

TIMES SQUARE'S STREET SECTION AND THE GHOSTED SILVER SCREEN

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The evolution of movie houses may be revealed as useful for analysis of the cities . . . from now on architecture is only a movie.

Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*

[The] screen is empty, and thus qualifies either as the everything of all possible images or else as their nothingness as vehicles of illusion.

Hans Belting, "Theaters of Illusion," in Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Theaters*²

INTRODUCTION

The current public space of New York City's Times Square is a product of the media that inhabited the site over the course of its history. Times Square epitomizes the transformation of media into urban fabric—the translation of an intangible social and sensual experience into a realized urban form. This transformation culminated in the conversion of the filmic screen into a building typology.

The history of Times Square reveals a constant metamorphosis of the ruling mode of entertainment. These different media not only acted as instruments of leisure, but also served as political devices, constructing a collective narrative in support of the site's reputation.

Founded on the programmatic adjacency of theater and prostitution activity, Times Square was established on a psychological split between potential fantasy and manifested fantasy. While the legitimate theaters served the former, the illegitimate activity of prostitution provided the latter. In this context, the theater, which was the first media to govern the site, sustained a double role. Psychologically, it evoked fantasies; politically, it served the image of the site as a "theater district."

With the rise of film and the conversion of theaters into movie houses, the visual image took on a central role in entertainment. Over time, this change in the status of the visual image produced an essential social paradigmatic shift in the relationship between the visual and the political images.³ Once opposed, the visual and political images of the site were eventually conflated.

Two critical moments in the evolution of the site are particularly important to understanding the collapse between Times Square's visual and political images. The first is the origin of the site in 1904, which is responsible for its mythological inscription in the collective memory. The second is the 1980-2001 42nd Street Development Plan (42DP), which implemented a new building typology and dramatically changed the shape and characteristics of Times Square's public space.

While the mythological image of the site was dominated by the media of theater, the phenomenological inscription of the filmic screen into the new building typology reveals both the social inversion of the fantasized and the realized, and the urban inversion of materialization and dematerialization in relation to the urban psyche of Times Square.

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THE CONSTRUCTION OF A MYTHOLOGICAL IMAGE IN RELATION TO THE LITERAL AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL SCREENS

Officially announced on April 8, 1904, Times Square emerged following two events: the erection of the *New York Times* Tower, and the opening of the Interborough Rapid Transit Station.⁴ Though it was announced as a new site, Times Square did not begin as a tabula rasa. Prior to the erection of the tower and the station, the site—then called Longacre Square—consisted of two hotels, five theaters, and thirty-eight brothels. There were an additional seventy houses of prostitution nearby.⁵



Figure 1. c. 1899



Figure 2. Olympia Theater, 1895

In spite of the fact that the number of brothels surpassed the number of theaters at its inception, Times Square was labeled a "theater district."⁶ The legitimate theater, which served as a camouflage for illegitimate activity, originated the gap between actuality and the collective image. A further reinforcement of the site's image manifested through its semantic and formal arrangements. While the Broad-way was governed by the theaters, the narrow-ways were governed by houses of prostitution.

The construction of a mythological image of Times Square as "theater district" was intended to compensate for the violent transition between the fantasized and the realized and was linked to the ruling media. While the dominant media changed, its psychological role producing fantasy, and its political role in constructing an ideal image of Times Square, persevered.

Theater District 1899-1929: The Stage

From 1899 until approximately its third decade, Times Square's identity as transportation hub and emerging cultural icon resulted in a rapid flourishing of theaters at the intersection of Broadway and 42nd Street. At its peak in 1927, Times Square encompassed at least eighty-five theaters. By the turn of the century, the area became what Lynne B. Sagalyn calls "America's great central marketplace for commercial culture," and served as a national entertainment center.⁷

As the dominant media, theater shaped the interiority of the site. Its phenomenological significance stems from the inscription of the theater as a spatial unit in collective memory. This unit was based on given dimensions for height, length and depth and on an oval shape, which was linked to catharsis—the audience's emotional reaction to the drama on stage.

Not only were the interior theater units built around a literal stage, but a phenomenological stage dominated the site's exteriority. The site's public space was characterized by a wide ground plan and a dramatic section. The section was based on a sole vertical member (Times Tower) situated in the center of a perspectival picture plane as an actor on a stage.

