

ARCHITECTURE VIEW: MORE BAD NEWS ABOUT TIMES SQUARE

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More Bad News About Times Square

It is not the best of times, and it is not the worst of times, just somewhere discouragingly in between. New York no longer has the look of a city in construction, which means that at least fewer good old buildings are being torn down for bad new ones. The developers are crying all the way to the Caribbean. And the city's planners, theoretically, have time to sit and think.

They have plenty to think about. Planning is in a quiet crisis in New York. The Times Square area, for example, faces a fateful 12 months in which it will either be lost or revitalized. This will depend on whether currently projected major construction will be able to go ahead. As the symbolic heart of the city, Times Square's condition somehow seems to represent the whole.

At the same time, the change in the economy and the change in the municipal administration have left the city's planning offices in a kind of paralysis, or limbo. After establishing a remarkable record for tangible achievements in the guidance of private development through progressive urban design, they now have virtually no construction to guide.

This means that there must be a radical reordering of programs and priorities if the planners are to continue as an effective force in the city's life. And unless this reassessment is made with vision, speed and skill, there is no place to go but down. As the planning offices go, so goes New York.

The Times Square case, in particular, has been conspicuously in the news in recent weeks. We have had the upbeat announcement of plans for a Broadway Mall from the city's Office of Midtown Planning and Development, and downbeat speculation about whether major construction for the area will be able to go ahead. Mayor Beame has expressed personal concern. He even appears to be backing the mall (after his earlier opposition to the Madison Avenue Mall), which would substitute a pedestrian amenity for an area of heavy street traffic. It is supposed to provide both cosmetic and therapeutic upgrading. But most of the news about Times Square is bad.

On the plus side, it has what every city needs—tremendous vitality. On the minus side, much of that energy

is channeled into high-visibility pornography and other fast-buck operations. The area is encrusted with the dark and gritty sediment of endless seasons of concentrated use and abuse that no rain or garbage removal ever touches, a patina that would soon congeal relentlessly on the proposed mall's fancy new paving and seats and bright umbrellas. But the crime statistics are down. And the theaters are virtually full.

So much for the surface. Underneath, the district is particularly hard hit by both recession and inflation, in terms of rentals, building health and the future of certain key projects. Because the area is tenuous anyway, these factors are critical. Within months, Times Square and its environs have lost a Liggett's, a Woolworth's, at least two restaurants and the Royal Manhattan Hotel. The Franklin National Bank has demolished one of the area's few fine buildings to save taxes and maintenance. The real estate base is in serious trouble.

The hotel, stores and restaurants represented the kind of sound, diversified services that the district desperately needs. But when rent and expenses went up, the tenants went out. Whenever rents rise and legitimate commercial activities leave a fringe area, peep shows and massage parlors come in. After the demise of Deli City on 42d Street, only the withholding of a state liquor license staved off a topless bar at this focal point of Times Square. The trend in such an economy is inevitably down. And the farther down the ambience slips, the greater the pathologies of the public it attracts, and the more difficult it is for any stabilizing, legitimate activities to remain and compete. (No one is looking to make Times Square genteel or the playground of the effete rich, only reasonably secure and appetizing.)

In fact, the future of Times Square seems to depend on one large, tide-turning project: the \$160-million hotel planned by the Atlanta architect-entrepreneur, John Portman, for the west side of Broadway between 45th and 46th Streets. In size and scale, in design bravura, in its ability to attract the middle class tourist and to be an environmental catalyst, it would provide an essential stability for Times Square, in character with its traditional functions and style. But this hotel, in turn, depends on a \$200-million convention center proposed for a riverfront site a few blocks west,

and this project is hung up on the city's financial crisis and the present state of the economy.

That is the situation, and the future is clearly in the balance. The question is, can the city's planners turn Times Square around? In the Lindsay era, they would have been in there with a strategy compounded of Machiavelli and Sixtus V. When Fifth Avenue began to change in character and style a few years ago, the Office of Midtown Planning and Development (OMPD) devised the mixed use Fifth Avenue zoning district to control and upgrade the street's activities. (The Olympic Tower is its first product.) The special theater district was taken over by OMPD from the Urban Design Group that had devised the zoning, and the planners worked with the builders to bring new playhouses to the Times Square area. It initiated plans and negotiations for the convention center and the Portman hotel. Farther east—OMPD's authority extends to both rivers—there was the defeated, but imaginative Madison Avenue Mall.

OMPD, one of about a dozen special planning offices located throughout the city according to districts, is currently in uneasy transition. A new director, Dick G. Lam, has replaced the first director of the office, Jaquelin T. Robertson, after months of delay due to changes at City Hall. (Mr. Robertson is about to embark on the redevelopment of Teheran for the Shah of Iran, with the planning firm of Llewelyn-Davies International—a far cry from Times Square.)

None of the planning offices have the high priority status now that they enjoyed under Lindsay; at that time the top-line authority of the Mayor's office was actively behind them. The power of his concentrated interest and backing was no small advantage in getting things done. In the uncertain transition from Lindsay to Beame, some of the best urban planners and directors have left. In the midtown office, five of the top planners were lost as a result of insecurity and conflict, and the Robertson team is being reshuffled. Now that the period of high publicity and dazzling innovation is past, New York has ceased to attract the brightest young professionals in the field.

Loss of talent is matched by loss of leadership; the charismatic directors, such as Robertson and Richard Weinstein of the Office of Lower Manhattan Development, who put the public and the private sector together with a blend of political magic and pragmatic idealism are gone. The days of working with large-scale development are also gone, at least temporarily, and so are the charismatic, large-scale projects. There are limited funds for anything at all in the current budgetary crisis.

If there is neither money nor development, what are OMPD's planners doing? There are some commendable undertakings: a continuing study of zoning controls for signs and street access that could reduce the impact of porn joints around Times Square, coupled with an ongoing collaborative effort with law-enforcement agencies to monitor and clean up illegal and dangerous activities. Dick Lam, the new director, has instituted a study of proliferating

single-room occupancy hotels with the aim of controlling their conversion. Block by block, surveys are being made for computer digestion and other forms of analysis. There also seems to be an increasing amount of planning busywork, such as "exchange and comparison" of information from other cities from Caracas to Miami, for which grants are usually available. These have, at best, risky and limited input into the New York planning process.

No longer are developers being pulled in by their jacquard silk ties to take a strong dose of higher design standards, often for mutual benefit and stimulation. The Villard Houses-Palace Hotel project in east midtown is not being guided into appropriate as well as profitable design solutions by the midtown office. Nor is the planning being done during this building hiatus that would prepare the city for development when construction resumes. (A Queensborough Bridge area study begun previously is now fragmented among other agencies. A "public entertainment district" could be mapped out for Times Square peddlers and tourist activity could be coordinated. A comprehensive midtown traffic study needs to be pushed while pressures are low.)

What is actually coming out of the office is less than encouraging. The Broadway Mall, a holdover from the Lindsay years, has been shorn of its most important element in its most recent public appearance. Part of its purpose as a pedestrian precinct was to have a tourist information billboard, or building, at one end that would centralize visitor activities attractively and informatively. That is gone, and the Mall is reduced to street dressing, rather than something that deals inclusively with the needs and functions of the area.

But what is most disturbing is the current planning climate: not apathy, but slowdown; not lack of interest so much as lack of vision; a lowering of standards and a lessened conceptualization of the job. What has noticeably slacked off is the passionate pursuit of a better city through the imaginative, far-reaching application of the creative processes of urban design. It was a kind of passion that pulled bureaucrats and businessmen along with it to very real planning achievements. It is not just Times Square that hangs in the balance; it is all of New York.

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