

Times Square ca. 1957. ANDREAS FEININGER/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/SHUTTERSTOCK

ARTS & CULTURE | BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

'Times Square Remade' Review: The City's Crossroads at a Crossroad

At its nadir, Manhattan's 42nd Street was patrolled by helmeted police officers wielding batons—the feared Hats and Bats unit.

By Edward Kosner

Dec. 29, 2023 at 10:53 am ET

Times Square has been at once the pulsing heart of New York and an open sore. Over the years, the garishly lighted plaza and adjoining 42nd Street—known as the Deuce—have been the scene of community rituals and the stage for prostitutes, peep shows and drug pushers, as well as aggressive *desnudas* and Elmos, Ticianen Mouses menacing tourists for tips. Along with St. Peter's Square, Times Square and Trafalgar Square, Times Square is one of the most iconic public spaces in the world—the site of New Year's Eve and Victory Day celebrations. It's also often arguably the sleaziest—a freak show only New York could produce.

GRAB A COPY

Times Square Remade: The Dynamics of Urban Change

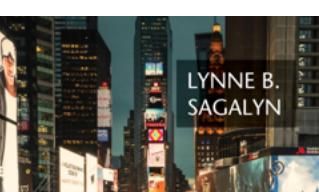
By Lynne B. Sagalyn

The MIT Press

432 pages

We may earn a commission when you buy products through the links on our site.

BUY BOOK



The bow-tie shaped plaza has also been a laboratory for experiments in urban-office development, landmark restoration, crime-and-vice suppression, pedestrian and traffic regulation, free expression and free enterprise. Once the hub of the city's horse-and-carriage trade—hence its original name, Longacre Square, after Long Acre in London—it survives as a magnetic tourist attraction, an entertainment hub and lucrative office space.

More than once, Times Square—it was renamed in 1904 after the eponymous newspaper anchored the southern end with its new tower—has been in intensive care, even resurrected from the dead. Now, Lynne Sagalyn, a real-estate professional and retired professor at Columbia Business School, has published "Times Square Remade: The Dynamics of Urban Change," an encyclopedic recapitulation of the saga of the fabled "Crossroads of the World"—warts, pimps, political posturing, feasibility studies and all.

The situation turned so dire that city officials increased the police presence and held hearings to examine whether, for example, the costumed characters ought to be fingerprinted and licensed like other street vendors. That notion raised First Amendment issues of free expression and concerns that fingerprinting would jeopardize undocumented immigrant Mickeys and Minnies. The problem was finally eased by the demarcation of special zones, where the costumed hustlers could mingle with their marks, and by the Covid pandemic that, for a time, turned the area into a ghost square.

The trouble with Times Square dates to the late 1960s crime spree that threatened the very future of the area as a commercial office zone. The downward slide continued through the 1970s and early '80s. In early 1978, Ms. Sagalyn reports, there were 40 pornographic-movie houses, 54 bookstores, 30 topless bars and live sex shows, 63 massage parlors and 33 "prostitution-prone" hotels. In 1981, the police started patrolling the pavement west of Seventh Avenue, deploying helmeted tactical patrol officers wielding batons—the feared Hats and Bats unit.

To clean up the blight, city officials decided on a strategic goal: to transform Times Square into an office district with new developments to rival the corporate palaces of Sixth and Park avenues in Midtown. The initial plan, put forward in 1984, envisioned four mansard-roofed, high-density office buildings around the intersection of Broadway and 42nd Street, to be designed by the celebrated architects Philip Johnson and John Burgee. The imperial sobriety of the edifices—so out of keeping with the jazzy appeal of Times Square at its best—touched off a furor. Opposition led by the starchy but sophisticated Municipal Art Society succeeded in scuttling the plan.

Ms. Sagalyn cleverly uses a lively chapter on the history of Times Square's gaudy signage to show how the failed Johnson-Burgee scheme eventually led to the successful revitalization of the district. Visitors of a certain age will recall the Camel billboard, with the man blowing smoke rings, or the Bond clothing platform, with its giant nude figures flanking a vast waterfall, opposite the Astor Hotel. To maintain the square's tangy character and to prevent it from becoming another "office canyon," the area's civic groups and performing-arts community lobbied for signage requirements to be written into the revitalization plan. The results exceeded expectations. Major financial institutions such as Morgan Stanley and Nasdaq took over the new buildings and festooned them with glittery LED signs flashing instant stock-market news. The sign-rental fees and the taxes on the heightened value of the buildings and displays proved a bonanza for developers and the city treasury.

By the 1990s, the cleanup efforts had completely transformed 42nd Street. The Walt Disney Co. cemented this success by turning the formerly shabby New Amsterdam Theatre into a glossy showcase for its theatrical hits like "Aladdin." New Yorkers being New Yorkers, of course, the transformation led to new complaints. The move was derided as the Disneyfication of the Deuce. "Safe was good," Ms. Sagalyn writes, "but the cultural changes in Times Square left many feeling that something authentic, if not unique, had been lost—the moxie and grit and edge that is a part of New York."

