Chapter 36

''X Marks the Spot: Times Square Dead or Alive?''

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Times Square/42nd Street is a place-name on the map of Manhattan as well as a representational space. Defined as the meeting of two triangles forming an "X" at 42nd Street where Broadway crosses Seventh Avenue, it was once the popular entertainment district of vaudeville and the legendary Broadway theater. Since the early twentieth century this rowdy playground has been the central public place where New Yorkers celebrate New Year's Eve. Frequented by thousands of daily commuters who arrive via its labyrinthine subway system, Times Square/42nd Street is linked directly to the entire metropolitan region. As its name designates, it used to be the location of great newspaper and radio headquarters. But at this very moment in time, the place has been rendered by Disney and turned into a wax museum with the likes of Madame Tussaud. This neon-encrusted "X" is regulated by design guidelines that call for a requisite number of Lutses [Light Units in Times Square] and controlled by urban designers who have planned its spontaneous unplannedness. Times Square/42nd Street has become "New York Land," a themed shopping district where Disney competes with Warner Brothers, and Virgin Megastore confronts the live music studio of MTV. Times Square/42nd Street promises to be a mega-entertainment complex trimmed with a 25-screen cinema complex, a Planet Hollywood movie-star hotel, restored historic theaters, and as many themed restaurants as the area can hold. Patrolled by private policemen, its garbage picked up by private collectors, and its signage refurbished by private donations – under the general guidelines set down by its Business Investment District (BID) – it is as clean as a whistle. Times Square/42nd Street has become the tourist epicenter of Manhattan.

Many New Yorkers wonder how this has happened to such an iconic place of popular culture. Will Times Square/42nd Street survive, will its competitive chaos and tough-guy allure be able to hold out against the latest onslaught of improvement schemes? Or has a grand mistake been made – and this dysfunction junction been mauled by disimprovement policies amending its authentic nature instead of its corruption? Has Times Square/42nd Street become another nonplace instantly recognizable from the images that circulate on television and cinema screens but a

space that is never experienced directly (Auge 1995)? Is it in danger of extinction or disappearance – reduced to an any-space-whatever? Gilles Deleuze claimed that "any-space-whatever is not an abstract universal. . . . It is a perfectly singular space, which has merely lost its homogeneity, that is, the principle of its metric relations or the connections of its own parts, so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways. It is a space of virtual conjunction, grasped as pure locus of the possible" (Delueze 1986). Indeed, Times Square/42nd Street appears to juxtapose in a single real place several different types of spaces. This open-ended disjunctive set of sites coexists simultaneously as a retrotheater district, a media center, a Disneyland, a suburban-style shopping mall, an advertising zone, a corporate office park, a movie but also a song, a novel, a play, a street, and a way of life. Will it also be called a center for the visual arts, a place for emerging electronic industries, a truly plugged-in space connected to the rest of the world?

Once upon a time, Times Square/42nd Street was a place where prostitutes, pimps, or hucksters rubbed shoulders with out-of-town conventioneers, theater audiences, corporate executive secretaries, tourists, and families. But now Times Square's vice zone, which reached its zenith in the 1970s when more than a hundred X-rated adult bookstores, peep shows and topless clubs concentrated there, has been broken up by a 1995 zoning order that allows only eight such establishments to remain. But spiralling real-estate prices and exorbitant rents have done more damage to the old Times Square than any zoning regulation or design guideline ever could have wrought. The last pieces of this remodeled media center are just now falling into place. Sixteen years ago, when the city and state decided to clean up Times Square they offered developers of the four giant office towers located at the heart of the "X" and known as Times Square Center – a center designed several times by Philip Johnson and John Burgee in the early 1980s – unbelievably large tax abatements if they would turn Times Square into a new headquarters for financial corporations. The collapse of New York's real-estate market and an array of law suits put an end to that dream. Meantime, the public and architects were given time to rethink the importance of Times Square as the crossroads where consumers and producers of popular culture inevitably meet.

Hopes for a new financial district to rival Wall Street gave way to a new reality that Times Square/42nd Street would soon become the media center of the world. As the idea developed, the four giant towers have been replaced piecemeal: a tower already under construction for Conde Nast Publications is rising on the northeast corner of Broadway and Times Square; across from this site on the western side of the Square, Reuters news and information services will build a 30-story headquarters. Two more towers – yet to be designed – will be built on the southside of 42nd Street, east and west of Seventh Avenue, whose tenants are likely to be Disney and Home Box Office. Following the special zoning requirements, the Conde Nast structure contains a ten-story cylinder cantilevered over the northwest corner and outfitted with neon signs. A metal grid on its other corner facade will permit a mixture of advertising gimmicks including video and electronic screens. Crowned at the top of its tower by four huge square panels looming out over the cityscape, these will house satellite dishes or other high-technology equipment. The design for the new 30-story Reuters Building contains similar gestures such as a fourth-floor newsroom visible from the street and a news zipper extending down to the sidewalk,

