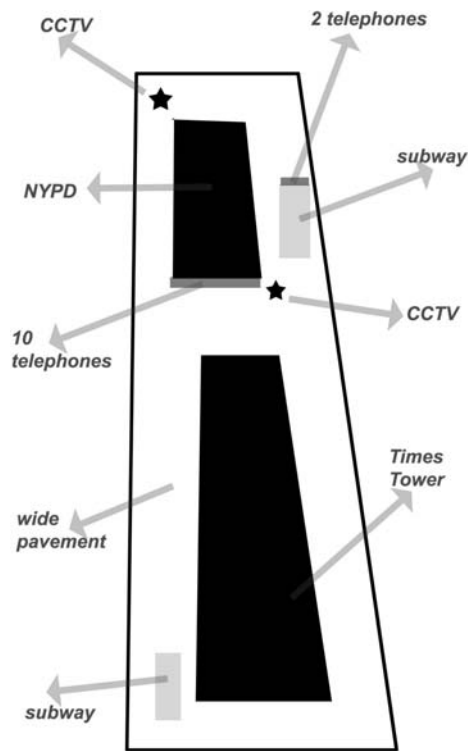


Building featured two mobile phones telling each other jokes and HSBC had a video screen that displayed the face of visitors to the Times Square Visitors Centre, showing them as part of a comic stereotypical scene from a number of countries such as India, Japan, and Spain (an unwitting digital reference to the long history of caricaturing in public space). These interactive signs are to be weighed against 13 different video screens advertising sponsors, and over 100 billboards, many of which could be in any city, and which contribute little to the individuality that once existed in the district.

A similar story of commercialisation applied to the 16 different electronic message reader boards, or ‘zippers’, that emulate the original 1920s system introduced by the New York Times around the Times Tower as a way of spreading the latest and most important news. Eight of the 16 zippers now have exclusively commercial functions promoting products or businesses, such as the Wrigley’s or ESPN zippers. In this form, a vehicle once associated with civility has been re-appropriated by commercial interests in a homogenised form.

Signage is also linked to the image that the various building occupiers around Times Square wish to project of themselves. So, rather than associate themselves with ‘kitsch’ or ‘tacky’ signage on their buildings, the large multinational companies that dominate the above ground levels have negotiated the signage regulations by using video technology and ‘zippers’ to advertise their corporate services. Examples of this are the seven video screens on the Reuters Building; Nasdaq, who reputedly have the most expensive video screen in the world; and Morgan Stanley who provide three huge stock market zippers mixing news and self-promotion.



9.7 Diagrammatic plan of element 7

Microanalysis: the space close up

The sections above have tried to deconstruct the signs and codes that structure Times Square. They provide the visual and sensorial background to the space. However, the real experience of the place from the users’ point of view happens at a much smaller scale. This section describes the key structural elements that make up Times Square from the perspective of a user trying to negotiate them at ground level. The area managed by Times Square Alliance covers several blocks, but Times Square proper, particularly as visitors are concerned, covers the 18 structural elements which include and surround the central bow-tie spaces (7–12 in Figure 9.5) that make up for the non-existent square.

ELEMENTS 7 AND 8

The southernmost element (7) is framed by the Times Tower and contains the one-storey NYPD police station (Figure 9.7). The tower functions as perhaps the prime advertising frontage to Times Square with ground floor retail space below. Counterpointing the commercial role of the tower was a reflection of civility in the form of the news zipper and the NYPD station; a strong state symbol, whose windows (at the time of survey) were plastered with messages of thanks from the public after 9/11. This strong state presence was enhanced by two CCTV cameras, one seemingly tracking the traffic interchange, and one trained on 10 telephones on the back of the police station. The wide pavements have ensured that this is the only block the BID has not widened. The space formed also contains two subway entrances/exits.

Moving north, element 8 is the most popular ‘photo opportunity’ bow-tie space, as it contains only one small structure – the Armed Forces