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# Times Square

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“The internationally celebrated crossroads,” was what Adolf Ochs called the bowtie intersection of Broadway and Seventh Avenue in 1904. Ochs had recently purchased the *New York Times* and sought a new business address. At great expense he soon acquired the triangular block on 42nd Street, Broadway, and Seventh Avenue just two blocks from Oscar Hammerstein, Sr.’s “Olympia” amid a growing cluster of theaters and fancy hotels. The new Times Tower, then the tallest building in New York City, became Broadway’s most famous landmark. The name of the paper has been associated with the place ever since. In its basement, the new IRT subway station subsequently became the transfer point for the rapidly expanding population from Queens and the Bronx who commuted to work during the day and sought entertainment in the evening.

On December 31, 1908, the great electric ball of light, in a ceremony repeated to this day, first descended from the Times Tower to mark the beginning of the new year.<sup>1</sup> Twenty years later, in 1928, the *Times* added the famous “News Zipper,” which spelled out wire service news on a band of electric light bulbs. Imitating Times Square’s rapid pace and night life, newspapers in capitol cities throughout the world soon installed similar news bands. On Broadway, light



1 “Times Square at its Best.”

© New York Public Library,  
photography collection

became the trademark of the “Great White Way.”<sup>2</sup> “The brilliance of the light and color,” wrote journalist/novelist Theodore Dreiser in the summer of 1908, “urged onlookers to chew gum, drink beer, attend a play or movie, and lit the clouds above Manhattan with a glow like that of a dry timber fire.” The spectacle, free and neverending, still enralls. People have come to Times Square to shed their cares, to wonder, to dream, and to feel the pulse of a vibrant city.

Times, however, have changed. Many New Yorkers have stopped going there. Live theater and shows now compete with private forms of entertainment. For many, the area is only a pale reflection of what it once was. For many, too, it is a bleak reminder of the myriad social problems afflicting the city.

There are many streets in the Times Square area that New Yorkers, especially women, avoid. City University of New York staff members, in a 1978 study of the pedestrian composition at the sidewalks of Times Square—42nd Street IRT station sidewalk area, discovered that the mean ratio of males to females was 7 to 1 in the afternoon hours and, at the equally busy Public Library, it was 2.7 to 1.<sup>3</sup> The study, however, undermined the suburban New Yorker’s preconception of Times Square as a

“playground for minorities.” At most hours of the day and night, whites outnumber other racial groups. A follow-up mail-in survey, at any rate, indicated that the theaters around Times Square ranked first among entertainment spots in the city as places where people would “enjoy going” and actually did patronize. Only 13 percent of the respondents said they had never attended a Broadway theater. Nevertheless, 20 percent said they had never patronized the restaurants there.

The theaters, thirty-three active ones which are clustered along the side streets, offer the district’s main appeal. Some have retained their fascination for more than eighty years. Elegant old structures, they greet visitors as special people. Their architecture extends the atmosphere of the drama from the stage to the auditorium, to the lobby and out into the street, surrounding the audience and the passerby as well in a single, playful, magic experience.

All together, they are a national treasure. The number, size, and acoustical features of these theaters enable the staging of virtually any kind of production. The theater business is still a cyclical one. Some theaters, for instance, are dark for many weeks. But collectively, they attract between eight and ten million people yearly. The

first-run movie houses in the district sell more tickets than the rest of New York’s movie houses combined. The outlook for live entertainment is far from dim. New York’s convention center, located less than a mile from Times Square, attracts twelve major conventions each year. Already, conventioners spend approximately one billion dollars yearly, or one-third of all the money spent by visitors overall. Times Square is an obvious choice for the ten thousand hotel rooms that are needed to accommodate the added flow of conventioners.

