Times Square and Columbus, Ohio: Urban Revitalization Through Reconstructions of Perception

As suburbanization continues to move urban populations farther and farther from the urban center, downtowns empty at the close of the business day leaving the city center dark, cold and lonely. Perceived fear plays on the actual danger present in these areas “after dark” causing an exodus first of residents then of commercial businesses. This in turn shifts the economic flow of consumer spending away from the city to the suburbs augmenting the downtown decline. Until the 1960s, cities looked to urban renewal to reverse this downtown decay setting into motion large-scale demolition schemes which aimed to wipe out downtown slums and build office buildings and luxury housing in their place. Ultimately, this approach proved unsuccessful and with the passage of the *Historical Preservation Act* in 1966¹, city governments shifted their downtown improvement plans towards historic preservation. New York City, with regard to its reconstruction of Times Square in the 1990s; and Columbus, Ohio, a city that presently finds itself in the midst of downtown revitalization, are just two cities who use the tenets of historic preservation to create an urban redevelopment policy that strives first to reconstruct public perception through a symbolic reappropriation of downtown history. In his essay “From Space to Place and Back Again,” David Harvey suggests that “the material practices and experiences involved in the construction and reconstruction of

place must be dialectically interrelated with the way places are both presented and imagined.\(^2\) Conversations surrounding policy to support flight from the inner city to the suburbs and those that attempt to pull the public back to the city through reconstruction engage a nuanced web of cultural symbols to spark these social changes.

The use of cultural symbols to spur urban revitalization finds a perfect model in New York’s effort to reconstruct Times Square. While this had been a goal since the Great Depression, the city’s piecemeal efforts had little effect until the early 1990s when the Disney Corporation joined forces with the city of New York to provide Times Square with a renewed economic and moral strength. As Charles Bagli recalls in his article for *The New York Times*, “Times Square at 100; and now for the next act”:

During the early 90's, morning commuters used to pour out of the Port Authority Bus Terminal on Eighth Avenue like a swollen river, coursing across 41st and 43rd Streets on their way east. They skirted 42nd Street as if it were blocked by a huge boulder, and the reason was obvious: the prostitutes, pimps, drug dealers, chicken hawks and other hustlers who presided on the parched sidewalks of *the Deuce*.\(^3\)

*The Deuce* is police slang for what was one of America's most dangerous blocks, 42d Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues.\(^4\) Conceived in the early 1980s, New York


City’s initial plan to revive 42nd Street and take back The Deuce “centered around four huge office towers that would surround Times Square and include a merchandise mart at Eighth Avenue. The city then planned to convert a majority of the old theaters into mixed-use buildings -- places where people live, work and shop. Unfortunately, the massive towers found extreme disfavor with the public -- their enormous size and awkward designs overwhelmed every aspect of the project that in turn painted a bleak picture for the area post-redevelopment. On the heels of this public disapproval came an economic downturn of the office market by the end of the 1980s. Only two companies, Prudential and Park Tower Realty, had committed to occupy offices in the towers and with this downturn there was no way to move forward with construction. However, as outlined in their agreement with the city, Prudential and Park Tower Realty were required to pay $241 million for the privilege of building the towers even though construction had stalled.  

In 1990, the city turned the Prudential and Park Tower Realty funds over to the 42nd Street Development Project and a new vision for Times Square was born -- one succinctly stated by Robert A.M. Stern, the architect who had been commissioned by the 42d Street Development Project to study the restoration potential of theaters in the area. As opposed to earlier campaigns which presented Times Square as “a cancer that must be surgically removed in order to save the economic health and social fabric of the city’s

west side”\(^6\), Stern proposed a more romantic amalgamation of Times Square’s past and present – “a good time” that does not overlook the upper-class markets which crave a bit of “sleaze and sensationalism.”\(^7\) The goal shifted from a complete reconstruction of the physical space to a reconstruction of public perception. Therefore, instead of office towers, the focus was to create “a dazzling place”\(^8\) filled with restaurants, stores and theaters illuminated beneath brilliant lights and signs.