all of which make the pedestrian aware that media art is the required adornment for all commercial architecture in Times Square. Some believe the revival of Times Square/42nd Street began in 1993 when Disney decided to make a modest investment in what was then considered to be a dead and dreary center of Manhattan by agreeing to renovate the New Amsterdam Theater on 42nd Street south. The city was more than willing to offer this entertainment giant both subsidies and guarantees that it would not risk its brand name, feeling secure that Disney would lure others to follow in its powerful wake. Perhaps Mr. Eisner, The Walt Disney Company's CEO since 1987, needed no such assurance for he proclaimed: "I know what 42nd Street can be, and it is going to completely rejuvenate New York. I want to be part of that, and I want to be part of that as an executive of the Disney Company and I want to be part of that as a former New Yorker." Five years later, the entire 13 acres of Times Square/42nd Street contains the hottest real-estate property in the world. The overall cleanup of Times Square/42nd Street has generated spin-off effects enlarging its theatrical tableaux: the "Stardust Dine-O-Mat" on 43rd Street appears to be a 1940s blue-plate restaurant with waitresses attired as if they were the Andrews Sisters, a Hansen's Times Square Brewery Restaurant has opened, as has a Ferrara's delicatessen, O'Lunney's Tavern, and a virtual-reality emporium called "Cinema Ride." Besides the Virgin Megastore, Live Entertainment of Toronto, and AMC Entertainment Inc., other communications and media have already arrived in Times Square or made commitments to do so. AMC Entertainment Inc. has even moved to an old burlesque house on the south side of 42nd Street, The Empire Theater, 70 feet down the street where it will form the entrance to its much proclaimed 25-screen movie theater complex.

None of the acts in this revival show, however, has been accomplished without a great deal of anxiety and fear that Times Square/42nd Street has been mauled, sanitized, Disneyfied (see Berman 1995; Elany 1997; Huxtable 1997; Koolhaas 1996). It arouses a general fear that no one will ever experience in this commodified place the unique reality of New York. Some blame Mickey Mouse as the virtuoso in charge of a marketing show that offers token images of the city laced with saccharine cheer in preference to the dirty real thing. Others fear the burning heat of a cultural meltdown where popular art and the mainstream commandeer the show. They believe that the exotic, the overcomplex, the unique can still be used to oppose the commonplace, the banal, and the widely available and thus they maintain a snobbish contempt for Disney, Warner Brothers, and the Ford Motor Company, all of whom are making their architectural debut on the reinvigorated stage of Times Square. Others believe that seedy old Times Square was utterly authentic, ablaze with stroboscopic liveliness and vibrating energy sustaining a tempo of desire both pleasurable and degenerate. They wish that Disney could be banished to the South Bronx, to an invisible rather than animated presence. Still others point out that the advertising war of signs taking place around the square has raised the entry stakes to billions of dollars in the competition to obtain mediaspace in this preeminently televisual place. At such a level, it is guaranteed that only megacorporations can play in the real-estate game. When merged or woven together the visual prejudices of these architectural critics and judges of place take the elite road to culture – relying on all the binary polarities that pit High Art against the Popular Arts, the pure against the devalued, the oppositional against the affirmative.

While acknowledging the dangers of global capitalism and its strategy of cultural appropriation, it is time to erect a monument to the old Times Square in order to resist the seductions of regressive nostalgia. There is something melancholy in the repetitive refrain that Times Square has died, been Disneyfied, reduced to another middle-class mall. There is a tendency to reify the authentic – or idealize the has-been – that used to hover about the place. Something paradoxical and pessimistic occurs in the outpourings of regrets remarking on the ruination of Times Square as a site of collective gathering because this special iconic place has been transformed into a mediascape where mass entertainment pacifies the spectator, where consumers are lulled to sleep, and passers-by are enticed by yet more blazing advertisements. What this outpouring of moralistic laments implicitly confirms is that cultural critics are tired of Pop Art – its promise has become classical, refined, even pleasurable. There is nothing to "learn from 42nd Street" when the symbolic expressions and semantic codes of commercial art no longer shock, when the manipulations of city images and signs are taken for granted as the visual vocabulary that spells out a place. Lawrence Alloway has been credited with coining the expression "pop art" in the mid-1950s. It was a term he used to approve of mass-produced objects and mass media imagery and to banish for ever the outmoded concepts of eternal value and artistic creativity. In the 1990s the abundance of mass communication and the esthetics of plenty are no longer an embarrassment to the custodians of art and the curators of taste. Like a good advertising campaign, Pop Art has saturated the market with its name and presence and become the fully accepted icon of the new Times Square.