The long-term viability of the theaters is an important goal.<sup>4</sup> How to reach it, however, is a matter of heated contention. Debate arose in 1982 when the “midtown” planning controls proposed expansion of the highrise office district to the west of Sixth Avenue.<sup>5</sup> This area includes the Times Square entertainment district. Properties on those blocks between Sixth and Eighth Avenues soon became prize real estate. Under the new controls, more than twenty highrise structures above fifty floors could be built along Broadway and Seventh Avenue between 42nd and 53rd Streets. Many of the new buildings could be constructed on or near theater properties.

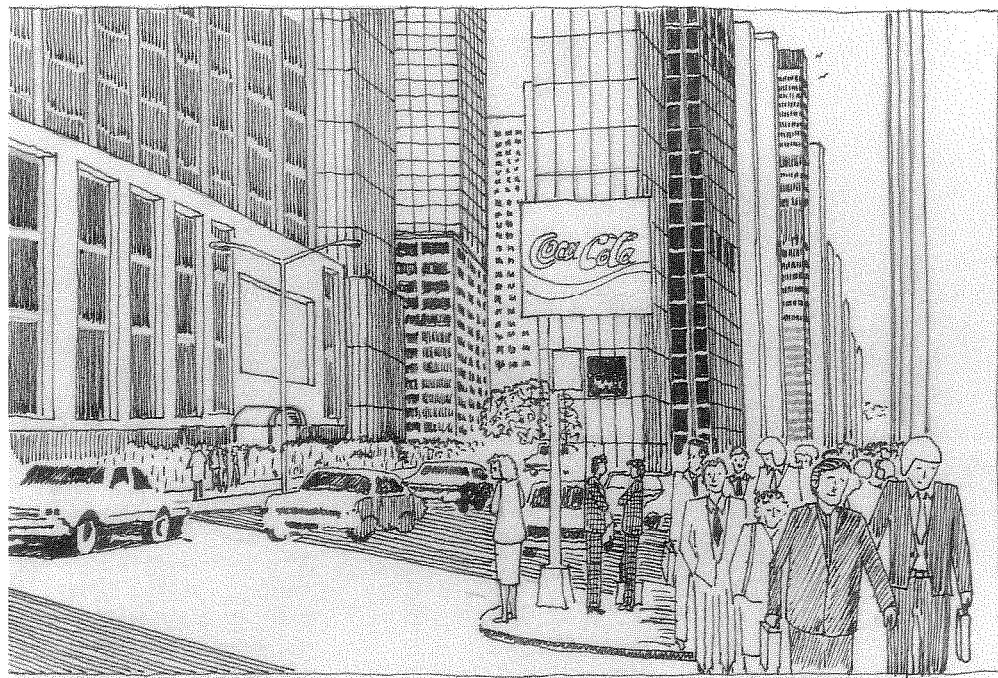
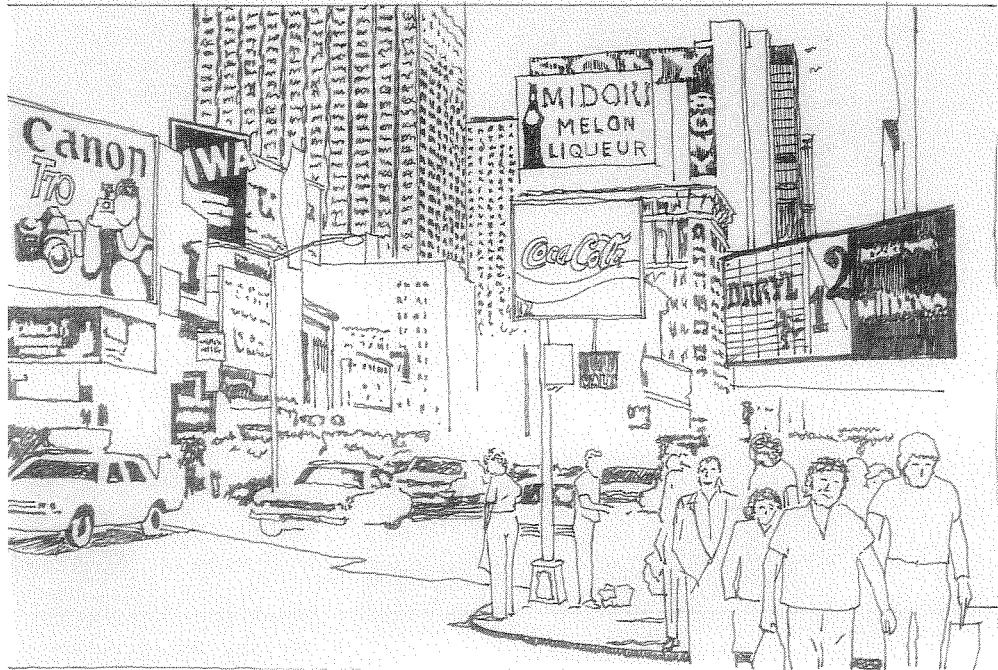
The zoning law allows for additional floor space, should the new buildings incorporate the theater

