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Regrets?

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Regrets?

Since change is the essence of the American city—arena for the installation of successive versions of Progress—it is conceptually reactionary to throw obstacles in its way. Despite objections made in the name of history, morality, or quality, Manhattan has *always* replaced the old with the new, and it would be irresponsible to interrupt this process. Manhattan’s radicalism can be suspended only at its peril.

Why then does the imminent transformation of 42nd Street, or more precisely the replacement of an Empire of Tawdriness with a State of Fun, inspire such a malaise, such a bizarre sense of foreboding?

It is not the fear that sex will disappear from the spectrum of the city—it is already clear that there will be a neater distribution system that dismantles the present Critical Mass of Sex in favor of more convenient, hygienic neighborhood mini-malls.

It is that 42nd Street was, at its most debased, corrupt, exploitative, and drug-ridden, still a crucial section of a Metropolitan Experiment, part of the answer to, “What happens when this many people are assembled on a single site?” Forty-Second Street developed an architecture and urbanism of sex—both super-seedy and super-clean. It found new and in themselves ingenuous architectural arrangements for ever new forms of human interchange, especially in the age of AIDS where fear combined with lust triggered fascinating hybrids of the Real and the Virtual—sexual acts separated from their audience by a thin sheet of plate glass.

An incredible array of organizational devices which were strictly utilitarian in themselves allowed for an almost infinite number of transactions: a terminal orchestration of the Romantic. As ever larger sections of urban life became increasingly mysterious—what is business, communication, media?—there was never any doubt as to what drove 42nd Street’s denizens into each other’s “arms.”

The bottom line is: 42nd Street was utterly *authentic*, a throbbing Zone of flickering, stroboscopic liveliness and energy, of invention

and exploitation. Perhaps what is most shocking about the loss of 42nd Street is its un-Americanness. Whereas the American city is the *par-excellence* plain of laissez-faire, fertilized by economic determinism, 42nd Street has died in a collective clean-up operation. Is this disgusting, but in itself harmless sector of N.Y.C. really the most urgent target for such collective action? Could Disney not have been piloted to the South Bronx? To an absence, rather than to a vibrant, or at least vibrating, presence.

It would have been less ambiguous if Times Square had died a “natural” death, if it had fallen victim to some other necessary expansion—but the leap from sick but energetic authenticity straight into the embalmed cheer of Disney has an intolerable perversity. It is as if the transition from the harmful to the innocent offends a sense of urban dramaturgy, as shocking as a movie suddenly played backward. A coalition of moralists, planners, and a nostalgia-driven entertainment giant expelling, as if in some Biblical scene, the unwanted from the city . . . it hardly seems a good omen for Manhattan’s continuing relevance in the twenty-first century.

—April 1996