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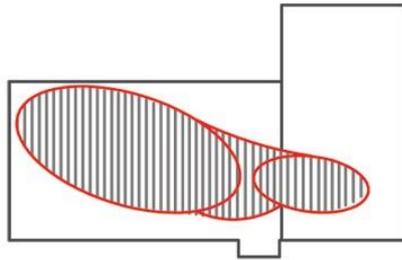


Figure 3. Theater Section Diagram



Figure 4. New York Times Tower, 1904

Film District 1930-1944: The Screen

By the 1930s, Times Square's popularity created the potential for new and expanded business. As land values rose, legitimate theaters, which were low in density and tailored to a single use, failed to generate sufficient revenues. In response, theater owners introduced vaudeville, burlesque, and—most significantly—moving images.⁸ The conversion of theaters into movie houses was not merely a change in media but also, and more importantly, a paradigmatic social, perceptual and phenomenological shift from stage to screen.

The silver screen prevailed in the theaters' interior space, and commercial screens began to shape the site's exterior public space.⁹ The street screen emerged as an extension of Times Tower: a vertical iconic member, responsible for reputation through a literal image. The intersection of the literal and phenomenological screens marks the beginning of the conflation of the two types of images, the visual and the political.

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Figure 5. Wrigley's Gum Sign, 1936

The arrival of film rendered futile the traditional division between the fantasized and the realized. A new mode of virtuality emerged: the cinematic screen, which embodied the collision between materiality and immateriality,¹⁰ the virtual and the real,¹¹ and the lived and perceived.¹²

The screen as a site of collision has been studied extensively by many twentieth-century cultural theorists. In his 1941 *Space, Time and Architecture*,¹³ Siegfried Giedion coined the term "Space-Time"¹⁴ to refer to the unification of space and time in relation to new modes of representation.¹⁵ While Giedion's work explored the intersection of space and time on a scientific basis, later writers including Paul Virilio applied the idea specifically to film. Virilio probed the screen from a poetic perspective, describing it as, "The passage from something material to something that is not."¹⁶ In *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (1980), he explored the concept of "dematerialization" in relation to the way by which the filmic screen distorts time and corrodes space. He observed "the gap of what is invisible between frames,"¹⁷ and described it as "a disappearance that produces a new register of appearance."¹⁸ Virilio examined the filmic screen not only as a site of collision—of materiality and immateriality—but also as a site of construction—as a disappearance that produces an appearance.

While Virilio dealt with the screen, French philosopher Roland Barthes considered the image. Although the former discussed the media and the latter its effect, they both read their subject as a site of collision, which is also a site of construction. For Barthes the collision is between the images of "self" and "other," and the construction is, therefore, a construction of the self-image in relation to the "other." Using the logic of the Lacanian Mirror Stage to describe the fascination of the filmic image, Barthes wrote, "I press my nose against the screen's mirror, against the 'other' image-repertoire with which I narcissistically identify myself."¹⁹ He observed the hypnotic effect of the filmic image as an intersection of the imaginary—the mirror stage's simultaneous experience of identification with, and separation from, the "other" —and ideology, which is, according to him, a fixed image of society.

The primary significance of the mirror metaphor in relation to the filmic screen is the emergence of a social image, in the form of visuality. In this sense, the confusion between the two types of images in Times Square (visual and political) can be read as a result of the total identification with the filmic image and the replacement of the realized by the fantasized.

Crime District 1944-1980: The Exteriorized Screen

In the 1940s, the obsolescence of the conventional theater prompted the emergence of new forms of entertainment. The theaters on West 42nd Street specialized in "grinders," which emphasized action and violence to appeal to male audiences. Grinders brought a new commercial language to the street, characterized by garish marquees, sexually suggestive posters, and bizarre devices to lure patrons. The site's reputation suffered a rapid decline.

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In terms of the relation between the visual image and image of the site, this time in the evolution of Times Square marks the greatest distance between the two: While the visual image flourished, the site's reputation reached its severest decline.