It is assumed by those who market the new Times Square, as well as by the cultural critics who lament its demise, that the place once contained a unique, even authentic, experience (Losell 1997). Both promoters and critics appeal to history as the stable source from which contemporary representations should draw. The sole reason that tourists visit Times Square – or any other historic site – is to stand on the spot where something took place, to see and experience the pleasures of a world-famous location. Critics make the same connection: the new Times Square ought to represent a deeper historical encounter with place. They blame consumers and tourists for corrupting the real experience of Times Square and trivializing the place for they have emptied it of meaning and settled too easily for stereotypical replacements and illusionary simulations. Yet it is difficult to determine what more authentic experience would correct its false illusions and what deeper historical meaning its signs and symbols should reference.

An appeal to Times Square's history is troublesome because the death of this famous place did not happen overnight. Legitimate theater along 42nd Street has been threatened with extinction at least since the 1930s when most of its theaters were turned into movie houses. The last legitimate stage production closed its doors in 1937. Of the 13 fabled theaters on 42nd Street, all built between 1899 and 1920, there are only 5 survivors. Furthermore, Times Square has been in trouble and its image in need of repair at least since 1961 when the 24-story triangular Times Tower built in 1904 was sold, remodeled and rechristened the Allied Chemical Tower. Damaging blows to Times Square's historic imagery have been delivered by New York City's real-estate market: a midtown zoning district was in force between 1982 and 1987 and allowed taller and bulkier skyscrapers from Times Square to Columbus Circle along the Broadway spine, plus a competitive war with the Wall Street area favored Times

Square as an office park because it is the city's most densely populated mass transit hub and lies in close proximity to commuter rail lines at Grand Central Station and Penn Station. In addition, there is the city's economic development policies pushing family-style entertainment for the masses as a tourist incentive and demanding that the gutter sordidness and notorious vice zone of Times Square be erased by reallocating sex to zones on the periphery of the city and almost outlawing its appearance along 42nd Street. Even "the Great White Way," the razzle-dazzle electronic wizardry of great neon signs that have turned the night lights of Times Square into a midtown Coney Island since the 1920s has been tampered with. A 1987 ordinance mandates the amount of illuminated signage and the degree of brilliance that new buildings must carry. The city wants these new signs to be as flashy as possible, and advertising is clearly allowed, in an attempt to eradicate the fact that most of Times Square already has become a dull and dark canyon of overlarge skyscraper office towers.

But there is nothing novel about the peculiarly American event of advertising to be seen in Times Square. When Le Corbusier visited New York in the 1930s, he surmised that the origin of American advertising lay in the great size of the country. Millions of citizens stretched over vast open spaces had constantly to be informed that this or that existed. He found advertising to be banal and without plastic quality, it should be banned from the streets of the city But the lights of Broadway were seductive, and Le Corbusier admitted that he could not

> pass by the luminous advertising on Broadway. Everyone has heard about that incandescent path cutting diagonally across Manhattan in which the mob of idlers and patrons of motion pictures, burlesque shows and theaters moves. Electricity reigns, but it is dynamic here, exploding, moving, sparkling, with lights turning white, blue, red, green, yellow. The things behind it are disappointing. These close-range constellations, this Milky Way in which you are carried along, lead to objects of enjoyment which are often mediocre. So much the worst for advertising! . . . And on Broadway, divided by feelings of melancholy and lively gaiety, I wander along in a hopeless search for an intelligent burlesque show in which the nude white bodies of beautiful women will spring up in witty flashes under the paradisiac illumination of the spotlights (Le Corbusier 1947: 101).

Le Corbusier, like the cultural critics of contemporary times who oppose the illusions of tourism to the authenticity of history, pits a naive American culture without profundity against a deeper sense of history that only a European would know.

