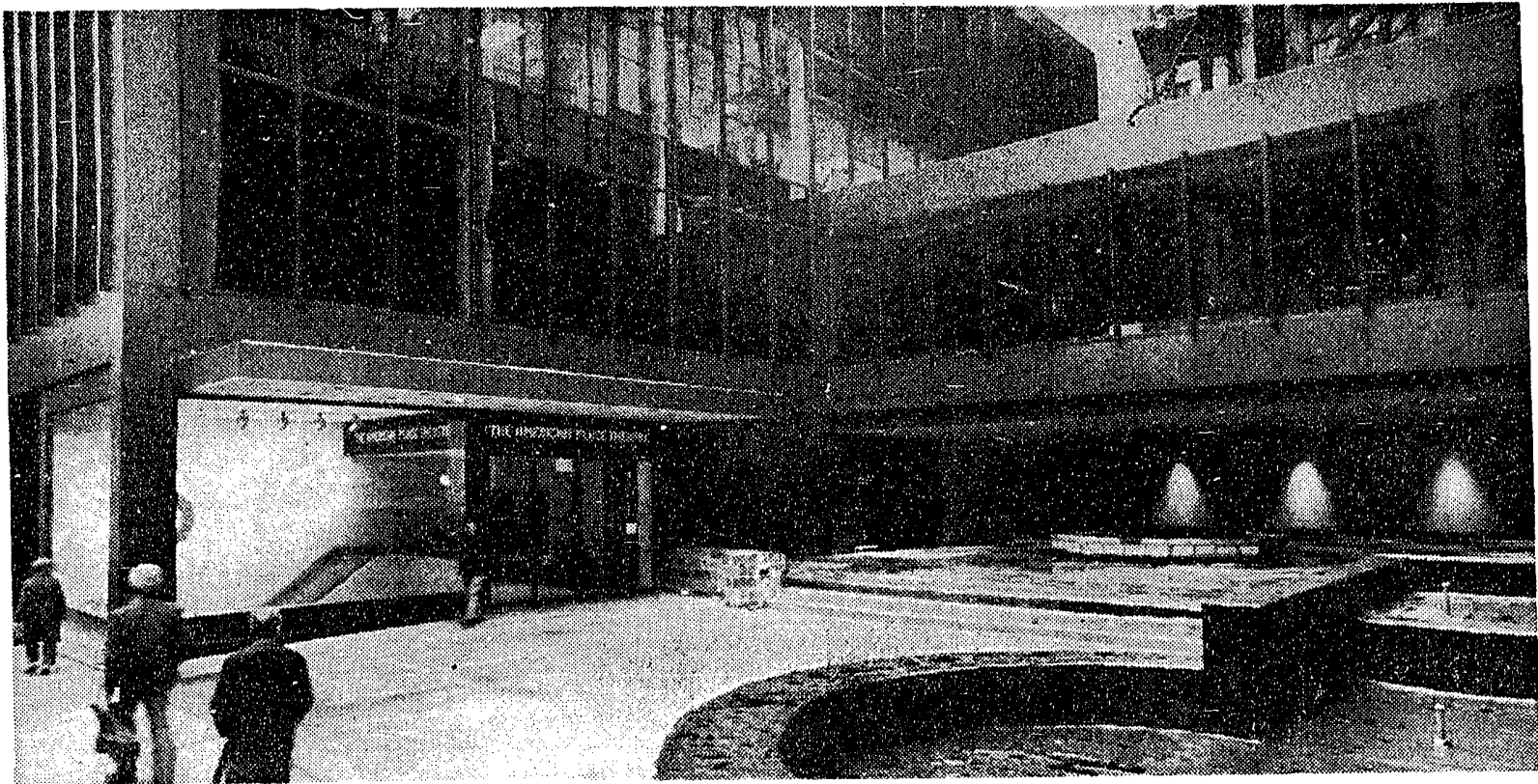


# American Place Theater Finds a Cozy Home Under New City Code: Theater Finds a Home Under New Code

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE  
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The entrance to the new American Place Theater at 111 West 46th Street, off the Avenue of the Americas. Richard D. Kaplan was the architect.

