

New Times Square...

Times Square is the traditional heart of New York. Its magnetism continues to work in spite of sordid decay. But unless the Beame administration mounts an immediate attack on the problems it has inherited—potholes, pornography, prostitution and physical deterioration—the few spring-like signs of regeneration are doomed. The beginnings of new construction and renovation, the economic health of the theater district, the continued vitality of the area as an entertainment center for a cross-section of New York and the world, hang on an effective action program.

The word most frequently used is cleanup, and what is needed are a lot of new brooms. The Mayor has put together an inspectional task force; and in a bureaucratic miracle, planners and law-enforcement people are talking to each other.

It becomes increasingly apparent, however, that the only current tool is harassment, with cyclical sweeps of offenders dumped in and out of the courts. Real estate arrangements are Byzantine; years are required to eliminate undesirable uses. Prostitution laws are ineffective and pornography laws are constantly open to re-interpretation. The area is a textbook of social pathology. Far from improving things, the recent suggestion for legalized gambling would only increase the pathology and strengthen the potential criminal-financial base.

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However, some changes for the better could be made quickly. More appropriately timed sanitation collections could spare the theater-goer vistas of garbage; the repaving of streets is already provided for in the city budget; visible police afford reassurance. But this is cosmetic correction.

Tackling the real blight means a combined planning and legal offensive. It implies a skillful kind of environmental design rather than the blanket old-building demolition of which developers dream. Effective law enforcement will depend almost totally on physical improvement.

There are Special District proposals now, in the city's Office of Midtown Planning and Development, that would encourage both preservation of neighborhood character and essential upgrading. Details include zoning, traffic patterns, open space and facade and building controls. New legislation with swift enforcement powers is being studied in the Corporation Counsel's office that would treat the cause, rather than the symptoms of the blight. Society will have to decide, ultimately, how far that law can go.

But all this is awaiting City Hall review and approval, and it is a long way to enactment of laws and fulfillment of plans. The fact that the lights that symbolize Times Square are on again, is not enough. This should be a symbol of administrative action.