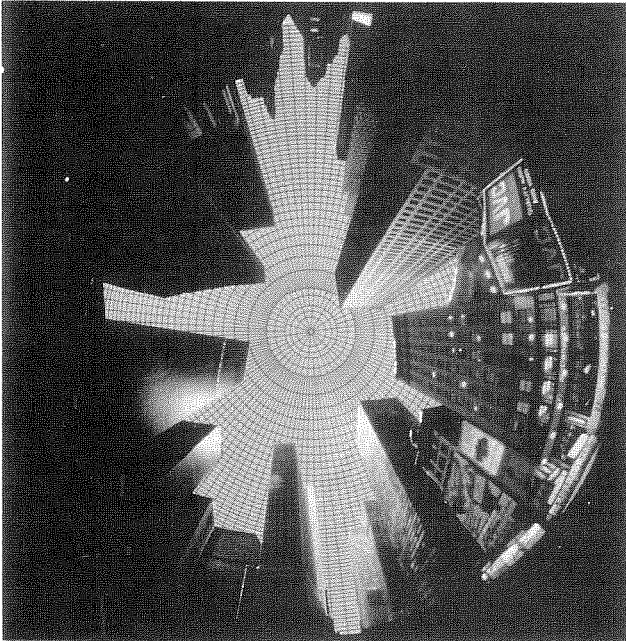
**2 Drawings prepared in California** before the construction of the model understate the impact of Midtown bulk on Times Square. Drawings by Peter Bosselman

into the new structures. Additional floor space is permitted if air rights are transferred from a theater in the vicinity. Altogether, the allowances could permit new buildings towering as high as 70 stories. Proponents of these new controls have argued that the theater rehabilitation bonus and the transfer of rights within the district will provide economic incentive for the preservation of theaters. Believing that white-collar workers would revitalize the district, they have also argued for the construction of new office buildings. Opponents, predictably, have greeted both points with skepticism.

Theater preservation, through zoning and transfer bonuses, has been questioned since 1982. That year saw five of Times Square's most beautiful and well-known theaters, the Helen Hayes, the Morosco, the Astor, the Bijou, and the Gaiety, demolished to make room for Portman's new Marriott Marquis Hotel at 45th Street and Broadway. Initially proposed in 1973, plans for the hotel were praised as a crucial step in the city's program to rehabilitate Times Square.

Recently completed, the architecture of the new building does not truly link hotel activities and those of the Marquis Theater to the Broadway sidewalk. The theater, the interior of which resembles a barn when





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compared to the five theaters it replaced, is accessible only from an interior lobby mall on the hotel's third floor.