This opposition is repeated and embellished by another traveler to America, Erich Mendelsohn, who published a book of his photographs taken in 1924. Under a section entitled "The Grotesque" he underlined a photograph of "New York: Broadway at Night" with the following caption: "Uncanny. The contours of the buildings are erased. But in one's consciousness they still rise, chase one another, trample one another./ This is the foil for the flaming scripts, the rocket fire of the moving illuminated ads, emerging and submerging, disappearing and breaking out again over the thousands of autos and the maelstrom of pleasure-seeking people./ Still disordered, because exaggerated, but all the same already full of imaginative beauty, which will one day be complete." Mendelsohn labeled another "Grotesque" photograph "Broadway by Daylight" and gave it the following caption: "[it] loses the mystery, intoxication, the glitter of the night./ Is nothing more than unbridled, wild, shouts itself hoarse. Grandiose tomfoolery of a universal fair: collars, sugar, Orpheum,

toothbrushes, tobacco, and 'Vote for Charles E. Gehring' " (Mendelsohn 1993: 52–4). Mendelsohn's reference to "uncanny" displays the pull of contradictory forces, the love/hate relationship of cultural critics when they come in contact with the commercial art that America so blatantly represents. It is animalistic, trampling underfoot more refined culture; and it is pure spectacle, reducing everything to frivolity and fun. The critic must build a defense against American levelings, but it is a defense that is ambivalent, displaying both dread of the grotesque, the chaotic, the seductive, yet revealing a curiosity to look behind first appearances, to probe into the depths, to discover more profound meaning. Thus is set up a movement back and forth between averting one's eyes and desiring to see more, between admiration and dislike.

Oppositions that set real against false attractions, that seek profound instead of superficial experiences, do not allow the critic to move beyond repetitious and pessimistic refrains when they encounter contemporary Times Square. They fail to recognize that neither Disney nor Mickey Mouse is the problem, but their bagful of technological tricks is. Americans have always been more interested in the medium than the message, and wondrous technology seems to fascinate the most. The animated world of Disney, beyond anything else, promises the dream that technology can conquer nature, can control the physical world. Furthermore, it is technology, the animation apparatus (consisting of frames and cuts, the speed, tempo and rhythm of movement, the method of caricature and drawing – in fact everything that makes possible the dissolution of the photographic and the realistic into each other) that enables the characters to transform themselves and to assume any form.

When shifts in technology are taken into account, it is not the loss of Times Square as an emblematic space of industrial capital that critics should mourn, but the passing of a mechanized industrial art into that of the electronic. When Jean Charlot celebrated Disney's new art of motion in 1939, he described it as an art that "could be multiplied by mechanical means" so that "the world might rid itself of the idolatry of the 'original' and resuscitate ancient collective traditions, Gothic and Egyptian" (Charlot 1939: 269–70). Because animated drawings were manipulated by so many hands from the birth of the plot to the inking of the line, they smashed the idea of an "original." By eradicating any idiosyncratic traces of an artist's individuality through homogenizing technical procedures, Disney cartoons simulated a unified whole and produced an art that could be enjoyed by everyone. When the Museum of Modern Art held an exhibit in the summer of 1942 entitled "Walt Disney's 'Bambi': The Making of an Animated Sound Picture," they too considered Disney cartoons to be an industrial art. MOMA's press release described the production process step by step: Walt Disney was active only in the first step, that of "visualizing the story", but from then on the work was accomplished by artists, actors, musicians, background and layout men, animators and two hundred women as inkers and painters (MOMA material, cited in Mikulak 1996). MOMA went even further, describing how the Disney "factory" produced an industrial art: each task being specialized within separate departments and the entire production process organized into sequential units.

Times Square, and any other electronic space, is no longer reflective of the industrial ideology that assumed human mastery over the forces of nature and the physical world. This has now been replaced by notions of interface, interaction, and interchange. Perhaps it is through a deeper understanding of animation, the awareness that motion lies in between static poses, a constant coming into being that will

open up to an exploration of electronic art. Innovations in telecommunications technology, distributed by many of the corporate giants who are seeking to reside in the refurbished Times Square, have ushered in a new era in which the recording, manipulation, and transmission of signs encourage a mixing of media – visual, verbal, and sound. Public space is being transformed into a mixture of signs, images, expressions both spatial and temporal, virtual and real – and this requires a new set of critical tools to evaluate change. It is no longer cars, machines, and technological tools but data, information, services, and entertainment that drive the economy. Space becomes an abstract computational space and representational forms mere algorithmic codes manipulated by a computer.

If there is to be a new geometry on which the city might be imagined, new space and time transformations that might enable us to envision creative potentialities – that something "new" pushing us toward experimentation and improvisation when we come in contact with the real – then it must be based not on the simulated displays and descriptive signs of our contemporary imagescapes – the result of a severed relationship between meaning and place – but instead on the open-ended display of virtual and actual images that allows for both a playful re-membering and an improvisational excess. This gesture aims to move beyond the melancholic opposition that decries tourism and praises authenticity, that criticizes illusion and seeks profundity. It requires a different map than the one we normally utilize as our conceptual tool to order and hierarchialize the actual territory of the city. Deleuze and Guatarri (1987: 12) have described such a map as "open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation. . . . it always has multiple entryways . . ."

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