

# A Moveable Feast: Times Square and the Emergence of a New Paradigm

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*“The cinema is an invention without a future.”*

Louis Lumière

## INTRODUCTION

A *Moveable Feast*, Hemingway’s memoir of Paris, described the incredible life that inhabited the French capital city in the 1920s. In every street, plaza, and corner, at every café table, you could meet extraordinary people living wonderful lives and telling amazing stories. Eighty years later, the expression “a moveable feast” characterizes the incredible vibrancy experienced by people going through Times Square in New York, NY. Now more than ever, Times Square provides a moveable feast for the senses. The overwhelming noises, smells, and images contribute to the creation of exceptional aural, olfactory, and visual experiences for the multitude of passer-by who try to find their way through the densely crowded streets. Crossing Times Square offers strollers and drivers the exhilaration of multiple time and spatial dimensions, ephemeral illusions of extra-temporal fragments and incredible accompanying kinetic envelops surrounding their moving bodies. There is something ecstatically and rapturously absorbing in Times Square.

Large electronic displays play an important role in increasing the complexity of these cognitive experiences. They are all-pervading in Times Square and have become increasingly present in the built environment. This paper aims at understanding how these high-tech electronic panels challenge our traditional ideas on architecture, urban design and urban planning and how they could affect future urban and suburban developments. The Lehman Brothers headquarters, located on 745 Seventh Avenue at Forty-ninth and Fiftieth Streets, provides a particularly interesting case study because of its successful and harmonious combination of architecture, arts, and digital technology.

First, I will present an overview of the specific history and planning requirements that allowed for the redevelopment of Times Square and the construction of the Lehman Brothers headquarters. Second, I will focus on the building—its architectural features, insertion in the urban fabric, and iconography. Finally, learning from Times Square and the Lehman Brothers headquarters, I will raise questions regarding their reproducibility and argue that mega digital displays are responsible for the emergence of a new paradigm in architecture and urban design.

## SIGNS AND PLANNING REGULATIONS IN TIMES SQUARE

Times Square is the only district with a zoning ordinance requiring tenants to display large bright signs. Without this innovative aesthetic zoning framework, the striking design of the facades of the new Lehman Brothers’ headquarters could never have materialized. This section retraces briefly the origins of these creative design guidelines.

Since the opening of its subway station and the proclamation that renamed Longacre Square in honor of the New Times Tower in 1904, Times Square has developed a long tradition of being New York’s central entertainment district. By the 1920s, it had become not only a popular and thriving entertainment district but also an international stage for the visual expression of a new commercial culture and the embodiment of the spirit of New York. Also market forces played a critical role; a place like Times Square did not happen spontaneously. Rather, it has been shaped by a series of decision making processes about land use, fiscal policy, and zoning codes that affect land values. “In New York, politics and real estate have always been closely allied.” (Huxtable 1991, 361).

In 1916, New York City enacted a pioneering Zoning Resolution, which was the first comprehensive zoning regulation in the United States. Although it did not specifically set Times

Square as an entertainment district, it established a mixed-use commercial district that permitted the full-scale building of giant billboards. The effect of the ordinance on Times Square was triggered by the opposition emerging from the Fifth Avenue Association, which members were often property owners and merchants from Fifth Avenue and advertisers in Times Square. In 1922, the city's Board of Aldermen passed a sign ordinance that banned giant billboards from Fifth Avenue, parts of Madison Avenue and Thirty-fourth Street; de facto concentrating the growth of outdoor advertising to the Times Square area. By 1924, Times Square was the most densely packed and most expensive advertising space in the world (Leach 1991, 237).

Over the years the signs got bigger and bigger and the "Great White Way" – the gaudy and electrically charged entertainment center – became increasingly reliant on colored rather than white light. The overall visual aesthetic revealed a dynamic commercial culture somewhat carnivalesque, flashy, and flamboyant that appealed to a mass market. "Times Square area contained the largest concentration of advertising space in the world, with marketing displays of unprecedented proportions. Signs were distinguished by their enormous sizes, spectacular designs and remarkable use of new illumination technologies" (Reichl 1999, 52).

Unfortunately, alongside the theater industry and its associated commercial businesses, Times Square developed as a neighborhood with some problematic social and urban activities, such as drug dealing and prostitution. From the 1960s until the mid-1990s, Times Square was seen mainly as a stage set full of "peep shows," pornography shops, erotic bookstores and X-rated movie houses. It became a symbol of the danger and corruption reigning in New York City.

