to give visible expression to support for the Union army at a time when many New Yorkers were highly ambivalent about the war with the south. From this point onwards the Washington statue became a magnet for all kinds of political meetings. Though they took place not in the square itself but in a formless space in the street adjacent to it, these meetings gave a new character to Union Square, that of a popular site for political rallies. In 1864 the real estate developer Samuel Ruggles described Union Square as a “spacious national opening,” “a theater adequate to the utterance of the national voice.” (Ruggles 11).

The stamping of national political significance on Union Square was confirmed after the war when the Union League Club commissioned a statue of President Abraham Lincoln as a companion piece to the statue of Washington. (Fig. 7) Erected in 1870, and again sculpted by Henry Kirke Brown, this statue was placed on a traffic island in the southwestern corner, mirroring Washington to the southeast. Like the statue of Washington, this one was also both iconic and symbolic. Rejecting the
classical theme of his earlier statue, Brown chose to depict Lincoln as a contemporary figure standing on the ground wearing ordinary clothes and holding a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation. In this way the republican ideal of equality forged through war by Washington, now expanded to include the abolition of slavery, were shown to have been confirmed by the Federal government through the 13th, 14th and 15th constitutional amendments.

In a short period of time the disjunction between the functional uses for which Union Square was designed (quiet strolls under shady trees), and those encouraged by its patriotic associations (mass gatherings of thousands of people), came into conflict, prompting a major redesign. (Fig. 8) In 1872 the New York City Parks Department commissioned landscape architects Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux to draw up a new plan for the square, one that responded to a pressing problem: during public meetings huge crowds gathered in the street at the base of the statue of Washington, blocking traffic and creating a safety hazard. (Minutes 2). Recognizing the need to formalize the habitual use of Union Square for public meetings, Olmsted and Vaux created a purpose-built meeting space at the northern end of the park, know as “the plaza.” A kind of third space, between the park and the street proper, it was designed to give public utility to the association between Union Square and democracy. Modeled on the nostalgic ideal of the colonial New England town green, the intent was to provide a space for orderly public meetings. (Olmsted 204).

The completion of the plaza fundamentally altered the temporal orientation of Union Square’s signifying structures: while the statues commemorated the military and political triumphs of the past, the plaza was designed to facilitate democracy as an active and ongoing process. Olmsted and Vaux’s vision was enormously successful: the plaza at Union Square soon became the site for large celebrations and political demonstrations, including vibrant election rallies during campaign season. In a short period of time it was appropriated by organized labor groups who marched north from the tenement district of the Lower East Side to hold strike meetings. The square cemented its association with specifically working class gatherings when it hosted the first Labour Day parade in 1882. (Grossman). (Fig. 9) Labour Day parades represented a change from the unified civic rites and celebrations of the first half of the century, when white male members of every section of society marched together. (Wilentz; Ryan; Keller). By the second half of the nineteenth century the middle class and wealthy elite had largely given up the practice of public parading and public demonstrations were now segregated by class. At first tolerated, if not encouraged by city authorities (who were largely Democrats aligned with the union cause), these gatherings became contentious during the 1890s, when May Day eclipsed the more benign Labour Day as the high point in the working class calendar. (Foner, Haverty-Stack). Speakers at May Day meetings preached not participation in the democratic process but the overthrow of the American political system. (Fig. 10) Soon conservative newspapers were characterizing May Day rallies as a dangerous threat to the American way of life. The political action of mass protest against perceived injustice, and efforts to correct it were characterized as the irrational behaviour of the “mob.” (Schapp and Tiews 13). Despite Olmsted and Vaux’s intent that the plaza serve as a dedicated place for public meetings, these events were considered illegitimate. This is a classic example of Lefebvre’s contention that, “space is produced out of a struggle between designers, planners, engineers, or other powerful actors who seek to create a space of order and control, and users of the space who necessarily perceive space differently and thus act in ways not necessarily anticipated by their designers.” (Lefebvre in Mitchell and Staeheli 119).
Turning back to the question of urban semiology, it is interesting to note that, in Peirces’ terms, the plaza functioned not only as a symbol of the power of masses in a democratic system, but also as an index. Occurring at the time when photojournalism was being established, we can read in the images of huge crowds gathered in Union Square around the turn-of-the-twentieth-century the measure of working class power in New York City at that time. (Fig. 11) At regular intervals every year, the plaza was filled with thousands of union members accompanied by marching bands, waving banners bearing labour slogans and flags commemorating the unity of the labour movement. These public meetings demonstrated to the city and to the country the power of the unions as a united political force. The organizers of these meetings used these events to present their political platforms, and to urge their supporters to vote for them in all sorts of elections, from mayoral, to state, to federal ballots. (Shapiro). The large number of people present in photographs of these meetings acted as an indexical sign of the power of the organized labour movement at this time.