THE REDEVELOPMENT PLAN IN RELATION TO THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL SCREEN

By its fourth decade, Times Square was caught between two forces: legislation and continued decline. Since 1937 Manhattan city planners had focused on eradicating crime and sleaze through a series of legislation and zoning regulations. Yet Times Square appeared to be out of control. By the beginning of the 1980s, the tension between the legislators' aims and the impotence of their actions was inscribed within the collective memory in a way that produced actual change. And by the turn of the twenty-first century, after twenty years of planning and negotiations, Times Square emerged as a reimagined Times Square.²⁰

Two programs were responsible for Times Square's redevelopment.²¹ The Special Midtown Zoning District dealt with the area between 40th and 57th Streets from Eighth to Sixth Avenue and was introduced to mitigate the threat to traditional theaters posed by high-rise development. It offered to increase the allowable floor area of a building up to twenty percent in return for the construction of a legitimate theater.²² Nineteen new commercial buildings were built under these terms in Times Square alone.²³

The 42DP (which was initiated in the 1980s, executed during the 1990s, and completed by the turn of the century) dealt specifically with the two and a half blocks (from 39th to 42nd Streets) that define the entrance to Times Square.²⁴ The redevelopment plan was a response to two distinct demands. One was the social demand to clean up the afflicted site. The other was a real estate demand for commercial spaces. The 42DP program consisted of the renovation of five theaters and the erection of four office towers, one hotel, and a retail complex.²⁵

Like the Special Midtown Zoning District, the 42DP linked the public's interest in preserving the old theaters to the financial ambitions of its developers. The massive financial investment of the 42DP—which was the largest national redevelopment urban project yet undertaken in the United States²⁶—raises the following questions: Was the theaters' preservation a fig leaf for financial ambition? Did real estate developers use the cleanup plan cynically, or had the long experience of crime and sleaze produced such a degree of panic to initiate urban development on a gigantic scale? At issue in either case are the ideological assumptions that bind financial and moral concerns.

The 42DP significantly altered the character of Times Square's built environment. This may not have been the case had the plan's original Design Guidelines, developed by urban designers Alexander Cooper and Stanton Eckstut in 1982, been followed. Stanton and Eckstut identified three objectives: to maintain and reinforce West 42nd Street's role as a public space, to preserve the spatial character of West 42nd Street as a low-rise corridor and to produce three differentiated areas—high-density office and retail space, a low-density entertainment cluster of theaters and an urban corridor. To reconcile a wish to preserve the site's character with the gigantic scale of the proposal, Cooper and Eckstut established detailed building specifications—specifications dealing mainly with setbacks, street wall requirements, and signage.²⁷

While the attention to materials and signage signaled the tendency to prioritize appearance over experience, the setback requirements put the pedestrian experience back on the table. Though the plan proposed a gigantic shift in scale, the stepped setback—which sustained the low street wall—bridged the gap between the high-rise skyscrapers and the collective memory of the street's practitioners

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(pedestrians, hustlers, prostitutes, prowlers), all of whom inscribed their motion onto the street's facade.

Architects Philip Johnson and John Burgee, hired to build four office towers in Times Square, at first ignored the Design Requirements entirely. Their initial design (1983) provoked a public critique on aesthetic grounds. A revised version incorporated many of the Design Guidelines' suggestions but still lacked the required setback.²⁸

The reason for the omission of the setback was, in a word, marketability. Setbacks not only reduce square footage, but also decrease the opportunity to sell contiguous floor space to prestigious firms.²⁹ Eliminating the setback thus served the building's image (reputation). At this point, image as reputation was translated into a literal image (as in "image plane"). Without setbacks, the distance between volumes and planes collapsed and a new typology that embodies a conflation of reputation and representation emerged.

The collapse between reputation and representation, which followed the elimination of the setback requirement from the redevelopment plan, indicated the phenomenological transformation from spatial to visual typology. This transformation had already begun by the end of the 1920s with the conversion of theaters into movie houses. The transformation of volumes into surfaces in the new building typology signified the exteriorization of the shift from stage to screen—the transformation of a theatrical into a cinematic public space.

TIMES SQUARE'S STREET SECTION IN RELATION TO THE GHOSTED SCREEN

The redevelopment plan created a new kind of public space in Times Square with a new kind of street section—a section that is narrow, flat and, most importantly, is based on a building facade that resembles a movie screen.