Rehabilitation is also the theme of New York State's redevelopment project on 42nd Street. Here, at the southern edge of Times Square, the presence of five new office towers currently planned will endanger the existence of eight theaters. These include some of the city's oldest, such as the Lyric (1903), the Victory (1899), and the most splendid of all, the New Amsterdam. The State's project also would endanger the existence of the Times Tower. In earlier rehabilitation projects, it should be recalled, the huge 1515 Broadway office tower replaced the old Astor Hotel. Next, the 1500 Broadway Tower, with its ominous facade, replaced the Claridge Hotel. The 1653 Broadway Tower followed. Every one of these projects was meant to remove the "undesirable" and "breathe new life" into the district. Yet the new skyscrapers have not solved any social problems. "The presence of advertising executives and lawyers at noon," writes Paul Goldberger, "does not make this the enticing and safe environment it once was at night."<sup>6</sup>

Instead of bonuses for new buildings, many people in the theater industry, including writers and actors, have urged theater

preservation. After Portman's development demolished the five theaters mentioned, "Save the Theaters Incorporated" demanded that every Broadway theater receive landmark designation. Only five, as a matter of fact, had been so honored.<sup>7</sup> At their prompting, the Board of Estimates subsequently requested a comprehensive district plan and charged the previously appointed Theater Advisory Council to study the issue. When the Council advocated city or federal landmark status for forty-five theaters, tempers immediately flared. The three major theater owners, the Schubert Organization, *Nederlander*, and *Juyamayan*, all staunchly opposed the "landmarking of an industry."<sup>8</sup> Gerald Schoenfeld, Chairman of the Schubert Organization, argued in favor of bonuses and of transfer for allowances "granted as of right" and not upon discretionary review by the city. When asked at a hearing regarding midtown controls for the theater district whether he could imagine Times Square surrounded by 70-story office buildings, Schoenfeld replied he had no qualms about such a future vision "if it preserves the theaters." Actors and producers, joined by preservationists and neighborhood groups, have questioned the integrating of old theater structures and new office towers. They are also skeptical of the theater owners' commitment to keep all the theaters, including the smaller ones, "alive."

For better focus on the matter, further research was needed. Just before the fall 1985 hearings on midtown planning controls for the entertainment district, the Municipal Art Society commissioned a model of the Times Square area. Using techniques developed at the Environmental Simulation Laboratory at Berkeley, a model measuring 16 feet in length was built. The model comprised, in miniature, every building along Seventh Avenue and Broadway between 42nd and 53rd Streets, including signs, billboards, cars, people, statues, and trees around the ticket booths on Duffy Square. To test alternative development controls for the district, the buildings in the model were made interchangeable. A committee formed by members of the Municipal Art Society and various outside professionals guided the project team.<sup>9</sup>

Work commenced with the careful photographing of every building. To assure accuracy, a perspective-correcting lens was used. The picture, taken with the camera held parallel to the facades, provided the desired frontal views. Printed to the scale of the model, in which 16 feet equals one inch, the prints were then mounted on stiff cardboard and assembled as exact replicas of the existing structures. Large billboards and signs were similarly photographed and assembled.<sup>10</sup>



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3 Sky exposure. Preferred alternative

4 Midtown controls

Of the twenty developable sites in the Times Square area, twelve large parcels were chosen for new construction under the midtown planning controls. They were also chosen under alternative controls designed to be compatible with the character of the entertainment district. For development under the midtown controls, recent high-rise buildings were photographed in the same manner as the existing buildings were photographed. For each of the chosen development sites around Times Square, large model structures were erected.

To illustrate the development opportunities over time, as well as cumulatively, the new buildings could be placed into the model incrementally. After placing three of the new buildings into the model, Broadway resembled Sixth Avenue one block further east. When all twelve new development buildings were placed into the model, the result was stunning. The architecture critic of the *New York Times*, after viewing the model, headlined his story, "Will Times Square Become a Grand Canyon?" "The current zoning law," he wrote, "could change the identity of the place."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, an office district would replace the entire entertainment district. Approximately 15 million square feet of office space could be built around Times Square.<sup>12</sup>

Anyone stepping up to the model could bend down slightly and, looking down Broadway or any side street, perceive instantly, from a pedestrian's perspective, the startling difference in scale between the new office towers and the theater structures, tucked in between as curiosities of a bygone era. New signs, even if mandated by zoning law, would have to be placed on the facades of large buildings; they could no longer be seen, cleverly angled to surround the viewer, as silhouettes against the sky. Indeed, "canyon" walls would replace a bowl of light.