In the 1970s the commercial and residential communities founded the Mayor's Midtown Citizens' Committee to combat the blight. Many private developers designed proposals for the redevelopment of the district, which was suffering from disinvestments and deterioration. However, city officials did not offer any serious backing until the early 1980s (Fainstein 1994, 130) and Times Square sunk into a state of decay. Finally, in 1981, the city government announced a redevelopment scheme and launched a request for proposals calling on developers to submit projects following a set of architectural guidelines devised by Cooper-Eckstut and Associates. The specifications asked for the creation of a lively streetscape through building setbacks, glass street walls, large neon signs, and the design of buildings with up to 56 stories. The New York State Urban Development Corporation selected Park Tower Realty to develop the office section and other developers to take care of various other components.

Since the first announcement of the redevelopment scheme in 1981, the project stimulated protest from activists fearing that gentrification would displace lower-income residents; from the

cultural left, who defended Times Square's sex businesses as constitutionally protected speech; and from the representatives of the entertainment industry, who feared that they would not have the financial resources to pursue their operations and would be pushed out of Times Square (Fainstein 1994, 134; Stern 1999). In 1987, the Department of City Planning obtained approval of the city council for a change in zoning mandating that five percent of the floor space of new buildings be dedicated to entertainment related activities (Stasio 1989).

The 1982 Midtown Zoning Resolution aimed at reallocating construction incentives to encourage construction in the sluggish West Side; it also required lighted supersigns on all new developments fronting Times Squares – a mandate that would become highly controversial because it could dramatically affect the marketability of Class A office towers. On the other hand, preservationist groups and grassroots organizations strongly supported the design regulations. Although it did not solve the compatibility issue with corporate image, technological innovation that allowed for see-through finlike signs rather than traditional billboards provided a solution to the compatibility need with office usage. In November 1984, the New York City Board of Estimate approved the 42nd Street Development Project – a long-term program to revitalize the district. The \$2.6 billion 42nd Street Redevelopment Plan used tax-abatement incentives to encourage developers to transform Times Square by building four giant office towers, containing 4.1 million square feet of floor space, a merchandise market, and a hotel; by restoring historic theaters; and by rehabilitating the 42nd Street subway station (Stern 1999). It also required by law that new buildings include bright lights and large illuminated supersigns as façade elements to preserve and maintain the historical character and glamorous image of Times Square. In 1987, the Municipal Art Society supported a zoning amendment imposing similar signage and lighting requirements in the design of all new office buildings in the greater Times Square area. By 1988, thirteen buildings were under construction or planned around Times Square (Fainstein 1994, 134) but with the property recession of the early 1990s, the plan withered. By 1992, Governor Cuomo relieved developers from their contractual engagements (Stern 1999).

Nevertheless, the early 1990s were the beginning of a new trend that has not stopped. While the original project failed to materialize, an increasing number of companies (e.g., Viacom, Bertelsmann AG, Morgan Stanley, the Walt Disney Company, and Warner Brothers) decided to invest in Times Square. Suddenly, the neighborhood was bursting with investment and renewal. Today, Times Square with its huge number of megascreens and flashing neon signage has become one of New York's iconic images and a Mecca for owners of sign locations (Sagalyn 2001, 331-2). The district's vitality epitomizes the successful revitalization of Manhattan's urban life. Although this success is not without criticism, the originality of the planning regulations is not contested. Huxtable (1991) and

Sorkin (1992) denounce the Disneyfication and sanitization processes. Nonetheless, Huxtable does not hesitate to conclude that in fairness, one must say that this is an unusually skilled and thoughtful set of urban design rules. More creative, groundbreaking guidelines through innovative zoning have yet to be devised. . . . Ironically, this is important legislation because it is on the leading edge of the art of place-making through visual and physical means. New York, as usual, has delivered something special (1991, 366).

## 745 SEVENTH STREET

The building located at 745 Seventh Street was designed by Kohn Pedersen Fox (KPF) and built by Tishman Construction, originally for Morgan Stanley Dean Witter. The securities company had planned to heavily concentrate its critical workforce in the area around its headquarters at 1585 Broadway at Forty-seventh and Forty-eighth Streets. The adopted management strategy aimed to increase work efficiency and productivity through a reduction of travel needs and more face-to-face interactions. However, in the aftermath of 9/11, what seemed to be an advantage became a vulnerability. The close proximity of the auxiliary location at 745 Seventh Street from Morgan Stanley's headquarters, which is about two block away, led the company to decide to not move into its almost complete building. Instead it sold the million-square-foot new glass tower for approximately \$700 million to another securities company, Lehman Brothers, which had been displaced from its space at 3 World Financial Center (Holusha 2002).