## American Place Theater Finds a Cozy Home Under New City Code

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

There is a 40-foot hole in the ground at 111 West 46th Street that may be the most important thing that has happened to American theater in a long time. It contains a 290-seat house with six levels above it, making

a neat package of stage and rehearsal spaces, offices,

services, lounge, cafe and cabaret, and it is the first new theater built under commercial auspices in New

An  
Appraisal

York since 1928. It is the American Place Theater, formerly of St. Clement's Church, farther west on 46th Street, a nonprofit, subscription group specializing in the work of living American playwrights. Its new \$1.8-million home, which adjoins and is part of a new office tower, was officially dedicated by Mayor Lindsay at a special performance last night.

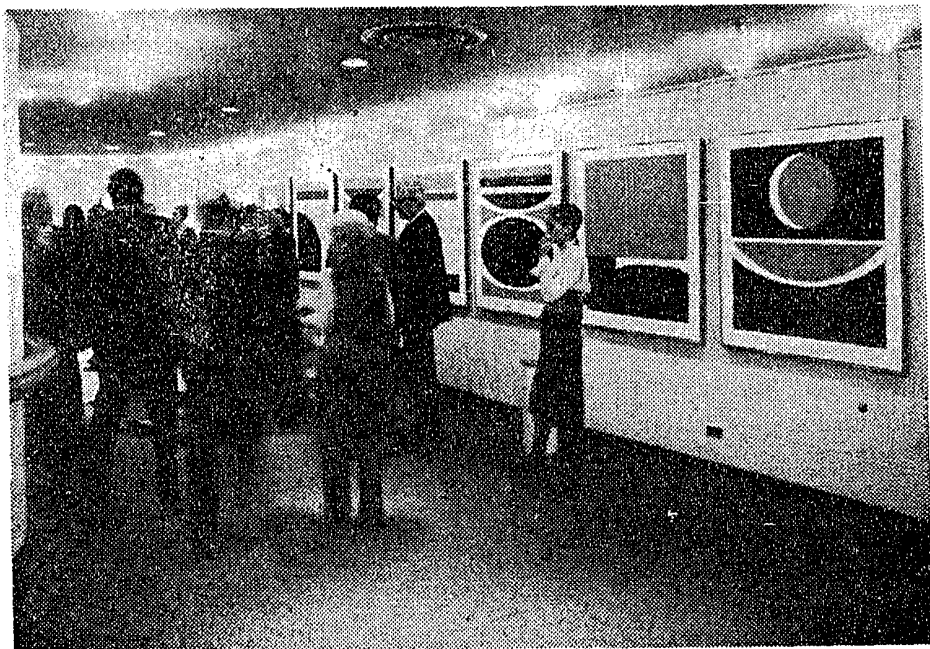
### Efforts Acknowledged

The Mayor, arriving with his wife at 7:10 P.M., made a brief speech of thanks to the audience before the first of the two plays on the double bill began. Standing just in front of the stage, the Mayor thanked "everyone involved" in making the theater a reality—from the lobbyists who helped push for the new legislation that made the construction possible to the various foundations that gave technical and financial assistance.