The large model effectively displayed the impact of midtown zoning controls. The dramatic change in scale dazzled the eyes of designers, planners, and nonprofessionals alike. "Before" and "after" sketches, prepared in California before the model was constructed, showed the same building volumes, yet understated by far the impact of new buildings as seen from a pedestrian's perspective in the model. Indeed, using a conventional 35mm camera with a close-focus lens, the scale of the model was sufficiently large to photograph at eye level. The model, built in 12-inch sections, thus permitted the camera to "walk" along Broadway, pivoting right and left. The model and views recorded in this fashion became a powerful design

tool to develop and test alternative controls, based on qualities already in place and on enhancing the experience of the visitor. The brilliance of the lights at night reflected against the sky is a Times Square tradition and needs to be preserved. The signs need to be seen from a distance, and there has to be ample room to angle them against the background of the city and the sky. The many stacked signs form the sloping walls of a well-proportioned outdoor room like a circus tent roofed by the sky. The design of this bowl, even now that it is interrupted by skyscrapers, is critical for Times Square as a place where tens of thousands of people can crowd together without feeling crowded. To preserve this openness to light and sky is the guiding aim to planning controls for the entertainment district.

The facades along Broadway and Seventh Avenue need to be low, with signs above as silhouettes against the sky. Taller buildings would step back above the street facade and step back again as buildings ascend. The sky can be retained because setbacks above the street facade let light and air into the street. Designing Times Square from the pedestrian's perspective was made possible by the use of the model. Lines of sight were studied and appropriate setback dimensions calculated. The placing of new signs and maximum

building heights were all tested in the realistic context of the Times Square model.<sup>13</sup>

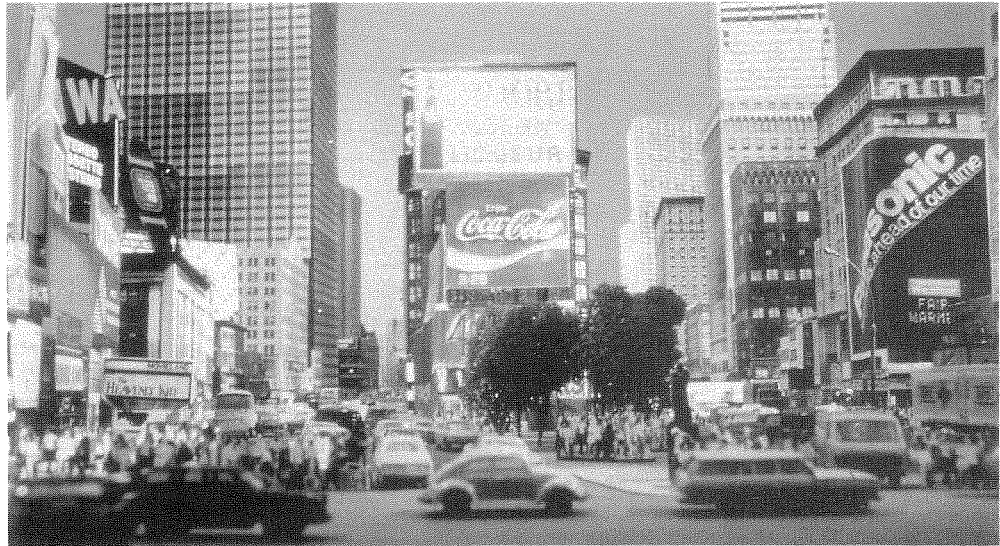
It was concluded that hotels, not office towers, are the most important use in an entertainment district. Residential buildings might not be ruled out along the side streets towards Eighth Avenue and the Clinton neighborhood.<sup>14</sup> Finally, in terms of land use, it was concluded that bars, restaurants, and nightclubs should all be open to the street and designed in a continuous row along the side streets between theaters and movie houses.