This facade acts as a "ghosted silver screen," not just because it resembles a movie screen visually, but since it marks yet another formal transformation of what can be described as the "urban psyche" of the site. Intrinsic to the site's psyche is the original programmatic adjacency between the legitimate theater and illegitimate prostitution activity. This adjacency created not only the psychological split between the fantasized and the realized, but also the political split between the site's actuality and reputation. While the former was inherent in the urban programs present on the site at its inception, the latter was constructed by the collective narrative.

The media that have inhabited the site since its origin played a major role in the formation of both splits: they served as an agent of the fantasized and they were also instrumental in the construction of the site's image. The redevelopment plan, which aimed to rehabilitate the site's political image, ultimately linked its mythological construction to the formal construction of its public space.

While the mythological image of the site was inscribed in collective memory in relation to theater, the new formal language is borrowed from film. The theater remained central to the political image even after film overtook theater as the dominant media. It was only with the implementation of the filmic screen in the new building typology that the formal language of the site began to reveal a social and political shift in collective perception. This new perception represents the coalescence of the historical visual and political images of Times Square.

As a site of collision between the virtual and the real, the filmic screen planted the seed for the conflation of the two types of images and for the materialization of the immaterial imaginary in the form of a building. If the role of theater in the construction of Times Square's political image was to

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counteract the reality of illegitimate prostitution activity, the filmic screen merely reflects it. In this sense, the theater is a mask and its attendant political image is symbolic, while the film is a mirror and its construction of the political image is imaginary.

The redevelopment plan as an agent—or reflection—of the collective mind as constructed by the media of film effected a public space that is based on the imaginary. It is flat, erases difference—prostitution was eliminated from the public sphere—and rather than producing, it reproduces images.

Epilogue

The current public space in Times Square comprises two vertical layers. Up until approximately their fifth floor (the height that used to mark the traditional setback), all of the buildings are covered in illuminated billboards. In this first layer, the screen becomes the wall. From the sixth floor up, the new towers implemented by the 42DP suggest an inversion: the wall has become a screen. Empty and flat, the upper walls may indicate a return—or phenomenological inscription—of the filmic screen in the form of a building typology. At the same time, their visual appearance alludes to yet another transformation. Made out of dark glass, which absorbs, filters, and rejects the flickering images of the layer below, the upper walls reveal that the screen has returned, but in its emptied version. Its imagery is distorted, fragmented, fractured, and refracted, and its surface absorbs, rather than omits, reflects, rather than projects, darkens, rather than illuminates. In the context of the site's psyche, should we read this formation as an attempt to distort and/or avoid fantasy itself, or simply as the expression of a desire to return to an earlier stage?

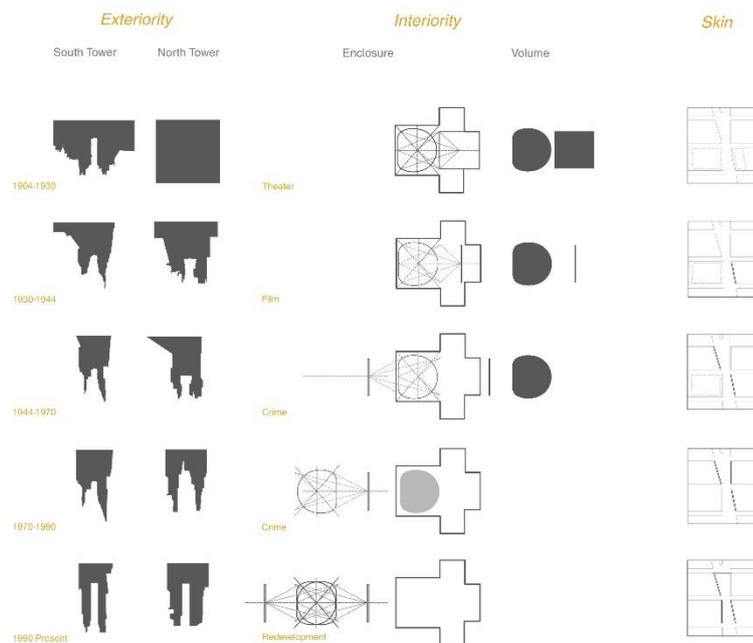


Figure 6. Phenomenological Evolution

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¹ This paper is a further development of *The Skin in Times Square* (2009), my research project at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University. Advisors: Michael K. Hays and Peter G. Rowe. Editor: Anna Bergren Miller. This research was made possible by the generous support of the REAI (Real Estate Academic Initiative) at Harvard University between the years 2009-10.