KPF started the project in 1996 and, at the time of the contract in the fall of 2001, there was not much left for Lehman Brothers to do. The building configuration was particularly adapted to companies in the securities business and did not need to undergo any major restructuring. The new securities company took over the entire development, architectural and construction groups assembled by Morgan Stanley to complete an \$80 million interior design program and make the few changes necessary to adapt the building to the company top executives. The project was completed in 2002.

The building would not be of much interest if it did not have conspicuous high-resolution light-emitting diodes (L.E.D.) panels wrapped around the two-and-a-half stories at the base of the whole structure. The design guidelines of the Times Square district mandated the presence of large signs. The eight pages of zoning text (sections ZR81-832 and ZR81-85) include all the specific requirements regarding the Times Square signage (e.g., areas, numbers, sizes, types, placement and orientation, technical standards for brightness, animation, and illumination). However, planners avoided to provide immediately replicable solutions. They rather tried to keep some flexibility and make sure that the creative and dynamic atmosphere of Times Square would be preserved (Sagalyn 2001, 255). The Lehman Brothers

headquarters exemplifies the freedom and amazing creative possibilities that planners offered to designers despite strict regulations.

The Morgan Stanley sign, which is now the Lehman Brothers sign, is a generation ahead of such high-voltage Times Square showpieces as the cylindrical Nasdaq sign on the Condé Nast Building, the ABC news ticker and television screen at 1500 Broadway, and the series of tall screens jutting out from the new Reuters Building (Goldberger 2002).

The Lehman Brothers sign is different from the surrounding examples. It is composed of three horizontal strips running across the two lateral facades on Forty-ninth and Fiftieth Street and the main façade on Seventh Avenue. Above the main entrance, there is a large vertical panel, like an electronic keystone. Although the Artkraft Strauss company created the successful high-tech display for Morgan Stanley headquarters, KPF architect Kevin Kennon asked Imaginary Forces, which is only marginally in the sign business, to design the sign.

The final outcome is an unquestionable success. In 2002, the 745 Seventh Avenue signage by Imaginary Forces received one of the 28 gold medals – out of 13,000 submissions from 50 countries – awarded by the Art Directors Club during the 81st Annual Awards Competition, which rewards the year's most innovative and exciting work in visual communications from around the world.

The creative director Mikon van Gastel wanted to create a sign that would be an integral layer of architecture and a series of visual sequences that would constantly animate and alter the façade's appearance. The Imaginary Forces team proposed a series of images on various themes – sunrises, bridges, green apples, piggy banks, globes, traders at work. The original program for Morgan Stanley designed by van Gastel and his colleagues included sounds and some words floating on the screens but the acquisition of the property by Lehman Brothers imposed a less complex and more abstract agenda (Goldberger 2002). The short movies are silent – although the random surrounding noises of New York City relate sometimes amazingly to the images (e.g., images of lightning and sounds of thunder produced by cars driving on a metal plate temporarily placed on the street for some infrastructure repair) – and there is no text moving across the sign.

Because the projection screen is the whole façade, the city looks like an open-air IMAX theater. After a visual cycle of constantly changing color palettes and shapes, the images disappear. All the screens turn black, giving an opportunity to observe the bare construction, its immobile and static structure. This dressing and stripping of the tower's lower levels incite strollers to stare at the facades. After a few seconds, the images reappear progressively, like tidal waves. During the interstitial absolute darkness, the building looks asleep or dead. Fascinated, the

eyes wait for the lights to shine, the building to be alive again, and the show to go on.

Looking at the glittering building, it seems that the sign is a reiterating art performance. The visually stunning images *compose a sequence of thematic short films/video clips that can be glimpsed at during a cab ride or viewed during the ten seconds it takes for people to walk in front of the building.* Like a bird you can fly above bridges located in the most gorgeous natural landscapes and watch cars moving like small dots on straight lines. Afterwards, like in a detective film, you chase cars racing at incredible speeds in dark tunnels. Later, you contemplate a sunset on an immense prairie covered with tall coarse grasses and experience a thunderstorm. In a surrealistic fashion, you can observe people walking on the façade and wonder how the sidewalks were able to climb the vertical walls. Even more impressive is the 3D virtual animation of the building itself projected on the vertical electronic panel. The sign, which is part of the built structure, becomes the support of the ultimate tangible image of the building—its virtual representation. The Lehman Brothers headquarters is a travel in hyperreality (Baudrillard 1983; 1989; Eco 1986); a step further from the work of Herzog and de Meuron, Toyo Ito, and Rem Koolhaas.

### THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW PARADIGM

The impact of the digital revolution on architecture is a popular and multifaceted theme and this paper aims at grasping how the ubiquitous presence of electronic technology and the media in the urban environment affect our traditional understanding of architecture, urban design, and urban planning. Almost a quarter century after his acknowledgement of the Las Vegas signage phenomenon and its impact on architecture, Venturi (1972; 1996) claims that electronics is not only a mere technological change but, more importantly, a cultural change.

The Lehman Brother headquarters is particularly interesting because it epitomizes a new paradigm. Goldberger (2002) claims that “here, more than anywhere else in Times Square, electronic imagery really does become architecture.” What Goldberger does not mention is that the architecture produced by the Lehman Brothers’ sign radically differs from the traditional concepts of architecture and urbanism. The sign is not about decorating a big, vacant shed with signage. The Lehman Brothers sign dissolves and annihilates the built structure. It dematerializes the façade in a very different way than the 175-foot-tall wand of light of the remarkable New 42nd Street Studios, the Tate Modern or the Tower of Winds. Nowadays, the facades of buildings are considered as surfaces, and particularly mutant surfaces. Lasers and lighting art have contributed to alter the impressions experienced in front of a piece of architecture; from solid and static the structure seems to become liquid and fluid. Toyo Ito finds “unbearable how a

building is able to stay on earth for hundreds of years, displaying its unchanging appearance” (Berwick 1997/98). But what is a building that becomes mentally invisible through its fleeting appearances?

The sign of 745 Seventh Avenue is a hymn to the cinema and video animation as major arts transcending architecture and structuring the urban environment. Staring at the Lehman Brothers headquarters, one wonders if the building is a giant television set, an urban drive-in theater, or a ghost. The traditional elements and references constitutive of architecture become negligible and meaningless. Could architecture become embedded in a movie? Could it become the favorite medium of expression of movie directors and distributors? Has architecture become the discrete locus of synergy between the visual arts? Will the realm of architecture become confined to tectonics? Is the ultimate goal of contemporary architecture to be an iconographic representation diffusing imagery on its surfaces? How are such trends going to affect the urban landscape and the human practice of space and experience of place?

A main feature of the human connection to architecture could be expressed in the relationship between transience and permanence. It is one of the prerogatives of the great majority of architectural structures to outlive the generation that built them and to remain the witnesses of history to future generations. The strength of the historic preservation movement is anchored in the human desire to keep material testimonies of the past. The fleeting appearance of 745 Seventh Avenue challenges the concept of architectural preservation. Would not there be a contradiction in preserving a building that undergoes an incessantly metamorphosis? What should be kept – the short films, photographs and movies of the tower, the screens, and/or the building structure?

Electronic displays have become common place, even in developing countries (Krylov 2001). Although their cost is still high, it is expected that as technology and quality improve, they will become increasingly affordable. Consequently, it is reasonable to view 745 Seventh Avenue as an excellent first-generation architectural prototype that could be used as a reference in the design and planning of future urban and suburban (re)developments.

Although the general impression emanating from Times Square is one of rather visually flashing and overpowering commercial images promoting various brands and products, the Lehman Brothers headquarters proves that it does not have to be so. One extreme proposal would be the disappearance not only of the building but also of the screens through the projection of images from the surrounding environment. Big boxes such as Wal-Mart and Home Depot could be camouflaged in a suburban or rural natural environment. It could be a learning space such as the early 17th-century utopian “Civitas Solis” described by Campanella. “It is Wisdom who causes the

exterior and interior, the higher and lower walls of the city to be adorned with the finest pictures, and to have all the sciences painted upon them in an admirable manner” (Campanella 2001). Furthermore, will the digital city become an oppressive forum dominated by large media corporations or—more probably considering the increasing affordability of digital technology—will it embody the essence of the democratic Greek agora?

## CONCLUSION

The Lehman Brothers headquarters in Times Square was an original answer to a special set of planning requirements. Although the bare building would be ranked as rather banal and uninteresting by most architects; its large electronic screens and the remarkable quality of the displayed images are an innovative step in the interdisciplinary synergy among architecture, urban design, and the visual arts. Once again, technological innovation challenges the traditional conceptual boundaries of these fields, opens tremendous possibilities for creating new environments, and raises numerous questions regarding the future role of architects, artists, urban designers, and planners in the development of our cities and suburbs.

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