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Kerry Hayes

The 1871 Church of the Covenant—
“eligible for landmark designation”

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Many Faces of 42d Street

Forty Second Street — from Great White Way and Crossroads of the World to Porn City — a thoroughfare with as many different images as the turns in its fortunes and history. Right now, a problem street, blighting the heart of midtown, the subject of periodic cleanup campaigns and efforts at renewal.

The street itself really hasn't changed that much; it is the uses of the street that have made the difference in recent years. Looked at purely for its physical attributes, it is a fabulous street, with a magnificent assortment of superior structures and spaces, and what would ordinarily be considered an ideal urban mix.

In fact, the range and quality of what exists on 42d Street alone would be a full complement of distinguished architecture and superior amenities for any smaller city. No other city could, or would, let this all go down the drain. Even New York can no longer afford the continued abuse of so vital an artery of such remarkably concentrated assets.

A list of these assets is overwhelming. Starting at the East River and the United Nations, there are the planned residential buildings and parks (Harry Helmsley willing) of Tudor City, the suave elegance of the Ford Foundation headquarters, a lineup of world-famous skyscrapers that includes the Daily News, Chrysler and Chanin Buildings shouldering the landmark Bowery Savings Bank.

Two major transportation centers, Grand Central Terminal on the East Side and the Port Authority Bus Terminal on the West Side, serve rail and bus lines that link New York to the entire region. They could not be more strategically or centrally placed. One of the finest cultural institutions in the world, the New York Public Library, anchors the street at Fifth Avenue, backed by a business-district rarity, the uncommonly handsome and consistently abused, almost block-square Bryant Park.

Opposite the library and park are a new skyscraper, the ski-slope Grace Building, and the sensitively recycled office structure that serves as the headquarters of the Graduate Center of the City University, for a strong midtown alliance of educational and cultural facilities. The ground floor of the Graduate Center provides a handsome pedestrian mall from 42d to 43d Streets, marred only by the flagrant misuse of this public space by some cars whose owners evidently consider it a parking lot.

Beyond the Avenue of the Americas, the pushers and pimps who have claimed Bryant Park as their turf begin to take over. The street is now a potpourri of the sordid and the merely crummy, infused with a dull sense of menace.

The sadly bowdlerized Times Tower still marks Times Square. The stretch between Seventh and Eighth, dominated by adult movies and sleazy pornography, is actually a nearly continuous row of some of the world's most beautiful theaters built in the first decades of this century when Broadway was in its finest flower. This incredibly undervalued block has been thrown away until now as a cultural resource; two of the theaters have just been restored. But this block's concentrated blight is the barrier to healthy development farther west.

At Ninth Avenue, for anyone who gets that far, normalcy returns; greengrocers and small household shops are a prelude to Manhattan Plaza, the performing artists' subsidized housing that fills the block to Tenth Avenue. Opposite Manhattan Plaza is the Theater Row conversion done by the Forty Second Street Redevelopment Corporation.

And there is more. What exists behind the facades on 42d Street is often even more impressive than what is visible outside. Which brings us belatedly to the subject of a small, unpublicized exhibition called "Inside 42d Street," which will be on view in the public lobby of the United Nations General Assembly Building through March 30. This show of color and black-and-white photographs is actually a well-researched and documented tour of 42d Street interiors that would be a perfect prelude to an early spring walk of discovery across town.

The easily accessible public spaces of the Library, Grand Central and the United Nations (this last is now poised between high camp and history as a monument to 1940's taste) are already familiar, but they have an extraordinary impact seen together. Less familiar, palatial office-building lobbies of classical grandeur vie with masterpieces of "modernistic" design rich in exotic inlaid woods and ornate metals and marbles. And there are the surprises of some virtually inaccessible interiors, such as the New Am-

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Faces of 42d Street

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sterdam Theater, which is considered to be one of the finest examples of Art Nouveau in the country.

The quality and variety, the range of styles, the beauty of the spaces, materials, details and execution, to be found on this one street, are a genuine revelation. From the lovely wooden fretwork of the 1871 Church of the Covenant, by the fashionable 19th-century architect J. C. Cady, to the High Art Deco of William Van Alen's Chrysler Building lobby (now threatened by excessive zeal in an otherwise exemplary restoration), these buildings are all eligible for designation as landmark interiors.

Some of the examples shown are gloriously intact, and some have been vandalized by modernization; the Daily News stripped out almost all of the Hood and Howells lobby ornament when it became unfashionable, and air-conditioning eliminated the Chanin Building's lobby ceiling as well as the skylight roof of the Bowery's vast banking room, which changed the perception of that great space very much for the worse. Still others are being destroyed by neglect or held hostage to speculation.

The exhibition, organized by May Callas and Wallace Randolph, has been several years in the making under the sponsorship of the Historical Buildings Committee of the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. It has been aided by grants from the International Paper Company and the Ford Foundation and the generosity of assorted 42d Street businesses and institutions; W. R. Grace and Company gave it a showing last fall in the lobby of the Grace Building where it was held virtually incommunicado by the newspaper strike.

There is a useful catalogue, courtesy of the Preservation Press, which, for some curious reason, disavows itself from any opinions expressed in it. The sponsor of the present showing is the Cultural Society of the United Nations Staff Recreation Committee.

Right now, 42d Street is a stalemated mix of squalor and splendor. Its assets of centrality, essential services, functional variety and architectural excellence are being ludicrously misused or patently abused. The folly of this waste of resources is equally clear to those who have such disparate interests as the economics or the landmarks of the city. In the classic New York phrase of one early visitor to the show, "It makes you wanna cry."