Times Square: Public Space Disneyfied
Author(s): John Bell
Published by: The MIT Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1146642
Accessed: 29-07-2018 02:11 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

The MIT Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to TDR (1988-)

This content downloaded from 140.233.2.214 on Sun, 29 Jul 2018 02:11:36 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms
These three essays on the redevelopment of Times Square are concerned with the nature of public space at the end of the 20th century: Who and what determines the culture—and especially the performance culture—from which we feed and draw nourishment? Mark Sussman’s essay focuses on the rising corporate control of public space, represented by such public/private innovations as the “Business Improvement District,” and how that authority displaces locally produced culture. Roberto Rossi’s article looks at two touristic performances—the “Fabulous 42nd Street” exhibit on Times Square and the Potsdamer Platz “Info Box” in Berlin—to examine how they both package development as tourist events. These performances, Rossi shows, help gloss over the transformation of such redeveloped urban sites from live, semi-autonomous activity hubs to tightly controlled amusement centers. My essay compares two different visions of “community” and “theatre,” Walt Disney’s and Lee Simonson’s, to ask how urban entertainment centers such as the “new” Times Square will affect the possibilities of locally produced culture.

The subjects these essays address are in some ways not new; governments, merchants, and less powerful citizens have probably always struggled over the performance potential of public space. But what seems to mark this issue at the end of the 20th century is a certain lack of contention: an apparent accord among all parties (or a weariness on the part of potential dissenters) that huge corporations are in the best position to determine the shape and parameters of public spaces and popular performance venues in those spaces.

In the fall of 1997, one of the lesser-known Democratic Party candidates for Mayor of New York City, Eric Ruano-Melendez, made one of his principle goals the creation of “Disney-style amusement parks and entertainment in poor and abandoned areas” in the city, to “attract business and create jobs.” Although Ruano-Melendez’s candidacy was not successful, the spirit of his proposal seems to be shared by many civic leaders, including New York’s Mayor, Rudolph Giuliani. The idea that amusement parks and other types of performance can create jobs in poor areas of a city is an interesting one. But it is unlikely that a “Disney style” of performance would do much to retain those elements of local culture and local community which now account for the rich and wildly varied performance cultures of international cities such as New York. It will be interesting to see what kind of performance such undertakings as the “new” Times Square produce in the 21st century, both in accord with and in response to those redevelopment projects.

—John Bell
1. Watch Disney theatre, buy Disney stuff: the Disney store is nestled next to the New Amsterdam Theatre. A door from the New Amsterdam lobby leads directly into the store. Times Square, New York City, 1997. (Photo by Orlando Marra)