

Downtown space 2: entertainment space

Returning to 1900, the trends to specialisation and zoning of uses across American downtowns increasingly resulted in another type of public space, this time for entertainment. The evolution of New York's famous Times Square can be used to understand the commercialisation of this type of public space throughout the twentieth century, and forms the subject for more detailed analysis and discussion in Chapter 9.

In fact, the term 'square' is somewhat of a misnomer as Times Square is merely the junction where Broadway intersects with 7th Avenue, forming a 'bow-tie' shaped area of two triangles: to the south from 43rd to 45th Street, then a second wedge from 45th to 47th Street to the north. As early as the 1860s the area began to develop into an entertainment district as open public space was reduced and vaudeville, theatres and brothels became the main attractions (Taylor 1991). For the first time in nineteenth-century America the lines were blurred between 'respectable and dissolute spaces' (Berman 1997: 76). In the approach to the twentieth century, American cities commercialised at an ever-increasing pace, with New York leading the way. One outcome was the spread of mass advertising, particularly following the electrification of the city in the 1880s.

The themes of theatre, illegal activity, and advertising feature throughout the history of the Times Square district, and are paralleled in London's Piccadilly Circus. Times Square too seemed to symbolise the vitality of the new century.

In 1904 the district gained its present name when the New York Times newspaper relocated its offices to the Times Tower on the southern end of the bow-tie (Figure 2.17). Times Tower was the second tallest building in the city in 1904, raising the prominence of Times Square through its moving-light news zipper and its 'ball lowering' New Year's Eve event. In that same year the subway station at Times Square opened, a major intersection of several lines. This brought people from all over New York to Times Square. Hotels and restaurants such as the Astor and the Knickerbocker opened at the turn of the century, adding a sense of class to the vibrant surroundings. Advertisers soon recognised the potential commercial gain of placing billboard signs around the area and the lights became multicoloured (Figure 2.18). In 1916 a new zoning ordinance permitted full-scale giant billboards in the area (Sagalyn 2001: 32–43). As such, Times Square quickly became a symbol of American free-market values.

In trying to summarise the social and architectural strands of the space Ada Huxtable (1991: 360) commented:

Size and anonymity make it both a private and a public place, where offbeat or offcolor desires can be openly or secretly satisfied, but where New Yorkers can also gather at moments of crisis



2.17 Times Square looking south towards the Times Tower in the 1920s



2.18 North Times Square at night, showing signage and advertising in the late 1930s