As both a member on the board of the 42\(^{nd}\) Street Development Project and Disney Corporation, Stern turned to his old friend Michael Eisner for the first component of West 42\(^{nd}\) Street’s re-imagining in March 1993.\(^9\) Michael Eisner, Chairman of Disney, was interested in acquiring a theater for Disney’s theatrical production of *Beauty and the Beast*. Stern coaxed Eisner to consider the New Amsterdam Theater -- located in the most talked about area, 42\(^{nd}\) Street between 7\(^{th}\) and 8\(^{th}\) Avenue.\(^10\) As Stern recalls, on the morning of Eisner’s and his first visit to the New Amsterdam Theater:

>[The theater] was in such bad shape that there were pigeon droppings falling through the open roof. It was an awful March day, raw and dark. You cannot imagine how disgusting the place was. But Michael saw what was there, and he was decisive. He said yes, Disney should do it.”\(^11\)

Negotiations between Disney and New York City continued for two years. Disney finally agreed to renovate the New Amsterdam Theater with a $34 million dollar subsidy

\(\text{\(^6\) Reichl, op. cit, pg. 60.}\)
\(\text{\(^7\) Ibid, pg. 151.}\)
\(\text{\(^8\) Ibid.}\)
\(\text{\(^9\) Goldberger, op. cit.}\)
\(\text{\(^10\) Reichl, op. cit, pg. 177.}\)
\(\text{\(^11\) Goldberger, op. cit.}\)
and the promise that their neighbors would be compatible. As Rebecca Robertson, President of the 42nd Street Development Project remembers, the reality was “that Disney came to 42d Street not so much because Disney was ready to become like New York as because New York was ready to become like Disney.”

Concurrent with the city’s negotiations with Disney, the 42nd Street Development Project thought of another way to play on perception and bring the upper classes to The Dangerous Deuce. In the summer of 1993 and 1994, officials of the 42nd Street Development project transformed the street into an outdoor public art exhibition between Broadway and Eighth Avenue. Several dozen artists and architects received commissions (including Jenny Holzer, Tibor Kalman and the architectural team Diller and Scifidio) to produce works integrated into the streetscape of vacant storefronts. These projects transformed West 42nd Street “into a museum for the display of images and relics captured from its own recent past.” Through the artwork the same troubling images that had previously been used to justify development found a permanent home on the street and acceptance from the more desirable crowd of tourists and higher-income city residents. With regard to Disney’s appropriation of Times Square and the city’s implementation of public art as means to facilitate this transition, each manifests Reichl’s

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12 Ibid.
14 Ibid, pg. 155.
notion that while “unsettling cultural symbols are not easily eradicated, they may be
mobilized to transform a place into a marketable commodity.”¹⁵

Columbus, Ohio is frequently referred to as the “everyman” of American cities
illustrated in Columbus Mayor Michael Coleman’s advice to presidential candidates:
“Campaign as if you're running for mayor of Columbus. If you can win Columbus, you
can win America.”¹⁶ Columbus indeed embodies America. It is both urban and suburban
with farmland only one exit off the freeway. It is a state capital and holds an air of
sophistication courtesy of The Ohio State University yet retains its Midwestern
simplicity. Columbus also reflects a disturbing American trend -- the decline of its
downtown at the hand of the suburban shopping mall. Rather than within the downtown
center it is now within the shopping mall that society chooses to mingle – “it is where
senior citizens walk in comfort and security, where parents lead their young to Santa
Claus, where singles court, where teenagers socialize, and where everybody
consumes.”¹⁷ The mall is the new antiseptic American downtown – a place where the
community permits exclusion on racial and socio-economic terms, where “litter,
panhandlers, vagrants, suspicious characters, protestors, and even cold winds are not
tolerated.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Reichl, op. cit, pg. 170.
¹⁶ Haya, Nasa El, “Columbus Ohio: The ‘everyman of America,” USA Today (December
¹⁷ Jackson, Kenneth T., “Reflections on the American Shopping Center,” in Critical
Cultural Policy Studies: A Reader, ed. Lewis, Justin and Toby Miller, (Massachusetts:
Blackwell Publishers, Ltd, 2003), pg. 332
¹⁸ Ibid.
Once described as one of the most “undermalled cities in America”\(^{19}\), the mall has quickly become the predominant symbol of Columbus, OH reflecting first its suburban success and its subsequent downtown decline. Just last February, with regard to Ohio’s 2006 gubernatorial race, an ad hit the local airwaves opposing Mayor Coleman’s nomination. The ad’s subject was the decline of City Center mall and, as described by Mike Harden in his article “City Center’s Downturn Not Coleman’s Fault,” uses a camera to pan City Center with its shuttered shops and windows as an announcer intones (with radio bravado):

