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Times Square: A Revisionist Lesson In City Building

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Times Square: A Revisionist Lesson In City Building by Lynne B. Sagalyn

Rapid comprehensive change in the physical pattern of a city is a minor revolution - as is the transformation of 42nd Street and Times Square. Two decades ago the agenda for change posed two big questions: Is it possible for cities to reshape what the market is likely to deliver in an area? Is large-scale redevelopment even a plausible political objective, especially when aggressive actions such as condemnation are deemed a necessary part of the strategy?

In New York, where public officials operate in the shadow of Robert Moses, legendary master builder, and the specter of the failure of Westway, large-scale ambitions have been handicapped from the get-go. "Public Projects: Are They Viable in the City Anymore?" asked a seasoned *New York Times* reporter in 1985. The presumptive answer was no. Confidence in government performance in New York and elsewhere had been falling for years and had not yet hit its nadir. The transformation of Times Square reversed that trajectory, unexpectedly.

The successful execution of the 42nd Street Development Project (42DP) rewrote the lesson plan on large-scale urban projects. It created a new story line -public-sector success- and definitively marked an era of city building in New York.

From its beginning in 1980, the cleanup strategy for West 42nd Street grabbed center stage as a public initiative. Aggressively pushed forward by the mayor and governor, it reflected in both real and symbolic terms the city's agenda -and constant effort- to rebuild itself, economically as well as physically, and stem the continuous flight of its middle class to the suburbs. By the end of the decade, the effort had reached a stalemate, bogged down by litigation and entrapped in a downturn of the real estate cycle. The question of whether it was possible to execute as large a project as the 42DP seemed to have been answered in the negative.

By the mid-1990s, however, opportunity born out of overbuilding, coincident with a shift in tastes favorable to cities, fused with a new entertainment-oriented vision for the street. As the use activity shifted from drug dealing, prostitution and pornography to legitimate theater, family entertainment and office employment, ironies of change defined the transformation-in symbolic as well as physical terms.

The new Times Square is a "made dynamic". It is not an accident; it is an invention. The 20-year process was grinding, a highly politicized affair that would have been anathema to Moses, the power broker who defined the definitive command-and-control style of public development.

The transformation of Times Square offers compelling testimony that it is still possible to execute ambitious city-building agendas - without Moses. It has recalibrated the scope of public possibility. It does so, however, only by adding substantive heft to the persuasive argument Jane Jacobs makes in her now-classic book, *The Death and Life of American Cities*. Jacobs maintains that big schemes for clearance and renewal could never work; only small-scale interventions and private investments can deliver the type of renewal that brings with it urban vitality. Though it violated most of the premises of what became a new planning orthodoxy -save for preserving the theaters- the tortured process of rebuilding West 42nd Street vividly demonstrates that if renewal calls for a significant amount of bulldozing, the vision must be consistent with the symbolic legacy of the place's past.

Selectively chosen and skillfully executed large-scale projects might not be naturally doomed to failure. However, to view the cityscape once again, as did Moses, as a claylike assemblage of parts to be reshaped into a more efficient arrangement, would be to misread this message of renewal.