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New York Times (1923-Current file); Nov 6, 1977; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D31

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Old Magic and New Dreams On 42d Street

Forty Second Street is still the street of dreams. Considering its current squalor, that's hard to believe. But there are people as nostalgic about its glamorous past as they are concerned with its current condition, for whom this street is the city's heart, even in its state of accelerated decay.

Beyond sentiment, however, is the fact that what happens in the Bronx and other devastated neighborhoods is connected with what happens to the commercial core of the city, in terms of the economy and jobs, and 42d Street is the very center of that core. There are people, in and out of city government, who are willing to undertake the Sisyphean job of reversing the street's decline.

All these dreams and concerns are reflected in an ambitious program at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (located, appropriately, at 33 West 42d Street) called "Forty Second Street—Theater and the City." This virtually on-site exploration of the street's most famous feature and of the area's past, present and future consists of a photo-

graphic exhibition, seminars, films and walking tours that began in October and will continue through Nov. 22.

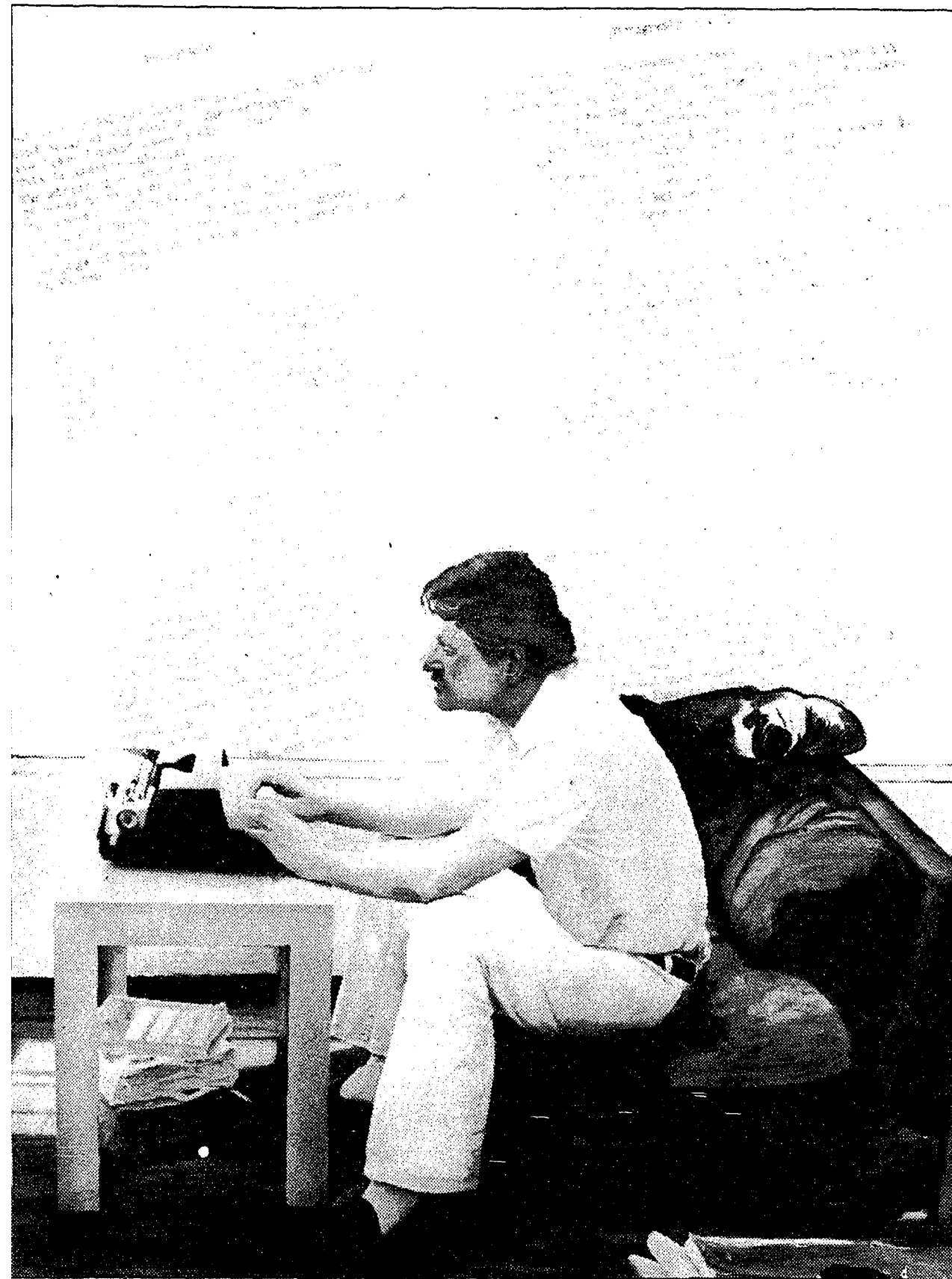
The exhibition deals with the legendary theaters of 42d Street—The Great White Way—in their heyday and after the fall. It is the most recent of an exemplary group of shows that the Graduate Center has mounted in its walk-through mall from 42d to 43d Streets—the ground floor of its handsomely recycled building and the best public space in the area since Bryant Park—that are concerned with the history and quality of its immediate environment.

