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A Harmonic Convergence in Union Square

By MELENA RYZIK

IN the taxonomy of New York City, the mere mention of a certain neighborhood conjures an image of its local tribe: the Williamsburg hipster. The meatpacking district club-goer. The Park Slope [Earth](#) Mama. But whom does Union Square conjure?

People like Amanda Bird, for one. On a recent Wednesday, Ms. Bird was omming away the city's distractions at the free weekly yoga class in the park. Afterward she strolled through the Greenmarket, looking for snacks free of trans fats.

Ms. Bird, 25, comes to Union Square from her home in Brooklyn regularly: to work out and to shop at the farmers' stalls; to see her doctor, who advocates holistic health; and to eat curry supreme at Zen Palate, a favorite [vegetarian](#) restaurant.

If she wanted, she could also leave clothing at Union Cleaners in the neighborhood, one of the city's few organic dry cleaners. Or shop for a reclaimed wood table at Environment Furniture.



HEALTHY ECONOMY The Union Square Greenmarket, free yoga in the park, and juice bars have created a blend of commune and commerce in this part of Manhattan.

If she wanted to apply green thinking to her night life, she could stop by the Village Pourhouse, a pub that recently began using recycled paper products.

Though other areas of the city offer one or a few of these services, Union Square is becoming a one-stop destination for those who consider themselves health-conscious, eco-friendly and deserving of the kind of spiritual and bodily nurturing that in the past was mainly the province of spa vacations. If the meatpacking district is where you go to party, Union Square is where you detoxify.

“We call it the wheatpacking district,” said Lisa Blau, who with Amanda Freeman founded VitalJuiceDaily.com, an e-mail newsletter devoted to healthy living that they publish from an office in the neighborhood.

With its high concentration of popular [organic food](#) suppliers like Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s, plus gyms (a half-dozen major ones in a 10-block radius), yoga and Pilates studios, alternative health practitioners, spas and other peddlers of vitality, Union Square may be the city’s greenest neighborhood.

“This is a new face of new New York: an upscale, health-conscious district,” said Robert Snyder, a professor of journalism and American studies at Rutgers who has written about the history of Union Square, a longtime site of political rallies and of the first Labor Day parade in 1882. But leave your Birkenstocks at home. “It’s not granola,” Ms. Freeman said of the area. “Formerly, if something was environmentally friendly, it was oatmeal-colored and styleless. Because eco-consciousness and the green movement has become popular, it’s risen to appeal to the luxury class.”

OVER the last six years, there has been a proliferation of spas and other personal care businesses in the area. Acupuncturists and massage therapists cluster there and, according to SpaFinder, whose offices are three blocks north of Union Square, there are more day spas there than on the Upper East Side. (The neighborhood’s borders, according to the Union Square Partnership, are First and Sixth Avenues on the east and west, and 18th and 13th Streets on the north and south.)



A NEW TWIST Tai chi classes have come to the Tao Yoga studio on Union Square West.

But this focus on luxury does come at a price, Dr. Snyder said. “Good health and environmental consciousness expressed as a habit of consumption” has the tinge of elitism, he said. “Looking at the real estate and prices around the area, I do grow concerned that the new Union Square will be less inclusive than the old one.”

Rosie Kanellis, 41, a textile designer who comes from Williamsburg, Brooklyn, to shop at the Greenmarket, said that the area had become too corporate, and that she was “opposed to the Whole Foods” because “it’s quick-fix healthy.”

Nonetheless, businesses are capitalizing on the area's new personality. Davide Berruto, chief executive of Environment Furniture, a Los Angeles-based store that opened its first East Coast outpost in Union Square last month, said an eco-conscious energy is "in the air, it's in the people walking around." But that wouldn't matter, he said, if people had no money to spend. "If you said, 'Oh there is this neighborhood and it's very green but it's not commercial,' we couldn't have done that."

Andrew Tanner, a managing partner of Tao Yoga & Tai Chi, spent months walking around the city looking for space for a new flagship studio before finding what he called the ideal 4,000-square-foot spot on Union Square West last year.

"It's the yoga haven of New York City," he said, ticking off a few of the dozen major studios and schools located there, like Om Yoga, Prana Power, Bikram and Jivamukti. "The energy field around Union Square is one of the best places around New York City," Mr. Tanner said. "There's a lot of happiness here."

Jeffrey Williams, 22, a fashion designer from Harlem, agrees. He comes to Union Square almost daily for a healthy lunch and a berry smoothie. "It feels fresh," he said of the area. "When I think of Union Square, I think of unity and a good vibration and a connection to the earth."

Mr. Williams's generation may be the first to feel that way.

"Twenty, 30 years ago, you took your life in your hands going in there," said Joyce Mendelsohn, a city historian and the author of "Touring the Flatiron: Walks in Four Historic Neighborhoods," which includes Union Square. Once considered a needle park, it was a refuge for drugs and prostitution. "Any middle-class people who lived in the neighborhood didn't feel comfortable using the park," she said. "It was such a gloomy place."

Not until the Greenmarket arrived, in 1976, did the park begin to attract crowds. In interviews, historians, city officials, business owners and residents credited the Greenmarket, the city's largest farmers' market — along with the restaurateur Danny Meyer, whose Union Square Cafe began offering a Greenmarket-inspired menu in 1985 — with helping transform the area.

"The Greenmarket was able to fill a vacuum to give Union Square a citywide identity," said Mitchell L. Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at [New York University](#).

As a major subway switching point, Union Square is "the dividing line between hip New York and the old fogies," said Dr. Moss, who occasionally ventures into foggy territory.

The park has not totally lost its roots as an activist center: The Critical Mass bike ride, meant to promote oil-free transportation, departs from there monthly, and protesters coexist with skateboarders and vendors of antiwar T-shirts. Plus, there is near-constant canvassing and promotion: "Do you have a minute to save the planet?" or "Free energy bar!" is the 21st-century version of getting onto one's soapbox.

"It's become a place to talk about greening and environmental issues and things that relate to the earth," said Adrian Benepe, the parks commissioner, whose father, Barry Benepe, was a founder of the Greenmarket. When the city wanted to launch a pilot program of public recycling bins, it chose

Union Square as one of two Manhattan locations. Next month, the Department of Sanitation will add electronics recycling there. It's also the only site that offers both composting and clothing recycling in conjunction with the Greenmarket, whose shoppers are sought after as eco-guinea pigs.

All of this helped draw people like Kate Sinding, a wheatpacking convert who moved to Union Square from Lower Manhattan in 2002. Like Ms. Bird, she does yoga, inspects labels, eats organic, conserves energy and rides a bike.

"It was very easy to have a relatively green lifestyle" in Union Square, said Ms. Sinding, 36, a senior lawyer for the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) (whose headquarters are three blocks north of Union Square). But, she added, "It's more of yuppie green lifestyle than a hippie green lifestyle. You can go to the Diesel store before or after you hit Whole Foods or the Greenmarket."

That juxtaposition is perhaps most indicative of the new Union Square, where the onetime headquarters of the Communist Party, on the east side of the park, is now a Babies "R" Us, and the allure of selecting a perfectly ripe peach is often trumped by rubbing shoulders with a television chef doing the same. It's no eco-topia, like Berkeley or even its New York equivalent, Park Slope.

"Park Slope has really great energy," said Mr. Tanner, who considered placing Tao Yoga in that neighborhood. "But Union Square just takes the cake. I see celebrities there all the time."