One benefit of the revival of Times Square was the redevelopment of the Clinton neighborhood to the west, known popularly as Hell's Kitchen—a working-class district adjoining the parking lots and workshops closer to the Hudson River. This, too, was a success, with the development of high-rise apartment buildings housing people working in the new office towers of Times Square.

Ms. Sagalyn has produced a conscientious, monumental work. But her approach seems aimed more at specialists in urban affairs and wannabe real-estate investors than the general reader. She devotes countless words, lavish illustrations and 43 pages of end matter to her subject. Sentences plod across the pages like dun-clad prisoners, eyes downcast.

It's the kind of treatment suitable for studies of epic periods like the fall of the Roman Empire. Which may not be entirely irrelevant: For all the resources lavished on Times Square in recent years, crime has proved persistent. The Deuce can still be wild.

Rakuten kobo
Learn, grow, read and listen in 2024
Shop Now

MOST POPULAR NEWS

1. Elon Musk Has Used Illegal Drugs, Worrying Leaders at Tesla and SpaceX
2. Buying Home and Auto Insurance Is Becoming Impossible
3. A Key Clue in the Alaska Airlines Blowout Turns Up in a Backyard
4. I Supercommuted for a Year. Here's What It's Really Like.
5. Here's What It's Like to Retire on Almost Nothing but Social Security

MOST POPULAR OPINION

1. Opinion: Harvard, Claudine Gay and the Education of Bill Ackman
2. Opinion: The 2020 Election All Over Again
3. Opinion: Claudine Gay and the Cheating Crisis on Campus
4. Opinion: Putin Sends Nukes to Belarus
5. Opinion: The Supreme Court to the Ballot Rescue

RECOMMENDED VIDEOS

1. FAA Grounds Dozens of Boeing 737 MAX Jets After Emergency Landing
2. WSJ Opinion: Harvard's President Doesn't Go Quietly
3. What Unfolded Inside Alaska Airlines Flight Before Emergency Landing
4. WSJ Opinion: Hits and Misses of the Week
5. WSJ Opinion: Donald Trump's Lame-Duck Presidential Candidacy

Advertisement - Scroll to Continue

Rakuten kobo
Learn, grow, read and listen in 2024
Shop Now

—Mr. Kosner's "It's News to Me" is a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

Appeared in the December 30, 2023, print edition.

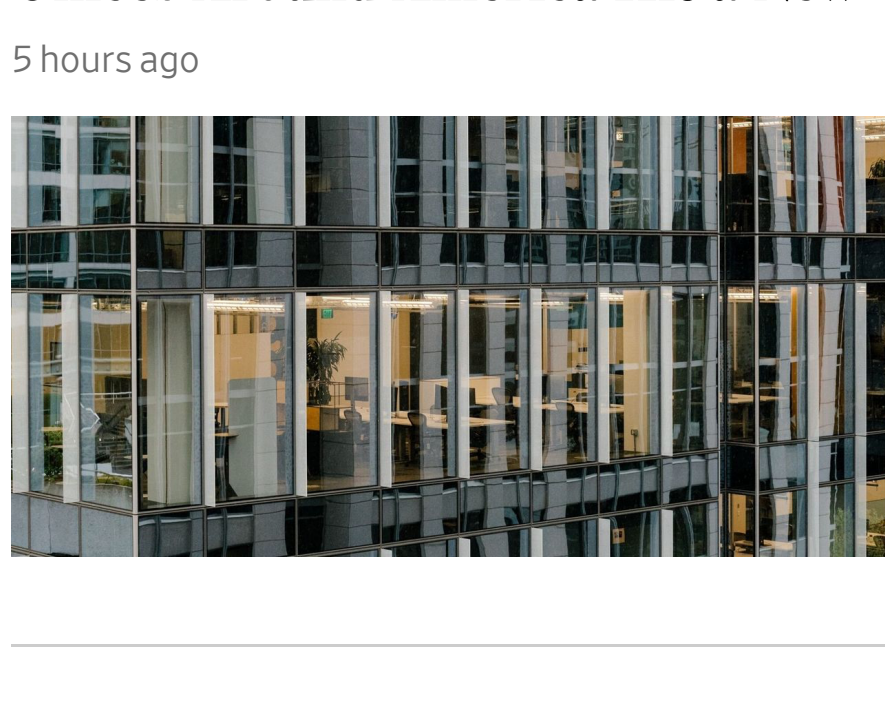
SHOW CONVERSATION (6)

What to Read Next

PROPERTY REPORT

Offices Around America Hit a New Vacancy Record

5 hours ago



The 19.6% of office space that isn't leased in major U.S. cities is the highest since at least 1979.

