



Times Square Renewal (Act II), a Farce

By Ada Louise Huxtable

After a six year intermission, the curtain has gone up on Act II of the long-running show at Times Square called the 42d Street Development Project. The latest revised production hit the boards in August. Act I had focused on a set of mansard-roofed towers of blockbuster proportions, dubious historical an-

Cosmetic changes can't obscure monstrous architecture.

tecedents and consummate zoning overkill. A staggering amount of the total bulk of the entire renewal area was transferred to four enormous new buildings at the heart of Times Square. These buildings were, and continue to be, the anchor of the state- and city-sponsored plan. The 1983 version by the architect John Burgee, with Philip Johnson, consultant, was meant to transform Times Square into a kind of postmodern Rockefeller Center in fancy architectural dress that gave frightening new meaning to the word "faux." The design relied heavily on the architectural free-association game — words and materials such as crested

Ada Louise Huxtable was architecture critic of The New York Times and a member of its Editorial Board.

mansards, entrance arcades and stone appliques — to create the buzz images that substitute upscale marketing for the art of architecture. Act I didn't play well with the critics; the buildings were panned as superficial, stolid and dull. The idea that a squeaky clean office district would cure the area's manifold ills was viewed as deliverance by death. The scheme had all the elements of a Joe Orton black comedy: a multi-billion-dollar real estate deal that piously packaged public morality and profitable mathematics under the banner of Times Square cleanup, and an unbelievable rerun of discredited 1960's urban renewal, in which the bulldozer promised relief from rot and drove out everything else with the blight. Hitched to the back of the juggernaut was the avowed restoration of the historic 42d Street theaters, to be funded from the profits of the office towers. But if the sponsors were dealing in one kind of fantasy, the champions of the traditional Times Square were seduced by another: the legendary image of lights, signs and surging crowds, dramatic displays and nonstop entertainment that has made these blocks a magnet for the world. The reality of the Times Square area is far more complex: It is the most fragile kind of urban fabric, in a constant state of change. This vital and vibrant place has many lifelines. The sordid and the spectacular are never far apart. Broadway and its theaters are in transition, its commerce and culture are in uneasy equilibrium, while pressures build on the older communities around it. There is no way the image can be fixed by decree; there is no way the reality can be papered over with signs. It was a particularly choice bit of black humor when, in 1986, the city rushed in belatedly to measure signs and setbacks and "define" the character of the area, leaving all the larger planning problems untouched. Legislation was passed that required buildings to follow sign and setback directives. The emperor got measured for a new set of clothes. Fantasy mistaken for reality becomes farce. The play-doctors, or plan-doctors, decided a "Times Square look" would make the behemoths acceptable. The buildings' outrageous size and square footage are still the same. The abuses of zoning and urban design, the default of planning and policy issues, have been subsumed into a ludicrous debate about a "suitable" style. And so, new costumes by the designers. Quicker-than-the-eye transformations, like scene shifts in the

dark. Abstract wall patterns, kinetic roof lines, state of the art illuminated displays. More surface skills, less historical malapropism. Shell games, so to speak. Give the architects a hand. Mr. Johnson now says that the original mansard monsters are passé. This is the New Modernism. The Pied Piper of Architecture has led us from Postmodern Classicism to Deconstructivism, which is what the New Modernism is called in circles where they are busy trying to make buildings look as if they are falling down or rushing off in any direction that denies gravity or structural logic. At the glacial pace of this project, this, too, will go out of style. With luck, we could see none of the above. Because this is not architecture at all. It is cosmetic window dressing. No one at any phase of this project has understood what architecture is or how it can be used creatively and constructively in the context of the city. Above all, the 42d Street project is a failure of government, from the moment the official design guidelines were literally thrown away by the

There's no justification for huge public subsidies.

developer and his architects and an opportunistic patchwork of investment prizes substituted for a plan. There is still no committed construction for Eighth Avenue, where it is essential to stabilize the neighborhood. To say that all will fall into place when the towers proceed is a real estate act of faith more appropriate to private investment than to public expenditure. Beyond the developer's promise of acquisition costs for theaters, most restoration and operating funds hang on the artistic, commercial and financial feasibility of proposals yet to be judged by a not-for-profit 42d Street Entertainment Corporation that, a year after its announcement, has yet to name its head. Massive new construction is already transforming and tipping the balance of the city's entertainment and tourist heart. There will be subway improve-

ments. Some sleaze and crime will move. We may save and sanitize the theaters for an uncertain future. But there is no plan or purpose large enough to justify the huge public subsidies of land assembly, tax abatement and zoning bonuses. And there will be four enormous buildings to demonstrate the failure of architecture and public policy in New York. They could be an effective memorial to Times Square. □



Blocked due to copyright.
See full page image or
microfilm.