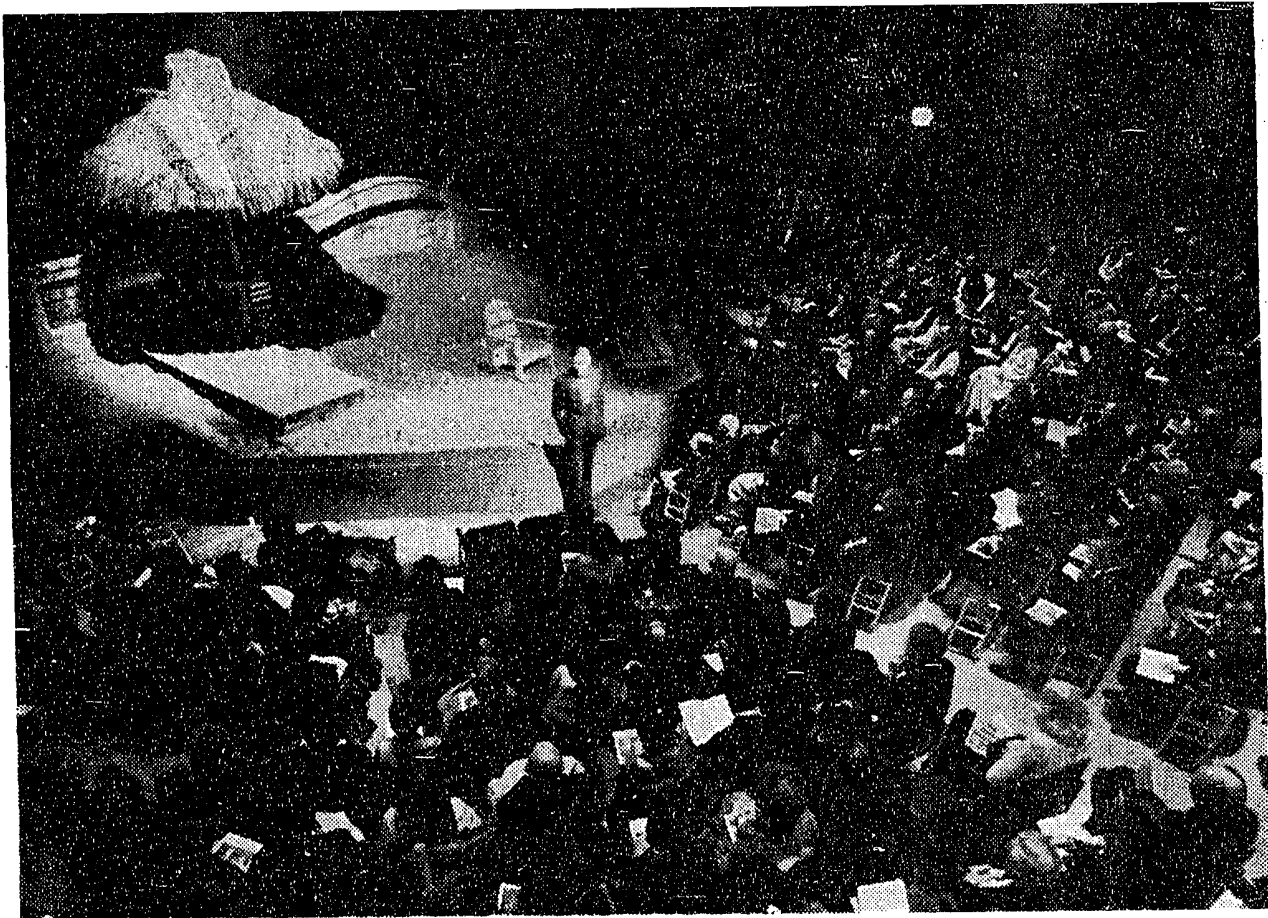
Mr. Lindsay himself had been introduced as "the great man" who had made it all possible.

The Mayor's interest was more than dramatic. This small gem of a theater is the first to be completed under New York's special theater-district zoning, a pioneering kind of building regulation that not only guarantees that theaters destroyed by the development of the area will

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Theatergoers gathering last night in a curved hallway with original art on the walls



Mayor Lindsay speaking to the audience during the official dedication of the theater before the opening program

# Theater Finds a Home Under New Code

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be replaced but also opens the door to a form of business subsidy of the arts that may be the hope of the future.

