

A Public Plaza for New York

The season of communal alfresco activities is upon us. New Yorkers love parades, festivals, celebrations, demonstrations and entertainments, particularly when such occasions bring large numbers of them together outdoors. The finer the weather, the greater the urge to gather, the sweeter the siren call of causes.

Over the years, these public events have moved around town. Union Square, long the scene of political oratory and promises of a better world, saw its last really good turnout for the first Earth Day, in 1970. The Battery and Lower Manhattan were the setting for an unforgettable Bicentennial celebration in 1976, and a few events since. But for some time now, the most popular place to gather has been the Sheep Meadow in Central Park, which was never meant to withstand the tramp of thousands of carefree or protesting feet.

This year the Sheep Meadow is newly sodded, at no small cost; its fresh grass is still behind protective fences. That brilliant green field is a clear sign that it is time to find or create a less vulnerable plaza. New York needs a ceremonial public gathering place that is large — at least four acres, preferably a dozen — receptive to many uses, reasonably impervious to wear and tear, easy to reach and to maintain. A central loca-

tion would be ideal, but there is no available midtown land. The hope that something of these dimensions could be developed alongside the Convention Center has been dashed by the plan for a one-acre plaza there; poor access to the West 30's would have made this a questionable solution in any case.

Remembering Op Sail, the city's Parks Department and the state's Urban Development Corporation have jointly proposed a plaza at Battery Park City, on the landfill alongside the World Trade Center. The City Planning Commission is studying the idea.

Battery Park City offers virtually the only suitable open space in Manhattan and it could be a splendid setting. A properly designed park there would be compatible with the present master plan. The site is well-served by mass transit, and is itself a celebration of New York's land and sea; long idle, it could use a bit of human celebration. The Parks Department and Urban Development Corporation have found enthusiastic sponsors for a number of events there this summer. What more appropriate background for shared pleasures and concerns than the skyline, the river and the Statue of Liberty? What better place for New Yorkers to do their public thing?