The show is extremely well researched, written and lighted. It has the special advantage of immediacy, since it is just a short, traumatic walk to the theaters on display. It also has clarity, in the arrangement and impact of its then-and-now pictures, in which elegant glass and iron marquees have given way to son-of-Sodom advertisements for punk porn, and readability, in its direct and literate text. With recordings of show tunes wafting through the mall to set the mood, I defy anyone to resist a severe bout of nostalgia, reinforced by the before and after pictures. Even the young are not immune.

The exhibition has been directed by Ray Ring, and the seminars (there are two more, on Nov. 15 and 22) under the auspices of the Graduate Center's doctoral program in theater, are concerned with both urban planning and the performing arts. Funding has come from the New York Council for the Humanities and the New York State Council on the Arts, and never have grants created better value than in this examination of a city's vital assets and pressing problems. Nor has the proper and constructive relationship of an educational and cultural institution to its environment been better demonstrated than in this project. Intelligence and hope are valuable weapons in the urban wars.

A few blocks to the west, on the 26th floor of the McGraw-Hill Building, intelligence and hope are operating at full throttle in the headquarters of the 42d Street Redevelopment Corporation, a not-for-profit, tax-exempt group, under the direction of Frederic S. Papert, that is doing more than dreaming. Through a wholly owned subsidiary, West Side Properties,

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A portrait of John Ashbery—"showing us the best side of Larry Rivers's talent"

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the Corporation has acquired 14 or more buildings between Ninth and Tenth Avenues, with plans for all of them.

Six are being turned into an enterprise called Theater Row, a \$700,000 project nearing completion now that will provide five Off-Off Broadway theaters for several theater groups that have already signed up to move in. There are other plans for other properties, including the Port Authority-donated, abandoned West Side Airlines Terminal. They range from an equestrian center with quarters for the police horses that were moved away not too long ago, to dance studios and a farmer's market.

All this is anchored by the huge Manhattan Plaza housing project, on the north side of 42d Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues, which started out as a well-intentioned but doomed attempt to lure prosperous residents to stabilize the area. It became an empty red elephant that was finally rescued by a plan for subsidized housing for the performing arts and allied fields. This successful solution, which aroused immense controversy at the time, is visibly reinforcing both the professional and the residential nature of the neighborhood.

Mr. Papert's dreams are spellbinding, and some of the best New York architects have turned them into drawings and models. It is significant that he does not deal in planners' tidy abstractions, but shrewdly senses needs and activities that people want, appropriate to the area, with a potential spinoff in money and jobs. The basic premise—still not grasped by many who are concerned with economic development—is that there are ways for the economy and the built environment to work together. In this case, construction with a cultural and performing arts base is tied to consumer and tourist uses. The Redevelopment Corporation is working closely with the city's planners.

Walking the area west of Ninth Avenue, with the Port Authority bus terminal extension under construction and Manhattan Plaza filling up, seeing the promise and reality of development, one has the sense of a viable West Side community, and a feeling that it can grow. Provided, of course, that one can get past the sordid barrier from Seventh to Eighth Avenues, so well protected by the First Amendment. It is that one block that is so totally scabrous, with its over spill along Eighth Avenue. East of Seventh, as the smut thins out, the street approaches health again.

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This sick nastiness has to be experienced to be understood. It is cheap, sleazy, offensive and dangerous; decay and depravity feed on each other; bad has totally driven out good. Certainly this intense concentration of destructive uses does not belong at the city's heart, and just as surely it could yield to the kind of dispersal that the city's proposed new anti-pornography zoning would make possible, if the Board of Estimate would cease its dedicated political sabotage of the measure.

Fifty years ago, in the 1920's, this was a solid block of magic. Now it is wall-to-wall filth. To see what it was then, go back to the exhibition at the Graduate Center. There were a dozen beautiful and legendary theaters, and most of them still stand. They have been uniformly defaced by movie marquees, but it is the movies that saved them. And while the Depression finished them as legitimate theaters, it also made destruction uneconomic. There they are, advertising sex and violence, some with ruined fronts, others with recognizable facades, and all with surprisingly little interior renovation.

Forty Second Street was, and is, an extraordinary place. It numbers among its disparate features the Ford Foundation's suave palace and the United Nations at its east end, those superb Beaux Arts landmarks, Grand Central and the Library at its center, three of the city's greatest skyscrapers, the Chrysler, Daily News and McGraw-Hill buildings along its length, and the grace note of the abused, formal beauty of Bryant Park. River to river, it is consummately New York, and a lot of people want to put it back in lights. Take it from the top—42d Street. ■

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