The model was first shown publicly at the Planning Commission hearing in September 1985. Prior to the meeting, the Art Society had set up the model in the front part of the room. Upon entering the room, the commissioners had to find their way around the large display. The model separated them from the first row. Here the three chairmen of the theater organization sat, with their aides. Upon the theater owners' urging, staff had to remove the model during their part of the testimony; but it returned during the many testimonies by the actors, stage writers, and citizens' groups who all spoke in support of theater preservation and entertainment district zoning controls. A short film, narrated by Jason Robards,<sup>15</sup> showed eye-level views of the Times Square model

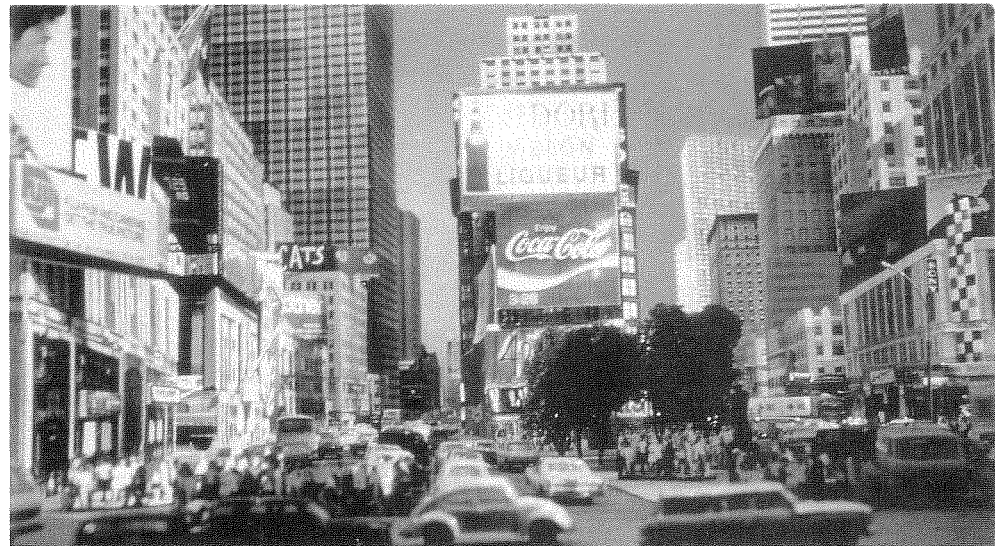
animated to show growth over time under the mid-town controls and under a preferred ordinance. This film and the display of the model for four months at the Urban Center on Madison Avenue has opened a new perspective on the future of Times Square.

Many people arriving at lunchtime, when staff occasionally animated the model to show alternative futures for Times Square, were given a view of Times Square unlike any they could imagine. These previews gave many the opportunity to react, articulate their own views, and participate in a public discussion.

This discussion is ongoing. In the summer of 1986 the *New York Times* reported on a change in planning controls for Times Square.<sup>16</sup> All buildings fronting Times Square have to be kept low, at 50 to 60 feet, with a 50-foot setback above this height to accommodate large illuminated signs. The size of the signs on top of these low buildings shall be directly proportional to the frontage length of each new development—50 square feet of signage for every foot of Times Square frontage. Beyond the 50-foot setback, buildings can go up higher. The City Planning Department's proposal follows directly the recommendations made in the film. But the amount of future development around Times Square is still