The American Place Theater is the first of four being constructed in this fashion at a total cost of \$15-million to \$20-million. The others are two 1,600-seat houses at One Astor Plaza and 1633 Broadway, and the Circle in the Square, also at 1633 Broadway, which will open within a few months.

These millions for the performing arts have come out of thin air—or rather, out of developers' pockets.

Considering the financial crisis of the funding of the arts today, this is a little like producing theaters by magic. And considering the battle to get cultural centers built, as well as the pompous and pedestrian results—including one in a large capital city that shall be nameless—the standard and procedure in New York restores faith in all of the arts, including architecture.

### New Theaters to Rise

The special New York zoning was passed in December 1967, at a time when the theater district was already under speculative attack. Its provisions give developers extra building height or plot coverage, meaning more rentable space, according to a carefully worked out formula, as a "bonus" for including, and paying for, a theater in the new building.

That kind of extra space is irresistible in the New York real estate market—or was, pre-recession. And the device virtually assures that of the 30-odd legitimate theaters bound for oblivion as development crawls westward—recessions don't last forever and New York is infinitely renewable, or as someone said, you can't stop progress—20 to 30 theaters can reappear in new form.

If the American Place Theater is a small sample of what is to come, they will be among the best new theaters in the country, and possibly in the world.

At about \$5-million a theater, that also represents \$100-

million of future investment in the performing arts—money available nowhere. Calculated by existing development economics, the old theaters are doomed, and without the zoning ordinance the total number of replacements would be zero.

But there is more. In every case, because the builders are being allowed to increase density and land use in exchange for the theater, part of the deal is improved circulation and greater provision of amenities. Where the new buildings go up, there are more and better subway connections, 50-foot wide midblock pedestrian streets, and specifications for restaurants and shops.

This is a remarkable planning package, and New York is way out in front in the creative and constructive use of zoning as a tool for more than making real-estate parcels.

Richard Weinstein, now head of the Office of Lower Manhattan, who worked on the idea and the law for the city, set up a Theater Projects Committee with Ford Foundation and city funds to guide the new theater development.

The American Place Theater is fitted into a space behind the new J. P. Stevens Building, put up by Fisher Brothers at 46th Street and the Avenue of the Americas, as compactly and beautifully as a fine Swiss watch.

It is the result of teamwork, with credit to be shared by the director, Wynn Handman, the architect, Richard D. Kaplan, the designer, Frank Trotta, theater consultant, Kert Lundel, and lighting consultant, Roger Morton.

Between the theater structure and the back of the new office tower is the beginning of a 50-foot wide midblock pedestrian street, bridged over dramatically by a connecting link that will be a restaurant.

Entering the theater, a neat glass lobby turns into a handsome stair that spirals down through a series of levels, including a miniature gallery, to the theater and cabaret spaces. The cabaret, for political and satirical reviews, will open in January. These spaces, which could be oppressive, are skillfully handled in their small scale and visual relationships.

The theater itself is attractive and welcoming. It is surprisingly expansive for its intimate size.

### Virtues in Economy

The simple style says clearly that this is a budget job, but in this day of architectural overachievers, economy has virtues. The fact is turned to advantage, with well-considered materials and colors. The overriding considerations have been a pleasant ambience and the theater's total flexibility.

The ceiling is an open grid of catwalks, lighting and services over the entire space. Sections of the oak slatted walls can be removed at any point. Seats fold down and can be covered with platforms. The stage can be changed in thrust and shape.

According to Mr. Handman, the American Place Theater is not experimental; it is eclectic. Its design will meet any production contingency.

The implications of the American Place Theater for the subsidy of the financially hard-pressed performing arts by the private sector through public planning are staggering. So is the suggestion of a *modus vivendi* between commercial builders and the quality of New York.

Two one-act plays being shown to subscription audiences will be reviewed in *The Times* beginning with the second edition of Thursday's issue. The plays are, "Fingernails Blue as Flowers," by Ron Ribman, and "Lake of the Woods" by Steven Teisch.