

Times Square Stirs While Planning Sleeps

Where there is life, there is hope — even in Times Square. A good sign of city life is developer interest in an area, something that is clearly growing in the blocks around Times Square despite the high cost of building there after two decades of decline. A number of ambitious redevelopment proposals have appeared, ranging in scale from the rehabilitation of individual structures to massive projects for rebuilding several blocks. All are aimed at erasing blight and substituting good uses for bad, and the eventual regeneration of the heart of Manhattan. Top Canadian and New York builders now perceive it as a good investment.

Renewal has already begun at the edges of the most blighted blocks: The abandoned Royal Manhattan Hotel is being rebuilt as a moderately priced hotel and a former hotel at a critical 42d Street corner is being converted to housing. But sponsors of the larger plans believe that substantial injections of new construction are needed.

Three such proposals are now in varying stages of study and promotion. One, called The City at 42d Street, began with the intention of upgrading the most squalid block from Seventh to Eighth Avenues but has grown to include total redevelopment of a four-block area, on both sides of Times Square. Another plan would rebuild four blocks between Broadway and the

Avenue of the Americas. A third, still in design, would incorporate some of the sites of the other two.

All the plans were conceived and are being pursued independently. Two make competing claims for urban renewal designation. In some cases they overlap; an apparel mart figures in three different proposals and locations. Plans on this scale, and in this number, are welcome; the area needs all the help it can find. But a free-for-all will not rebuild Times Square wisely.

There is clearly no shortage of plans or sponsors; what is missing is appropriate city action. To the promoters, that means the urban renewal designations that they are requesting from the City Planning Commission. But the first job for the city agencies is a decent evaluation of the proposals. The next task is to relate them to each other, and to the area's future needs and resources. Only then can the nature of the city's assistance be decided. Best of all would be for the city to define its own strategic plan to guide the negotiations with developers. Inexplicably, the city's leaders have been idle as the opportunities arose.

This failure of initiative signals more than a failure to grasp the main chance — it is a default of the planning process. The situation around Times Square is tenuous at best; the opportunities could easily be lost. The next move is up to the city and it is long overdue.