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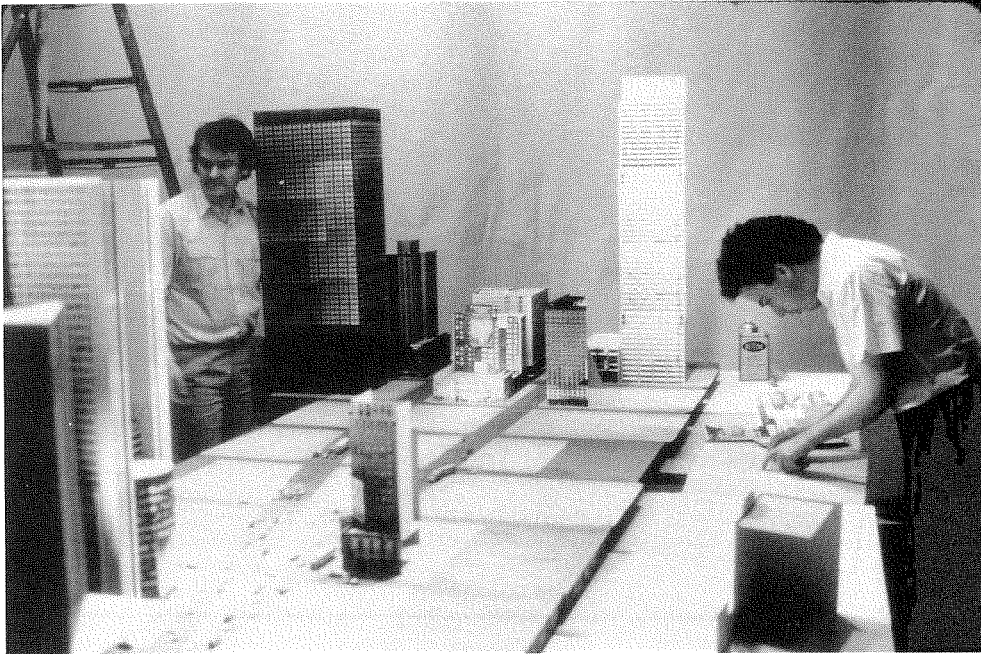


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5 Existing

6 Preferred alternative





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disputed. The city's urban designers are reluctant to further limit the bulk of future high-rise development. In their view, building bulk is a political issue.

The current midtown controls allow towers with a total floor area of eighteen times the square footage of the lot. Additional floor area is permitted through transfer rights and bonuses. Also, a complicated daylight evaluation system is used to preserve adequate light conditions at street level. This daylight scoring system defines the tower shapes, but does not limit the volume or height of future buildings. These daylighting scores, designed for streets and avenues, cannot be applied to an open area like Times Square. They will not produce a "bowl of light," so essential to the vitality of this large public place. To preserve the openness of Times Square to light and sky, building bulk has to be limited by sky exposure planes. This continues to be the position of groups who support special planning controls for Times Square.

The model has been continuously used to study the city's proposals as well as counterproposals. The outcome of this debate is uncertain. However, community groups concerned about places like Times Square have learned to use tools that help them visualize and imagine what these places would be like in the

future. Floor area ratios, setbacks, and sky exposure planes are no longer abstract terms and numbers.

The Times Square project has spurred community groups in Manhattan to use these modeling and filming techniques in waking others to the effects of city planning policies on their neighborhoods. A group on the Upper East Side has used this technique to show what the avenues would look like if more and more towers were built along Third, Second, First, and East River Avenues. The group insists on lower building heights and on stricter design review criteria from the city.<sup>17</sup> Across the Park, on the Upper West Side, community groups have gone further, calling for a moratorium on new high-rise development in their neighborhoods.

In New York, community groups are no longer on the defensive. They are taking an active role in shaping their future.

#### NOTES

- 1 A history of Times Square by Stanley Buder, Professor of History, Baruch College, appeared in "The Bright Light Zone," by William Kornblum, Associate Professor of Sociology, City University of New York, Graduate School and University Center, 1978.
- 2 Another good history with many illustrations of Times Square, the actors, and show business is Jill Stone's *Times Square, A Pictorial History*,

1982, published by MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc.