Continue To Article

MANAGING YOUR CAREER

I'm a Supercommuter. Here's What It's Really Like.

14 hours ago



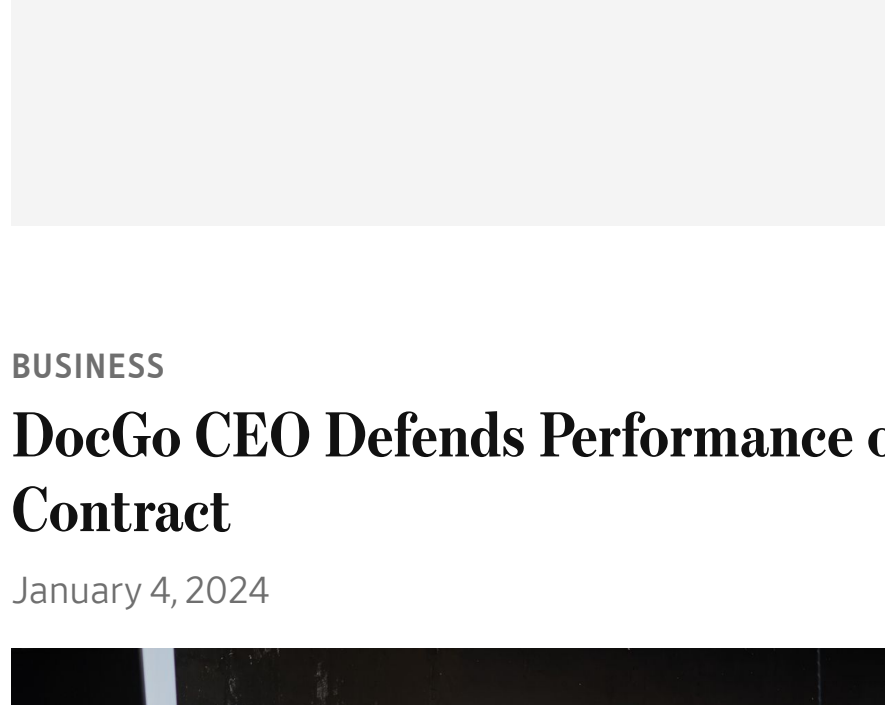
The money, miles and stamina it takes to work in one city and live in another

Continue To Article

BUSINESS

DocGo CEO Defends Performance on New York City Migrant-Care Contract

January 4, 2024



DocGo Chief Executive Lee Bienstock is standing by the mobile-healthcare company's performance under a controversial migrant-care contract awarded by New York City.

Continue To Article

U.S.

New York Attorney General Seeks \$370 Million in Penalties From Trump

January 5, 2024

Former president reaped hundreds of millions of dollars through deceptive schemes to inflate net worth, say lawyers for Letitia James's office.

Continue To Article

OFF DUTY TRAVEL

The 10 Best Places to Visit in 2024

January 5, 2024

A good vacation starts with a spark of inspiration. Here, 10 places around the world you should put on your to-go list this year. Consider it fuel for dreams of escape.

Continue To Article

U.S.

New York City Sues Bus Companies for \$700 Million Over Migrants Sent From Texas

January 4, 2024

The lawsuit says Texas has sent more than 33,000 migrants to the city since 2022.

Continue To Article

MarketWatch

What airlines fly the 737 Max 9?

1 hour ago

United Airlines, Alaska Air and Aeromexico have the jets, but American and other big carriers don't.

Continue To Article

MANSSION GLOBAL

This \$18.5 Million Spec House Is Tucked Away in the Heart of Harvard Square

4 hours ago

The Cambridge, Massachusetts, contemporary new build has a bar, a gym, a spa, an outdoor kitchen and the latest technology

Continue To Article

ADVERTISEMENT

5 Surprise Retirement Expenses

Charles Schwab

Why March 15 Could Be a Make-or-Break Moment for Tesla

Stansberry Research

oianomi

Is a Roth IRA Conversion Really Worth It?

smartasset

6 Odd Things Most Millennials Do With Money, But Billionaires Do Haven't Tried

The Penny Hoarder

oianomi

Best trading technology + \$0 commission equities & options.

TradeStation

Where should you invest \$1,000 right now?

The Motley Fool

oianomi

SPONSORED OFFERS

VISTAPRINT: VistaPrint promo code: Up to 50% OFF wedding invitations

WALMART: \$20 Off Walmart Promo Code - Any \$50+ Order

GROUPON: Groupon New Year coupon: Up to 75% off all local deals + extra 30% off at checkout

TURBOTAX: Up to 10% off online tax services with TurboTax discount code

THE MOTLEY FOOL: Epic Bundle - 3x Expert Stock Recommendations

H&R BLOCK TAX: Get 20% Off H&R Block tax software products