Within fifty years the positive associations of Union Square had become negative, at least in the mainstream press. As a symbolic space it was seen now to represent not American democracy but dangerous and un-American political ideas. The crowds that gathered at the plaza were now viewed as a destabilizing force, and the square itself was characterized as a center of sedition, a place where the overthrow of the government was openly encouraged. In the first decade of the twentieth century the Parks Department became increasingly convinced that things must change, and the construction of several subway lines underneath the square during the 1920s provided an opportunity for a fundamental rebranding. Triumphantly opened in April 1932 to coincide with the square’s centenary, a major renovation decisively re-weighted the power of the three signifying elements within Union Square. The entire surface of the park was raised up to allow for a series of subway platforms to be built underneath. On top, the statues of Washington and Lincoln were relocated; previously positioned on the outer edges of the square, they were brought into the park proper, sited along the central north-south axis.

With the statues made the new focus, the power of the plaza as a public gathering place was eroded by a series of incremental changes involving the restriction of access by tighter permitting criteria, and the re-introduction of traffic. In 1942 parking meters were installed, and by 1949 the space had become a dumping ground for impounded vehicles. (New York Times 1942). (Fig. 12) Despite these efforts, the association between Union Square and radicalism remained strong. Now organized by the Communist Party of the United States, May Day parades continued to attract tens of thousands of participants throughout the 1930s. At other times of the year the park itself hosted radical soapbox speakers, the most popular spot being at the base of Lincoln’s statue. Afraid that this radical image would deter shoppers, local business groups lobbied the city to ban rallies in Union Square, largely without success. In the 1940s the square was still being described as “America’s open-air center of radical propaganda,” and a “Mecca of Stalinists.” (Work Projects Administration 259; New Leader 1948).

In the 1950s, during the early years of the Cold War, the only solution for those opposed to Communist influence on this important public space was to appropriate the square’s established imagery and rituals to new ends. These efforts began with elaborate ceremonies celebrating Lincoln’s Birthday, February 12th, during which Boy Scout groups were encouraged to lay wreaths at the foot of the Lincoln statue, and patriotic speeches, including recitations of the Gettysburg Address, were given by members of the “National Republican Club.” (Fig. 13) They continued with
similar ceremonies celebrating Flag Day, on June 14th. In 1953 a local business association, the Fourteenth Street Association, announced a, “monopoly of Union Square by loyal American citizens thus making the historic site unavailable for the rabble-rousing elements at times most coveted by those elements.” (“Battle for Union Square,” New York Times 1953). These events culminated in the announcement of plans for a “Loyalty Fete”, to be held on May 1st 1954.

It was no accident that Loyalty Fete was held on 1st of May; the event was unambiguously designed to repress if not obliterate the tradition of May Day gatherings. The conflict between the Loyalty Fete and May Day was, “a struggle over who would get to decide how to use and define the character of the city’s public space.” (Haverty-Stacke 205). It was played out via the appropriation of the physical components of the square, and the reinterpretation of the meanings they had acquired since the mid-nineteenth century. Two of these elements were figurative -- statues of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln --, and the other was spatial, the plaza on the north side of the square. An expansion of the Loyalty Day parades that had been held in the city by the Veterans of Foreign Wars since the late 1940s, the Loyalty Fete was part of a well-publicized campaign to, “reclaim Union Square for Americans.” (“Flag Day,” New York Times 1953). This goal was supported by city authorities: while the Fourteen Street Association received a permit to occupy the square from 10am to 6pm, the traditional May Day gathering was restricted to 90 minutes between 6.30 and 8pm. The fete included concerts and games for children, as well as appearances by entertainment and sports celebrities, and an “Americanization” ceremony during which immigrants would receive their citizenship. To mark the day, the street sign at 17th Street was replaced with one reading, “Union Square, U.S.A.” A Loyalty Fete was held annually in Union Square from 1954 until the mid-1960s.

The Loyalty Fete campaign had both political and economic imperatives. Union Square had been a center for budget department stores since the early twentieth century, such as S. Klein’s on the east side, shown here. In the context of postwar urban decentralization, inner city businesses such as those lining the square were losing customers to newly developed suburban shopping malls. An early version of the Business Improvement District, the Fourteenth Street Association cleaned up inner city streets and staged spectacular events such as holiday fairs in order to lure shoppers back downtown. In the case of the Loyalty Fete, they attempted to persuade suburban New Yorkers that Union Square, long regarded a locus of radical politics, was actually an all-American town square. The conflation of patriotism and consumerism that made the Loyalty Fete a success depended on the vigorous wielding of nationalistic symbols: the Stars and Stripes, marched ranks of veterans, and the authority of citizenship itself.