² Hans Belting, "Theaters of Illusion," in Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Theaters* (New York: Sonnabend Sundell, 2000); quoted in Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 166.

³ The first theorist to discuss perception in relation to the social domain was Walter Benjamin. In his 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," he wrote: "The manner in which human perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 222.

⁴ Alexander J. Reichl, *Reconstructing Times Square: Politics and Culture in Urban Development* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 5-20.

⁵ Ken Bloom, *Broadway: Its History, People, and Places: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2004), x.

⁶ Lynne B. Sagalyn, *Times Square Roulette: Remaking the City Icon* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 40-42.

⁹ In 1936 Wrigley's Gum erected the first large street sign. Built on top of former Olympia Theater Complex, this sign stretched over the entire block. <http://www.nyc-architecture.com/MID/MID-TimesSquare.htm>. An image of this sign showing its verticality and iconic appearance suggests an allusion to the Times Tower.

¹⁰ Terms borrowed from Paul Virilio's discussion of the screen as an intersection of the concrete and the abstract as it appeared in his 1980 book *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (New York: Zone Books, 1991). See next paragraph.

¹¹ In her book, *The Virtual Window*, Anne Friedberg draws attention to the first use of the term "virtual" by the French philosopher Henri Bergson. He introduced the term in relation to visual studies in his 1889 book *Time and Free Will*. Bergson further developed the concept of the virtual in his 1896 book *Matter and Memory*, where he described the difference between the real and the virtual as "between being and being consciously perceived." Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 37.

¹² Terms borrowed from Henri Lefebvre's book *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre used these terms (as part of a triad which includes "the conceived") to distinguish between different modes of practicing urban life. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicolson Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

¹³ Friedberg discusses the significance of Giedion's concept of space-time to the field of visual studies, and points out that he coined the term following German Mathematician Hermann Minkowski, who in 1908 examined the relation between the two in the context of experimental physics. Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 118.

¹⁴ Although Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture* is considered one of the most influential texts with respect to the concept of space-time, he was not the first to discuss the intersection of space and time. In his *Warped Space*, Anthony Vidler draws attention to Abel Gance, writing in 1912. Gance imagined a new sixth art that synthesized the movement of space and time. Vidler also cites Elie Faure, writing in 1922, who first coined a term for the cinematic aesthetic that brought together the two dimensions: "cineplastics." Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (MIT Press: 2000), 102.

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¹⁵ Giedion's context was Cubism's break from the Renaissance perspective.

¹⁶ Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 184.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. R. Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 348.

²⁰ Sagalyn, *Times Square Roulette*, 61-67.

²¹ Robert A. M Stern, *New York 2000: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Bicentennial and the Millennium* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2006), x.

²² Ibid., x.

²³ Sagalyn, *Times Square Roulette*, y.

²⁴ Ibid., 171.

²⁵ Stern, *New York 2000*, x.

²⁶ Sagalyn, *Times Square Roulette*, 2-30.

²⁷ Ibid., 190-1.

²⁸ Ibid., 192.

²⁹ As developer George Klein explained: "Following the setback requirements would shrink the footplates at higher levels, thereby intensifying the difficulty of leasing to the banks, law firms, and advertising agencies the developer had targeted as tenants. These were prime tenants who took five, ten or twenty floors at a time, whose name looked impressive to lenders as well as on a building's ground floor directory." Ibid., 196.

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IMAGES

F1. In Taylor, W. Robert. *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroad of the World*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991. Photo credit: The New York Historical Society, New York City.

F2. Photo courtesy of The Museum of the City of New York, The Byron Collection.

F3. Author's Diagram.

F4. <http://nyc-architecture.com/GON/GON027.htm>.

F5. Photo courtesy of The Museum of the City of New York, The Byron Collection.

F6. Author's Diagram.