"The Columbus City Center was one of the retail mall gems of the Midwest until Mike Coleman became mayor of Columbus. Look at it now. Why should Ohioans believe that Coleman can save Ohio if he can't even save Downtown Columbus?"\(^{20}\)

City Center mall opened in 1989 to great anticipation, as it was one of the city’s first attempts at downtown revitalization. City Center’s inauguration even inspired a song in which one verse extols this downtown retail mecca:

But we'll all come Downtown to see / The \textit{City Center Mall} / And then head back to Obetz / To tell 'em what we saw. And once a year at Christmas time / We'll make the trek again / To point at all the pretty lights /Where the Centrum used to been.

City Center held space for approximately 150 specialty stores with two new department stores at either end: Detroit-based Jacobson’s and Chicago-based Marshall Field’s. The


\(^{20}\) Ibid.
center also built a bridge to link to the downtown stalwart Lazarus Department Store that had remained on the same corner for 90 years. City Center was touted “not only as a shopping destination but as a symbol for the city.”\(^{21}\) What the city couldn’t predict was the toll new suburban retail developments – New Albany’s Easton Town Center, the Mall at Tuttle Crossing and Polaris Fashion Place -- would take on downtown’s economic prosperity.

In 1996, Leslie Wexner, Chairman of Limited Brands, opened Easton Town Center located in New Albany, Wexner’s suburb outside of Columbus. Easton boasts 10 million square feet – 4 times the size of City Center mall and added 20% to the Columbus retail market, yet Easton is located miles outside the city’s center.\(^{22}\) Easton was followed a year later by The Mall at Tuttle Crossing which catered to an upper class clientele and was also the site for Marshall Field’s only other store in Columbus. As a result of Tuttle Crossing, sales dropped at City Center by 10% in one year. Things only got worse two years later when Polaris Fashion Place opened its doors aided by a controversial $22 million tax subsidy to improve road conditions surrounding the shopping center. As one Columbus resident noted in 1996, “the emerging new 'downtowns' are Easton, Tuttle and


Jacobson’s went bankrupt in 2002 and remains empty today; Marshall Fields withdrew from the Columbus market entirely that same year and Lazarus Department Store, a 100-year landmark symbolizing a bygone prosperity finally closed its doors in August 2004.

The closing of the Lazarus store seemed to be the last straw for a city that had witnessed its downtown decline dramatically over the previous 15 years. Realizing that Columbus’ downtown needed a complete overhaul to even survive (70,000 parking spaces now sat where buildings once stood), the city of Columbus adopted a new 10-year strategic plan. This new plan (initiated in 2002) set five broad goals: build more downtown housing – 10,000 units in 10 years; stabilize the downtown office market and add jobs; create new downtown neighborhoods on Gay Street, a prominent street for downtown business, and in the new RiverSouth area; develop a riverfront park system and improve public transit.