The invention of the Loyalty Fete to topple May Day exemplifies the class and political divisions apparent in competing visions of the future of Union Square in the mid-twentieth century. At the heart of this conflict was the claiming of the various physical elements in the square -- the statues of Washington and Lincoln and the plaza itself -- by particular groups and causes, from the business-centric Fourteenth Street Association, to the unions, to the Communist Party. In renaming Union Square, “Union Square U.S.A,” the Fourteenth Street Association reclaimed the symbolic association with patriotism the square had long held, but in a passive sense. The group returned to an earlier vision in which the statues were iconic symbols of political ideals already settled and established, and undermined the indexical value of the plaza as a place in which democracy was continuously performed in the present. Olmsted and Vaux’s plaza was a rare moment in which the functional
design and the symbolic association of Union Square were aligned. The attempt to repress that functional and symbolic use in the 1950s is testament to its strength. In common with other efforts to repress Union Square’s radical reputation, this approach created a tension between the square as a place of passive signification or one of direct political action, tensions that continue to be felt into the present day.

Throughout its long life, Union Square acquired an association as a place in which the ideals of American republicanism and democracy are both signified and enacted. This paper has been concerned with two things: the ways in which the signifying function of the square was first created, then altered and appropriated by different urban actors at different times; and the role played in that process by three design elements, the statues of two presidents and the open plaza space designed by Olmsted and Vaux. Using Roland Barthes’ concept of urban semiology and Charles Sanders Peirce’s categorization of different forms of sign, the statues and the plaza may be analyzed as symbols, icons, and indexes of the concepts of republicanism and democracy. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s concept of urban space as a mirror of social relations, including the belief that access to space is limited in order to limit the economic and political rights of certain groups, attention has been drawn to the various “actors” responsible for shaping both the physical space of the square and its abstract meanings. Any investigation into urban semiology must recognize that the city is not only a text subject to endless readings but also a text that is continually being rewritten by numerous authors. The fluidity of the meanings, and the numerous agents involved, make Union Square a pertinent example of the ways in which urban design contributes to the signifying process, and of the argument that true public space will always be subject to conflicting desires about its proper form and use.

Illustrations
(Fig. 1) Panorama of Union Square c.1910. New York Public Library

(Fig. 2) Sumter Rally in Union Square, 20 April 1861. Harper’s Weekly. New York Public Library
(Fig. 3) “Union Place” in the 1811 map of New York

(Fig. 4) Union Square, New York, c.1845. Municipal Art Society of New York
(Fig. 5) Statue of Washington by Henry K. Brown, Union Square New York, 1856. George R. Hall, Engraver (1903). New York Public Library

(Fig. 6) “Great Sumter Meeting in Union Square, New York, April 11, 1863,” *Harper’s Weekly* (25 April 1863)
(Fig. 7) Henry K Brown’s statue of Abraham Lincoln, Union Square, New York, c.1904. Mechanical Engineering Image Collection

(Fig. 8) Detail of Ward 18, New York City, 1879. Olmsted and Vaux’s “plaza” is seen at the north end of Union Square
(Fig. 9) Labour Day Parade, Union Square, 1882. *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (September 16 1882)

(Fig. 10) Socialists meeting in Union Square, New York, 1908
11) May Day Crowd in Union Square, 1913. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

(Fig. 12) “Proposed New Parking Area in Union Square,” New York Times, 1942
(Fig. 13) Lincoln’s Birthday Celebration, 13 February 1945. New York Times

Works Cited

“A Union Square Idyll,” New Leader (10 July 1948)


“Flag Day Opens Campaign ‘to Reclaim Union Square’,” New York Times (15 June 1953)


*Minutes of the Commissioners of the Department of Public Parks, 1871*. Document 35 (New York, 1872)


“New York For The Union. Great Mass Meeting in Union Square. Largest Gathering Ever Held,” *New York Post* (22 April 1861)


Ruggles, Samuel B., *Union Square and the Sanitary Commission: Address by the Hon. Samuel B. Ruggles, at Union Square, on the Opening of the Metropolitan Fair, April 8th, 1864* (New York: C.A. Alvord, 1864)

Ryan, Mary, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City During the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997)


Shapiro, Michael D., “Becoming Union Square: Struggles for Legitimacy in Nineteenth-Century New York,” University of Massachusetts, Amherst (2010)

“250,000 Expected In Loyalty March: Parade Down Fifth Avenue to Start at 1pm,” *New York Times* (1 May 1954)
