

Will Slab City Take Over Times Square?

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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For years Times Square has been a kind of urban urchin, dirty and bedraggled, keeping bad company. Periodic rescue efforts have been resisted with a sooty, sleazy stubbornness. The area's peculiar assets—a lively emphasis on continuous, varied, small-scale, fine-grained human activities and a constantly moving kaleidoscope of moving light and color—have overshadowed its liabilities.

Times Square remains a strongly beating urban heart among cool commercial towers, a night and day world of sun and neon against one of New York's few remaining open skies. It has what planners call a sense of place. Even its sordid aspects have failed to dim its vitality as the city's entertainment center or its reputation as a landmark—one of the most familiar in the world.

Dangers of Respectability

Change has now come to Times Square in the only way the city knows. The steady westward press of commercial construction has demolished the Astor Hotel, where a skyscraper office building will soon rise; taken the theater out of the Paramount Theater Building for more offices, and put almost all of the property surrounding Times Square into developers' hands. Respectability is in the

offing. So is destruction, in terms of urban scale, use and character.

This danger has been recognized by the city, which has made a strong initial effort to see that the new construction will not wipe out the theater district, as it well could. The developers' pattern, if left to itself, is mechanically predictable: the same sleek, faceless slabs that are marching down Sixth Avenue, the same repetitive banks and showrooms on their ground floors, the same impersonal big business, big building mold.

Holding Off Conformity

It is questionable whether even the city's precautions can be fully effective in keeping Times Square from being absorbed into standardized commercial New York. The zoning bonuses being offered by the city for including theaters in the new construction can still produce a clutch of routine office buildings and the relentless extension of what the Regional Plan Association calls Slab City.

In its forthcoming Second Regional Plan that organization has dealt with Times Square as part of the central Manhattan business district. "The gradual creep of offices threatens to produce massive single-purpose areas," it says, reinforcing the

city's position. These areas are a "vacuous visual environment." The city needs to keep focal "low points" among its "coalescing peaks" for a sense of space, orientation and humanity. New York is on its way to becoming one "undifferentiated mass." The report warns, "If the theater district is replaced by office slabs due to short-term pressures, the cost will be felt in the long run."

The New Yorker knows this instinctively. The Times Square pedestrian enjoys the greatest of all Pop Art displays in the famous Times Square signs and lights; it is a better environmental show than anything in the galleries; it has taught a lot to the psychedelic avant garde.

He may not enter a theater at all. The streets are rivers of every kind of life, and he comes to be part of it. Right now he takes pleasure even in the temporary parking lot where the Astor stood because it is low, open and flooded with pre-spring sun. He thinks wistfully of small parks; this one would carry at least a \$10-million price tag.

Making It Happen

His instincts, however, are right. There are ways of having open space, pedestrian pleasures and the visual fireworks and human scale and variety that is

the best of Times Square in new development. But it will never happen by itself. It will take a planned framework, the establishment of principles and patterns for building, the coordination of private development and city tools, objectives and guidance. It will take a city that wants to do it.

Planning Ahead

The less than a dozen able men now in the City Planning Commission's dike-stopping Urban Design Group can hardly control this, as well as every other planning emergency in New York. The Second Regional Plan will recommend a full-time professional planning group for the Manhattan commercial core alone, which includes Times Square. There must be a development overview set by the city and put into competent, sensitive hands.

For once, there is still time. Developers speak of holding their newly purchased property, of waiting five years to build. No one needs a crystal ball to see the sanitary sterility that will come to Times Square without some thoughtful urban design, as it has come to so many once-colorful parts of the city. A walk down Third Avenue will do.

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