Similar to the 42nd Street Development Project that spearheaded the Times Square redevelopment campaign, the city of Columbus formed the Columbus Downtown Development Corporation (CDDC), a private non-profit initiative created to steer the downtown revitalization effort and “make Downtown Columbus among the most

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attractive center cities in the United States.” The first step towards changing the physical character of downtown once again involved changing public perception. With this in mind, the city renamed its downtrodden downtown RiverSouth and in 2004, RiverSouth’s mascot became the Columbus Center for the Arts and Sciences located in the historic Lazarus building. According to Edgar Lampert, President of The Georgetown Company, “The Lazarus Building, redeveloped as the ‘Columbus Center for the Arts and Sciences,’ will be both an anchor for the district and a symbol of a Downtown on the rise.”

The City of Columbus, CDDC, OSU and Battelle announced on July 19, 2004 that they would join forces to convert the old Lazarus building into the Columbus Center for the Arts and Sciences. This would be the home for new research and development activities linked with Battelle and OSU. The center would also serve as a magnet for arts activities. 

26 The boundaries for RiverSouth are defined by City Center mall on the east and the Scioto River on the west and between State Street on the north and the Franklin County offices on the south. Bonneville, Paul, “RiverSouth Development District Panorama,” Columbus RetroMetro (August 9, 2004). Retrieved on October 30, 2005. http://columbusretrometro.typepad.com/columbus_retrometro/riversouth/
29 Based in Columbus, Ohio, “Battelle is a global science and technology enterprise that develops and commercializes technology and manages laboratories for customers. Retrieved on November 24, 2005 from http://www.battelle.com
organizations with artist studios, galleries and restaurants “re-energizing one of downtown’s most revered buildings and creating a cornerstone for the birth of the new RiverSouth District.”

Along with the Columbus Center for the Arts and Sciences, The Columbus City Council is working towards implementing a policy for public art. In 2004, city council proposed to create the Columbus Public Art Commission and establish a municipal public art program. The commission would work to place “freestanding works of public art, not integrated into the architecture of a building, and that are proposed to be located on city property, including in, on, or over the public right of way.” This plan also outlined a funding plan in which one-percent of the city’s capital improvement budget would be designated as the ideal amount to expend on public art. In line with Columbus’s vision to enhance its downtown Riverfront property along the Scioto River, the city created North Bank Park. On July 16, 2005, in tandem with the parks dedication ceremony, a new public sculpture titled Waterfire on the Mile was unveiled. The artist, Barnaby Evans, created a similar project for Providence, Rhode Island as a part of their downtown revitalization efforts a decade ago. In order to presume higher income citizens will


32 Ibid.

move back downtown and occupy new luxury high-rises, this group must first believe that the downtown has already recovered. The city’s embrace of public art provides this audience “a reassuring sign that the area is safe for middle and upper income groups” and these “cultural forms and symbols take on a special significance in the process of establishing control over urban spaces” to incite economic revitalization.

As we can see with regard to both the revitalization efforts of Times Square and Columbus, OH, it is the way in which cities are “represented in public debate that shape the choices made by individuals, investors and public officials”. Historically, discourse on urban renewal policies revolved around “The Tabula Rasa Imperative” that assumed urban revitalization could succeed only by tearing down deteriorated slum areas and building anew from the ground up in order to erase any reminder of the area’s impoverished and dangerous past. In contrast, rather than relying on public forgetfulness, the discourse that surrounds historic preservation appeals to a nostalgia that symbolically presents Times Square’s revitalization as a return to the Great White Way and Columbus’ reclaiming of Lazarus’s history as the cornerstone of hope for RiverSouth’s re-imagined future.

was not a project of the Columbus Public Art Commission as legislation is currently at a standstill.
34 Reichl, op. cit, pg. 170.
36 Ibid, pg. 22.
Bibliography


Harden, Mike, “City Center’s Downturn Not Coleman’s Fault,” *The Columbus Dispatch* (February 8, 2005). Retrieved on November 2, 2005 from