A third valuable history is Lou Stoumen's *Times Square—45 Years of Photography*. The author has taken photographs of Times Square from 1939 to the present. New York: Aperture, 1985.

- 3 "The Bright Light Zone," West 42nd Street Study, by the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, 1978, commissioned by the Ford Foundation. The study team conducted pedestrian counts, questionnaire surveys, and market studies of the 42nd Street corridor entertainment industries. The study concentrates on West 42nd Street, with some emphasis on the Times Square area.
- 4 In an open letter dated August 7, 1985, the president of the Planning Commission identified issues for public discussion: a special demolition permit for all theaters, height controls for Broadway and Seventh Avenue properties (a novelty in Manhattan's midtown), transfer development rights, and urban design controls on signage and lights.
- 5 City of New York, Midtown Planning, 1982.
- 6 Paul Goldberger, *New York Times*, October 6, 1985.
- 7 Broadway Theater District, A Preservation Development and Management Plan, advocated: Designate as landmarks the interior and exterior of the remaining thirty-three legitimate Broadway theaters under Chapter 2004 of the City Charter. The study, sponsored by Save the

Theaters, Inc., also recommended a Federal Historic District bounded by 41st Street to 53rd Street, midblock between Sixth and Seventh Avenues to Eighth Avenue. The study was prepared by Lee Harris Pomeroy Associates, Jack Goldstein, Fred Kent, and the Harvard Business School Task Force, December 1983.

- 8 *Daily News*, Manhattan, August 28, 1985.
- 9 The committee was chaired by Nicholas Quenelle and Hugh Hardy; members were Kent Barwick, Paul Byard, Phillip Howard, and Carol Rifkind. Advisers were Lee Pomeroy and Anthony Hiss. Darlene McCloud, Director of Issues at the Municipal Art Society, did the research on development potential in the area and organized the project. Virginia Dejeni successfully convinced Jason Robards to narrate the film. Sue Radmer organized the exhibit at the Municipal Art Society.
- 10 The photographs were taken by Duke Crawford and Doug Webb. The models were built by Gilles Depardon, Michael St. Pierre, Kathryn Ogawa, Timothy Abbel, Mary Jukary, Lea Cloud, and Nancie Newman.
- 11 *New York Times*, October 6, 1985.
- 12 This figure is based on 80 percent build-out of twelve development sites around the bowtie intersection of Seventh Avenue and Broadway, north of 42nd to 53rd Streets. It does not include the approximately 4 million square feet of development proposed for the 42nd Street redevelopment project—The City at 42nd Street. Fifteen million

square feet of office space would bring forty to sixty thousand people to the sidewalks of Times Square during the morning and afternoon.

- 13 Under the proposal by the Municipal Art Society, a street wall height of 50 to 70 feet would be mandatory, with a 50-foot setback above the street wall for the placing of signs. Above that height, building volume would follow a cut-off plane of 1:2. If avenue properties would be limited to 200 feet in depth, the resulting floor area ratio would amount to 1:14. The development potential on the twelve sites in the study would total 6.1 million square feet instead of the 11.7 million square feet permitted under Midtown controls.
- 14 Clinton, or "Hell's Kitchen," a neighborhood first truncated by redevelopment in the 1930s—first by the Lincoln Tunnel project, then by the Port Authority Bus Terminal—is a physically isolated neighborhood west of Eighth Avenue.
- 15 Jason Robards volunteered his time to narrate the 12-minute film presentation with model simulations. The model was photographed by Doug Webb. The author designed the model scenarios and directed the model and film project.
- 16 *New York Times*, August 6, 1986.
- 17 "No More Tall Stories," a film produced by CIVITAS, written by Edmond Levy and Peter Bosselmann, narrated by Paul Newman, directed by Peter Bosselmann and the Project for Public Spaces.