

NEW YORK

Times Square: The centre of the universe

There's nothing pedestrian about one of the world's busiest intersections

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Times Square, “crossroads of the world” and certainly one of its busiest tourist attractions, is the perfect American confluence of art, commerce and carnival. A cacophony of signage and sex shops, recently sanitized for consumers, it lies on the bones of old horse-trading hangouts. A favourite destination for both camera-toting Midwesterners and disaffected anarchist bombers, its recent “Disneyfication” has been derided by purists, who long for the days of nostalgic sleaze.

I know what they mean. There is a certain innocence to the few remaining sex shops, dwarfed by corporate signage, evocative of a pre-Internet age when smut was something special. They channel the past as much as the classic theatres where the Ziegfeld follies once carried on.

But despite the rolled eyes of friends in Gramercy when I told them I was staying in Times Square for a few days, the apotheosis of the American dream and one of the world's busiest pedestrian intersections did not disappoint.

Its colourful history has a new look of late, since its pedestrianization—made permanent in 2010—has given its Broadway and 42nd Street Duffy Square (named for a Canadian born priest and military chaplain) epicentre a kind of piazza feel. Well ... make that a piazza on acid, where naked cowboys playing guitar mingle with Mickey Mouse against a backdrop of ads for Panasonic televisions and all under the watchful eye of a George M. Cohan statue.

A giant televisual pillar — like a monument to mammon — stands at the centre of a red, pyramidal set of bleachers, at the end of a long traffic island. The area has been a stage for new public art, such as the 2010 work called Cool Water, Hot Island that simulated a river on the pedestrian plazas from 42-47th Street. One critic referred to it as a “Smurf jungle camouflage.”

Times Square is such an archetypal piece of Americana, and so cinematically overexposed, (especially, it would seem, in films with apocalyptic themes) it's often hard to separate the actual from the celluloid. As I strolled its streets, I kept thinking it would have been the perfect place for a German filmmaker — say Wim Wenders circa 1971 — to compose a black and



American playwright George M. Cohan keeps a watchful eye on the hustle and bustle. Times Square, an area that stretches from Broadway and 42nd to West 47th Street, is one of the busiest tourist attractions in the world and is filled with recognizable landmarks, like Roxy Delicatessen.

white art movie about “Amerika,” its circus neon filtered through a more sober lens, and rendered serious.

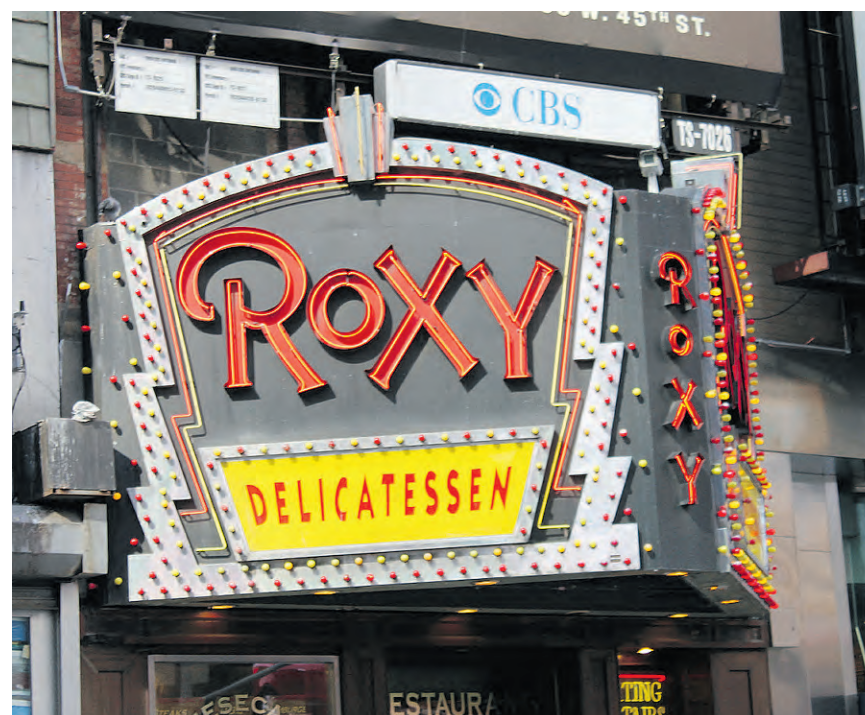
Fittingly, I went for my first walk about in Times Square — an area that stretches from Broadway and 42nd to West 47th Street — (unbeknownst to me) on the very day and exact same hour of the Boston bombings.

It seemed there was more of a police presence than usual as well as

a plethora of television cameras, but it was hard to tell if it was real, or a film set.

In the midst of all this, I heard music.

Not the kind blasted from giant screens in the square, but actual live music. It sounded a bit like a drum and bugle band with a little Rio de Janeiro thrown in. I followed it and saw a few dozen earnest protesters



PHOTOS: HADANI DITMARS/SPECIAL TO THE SUN

wielding placards saying “Down With the War economy” and “40% of our budget goes to the military.” As they handed out leaflets, I noticed an Elmo mascot dancing and waving his big furry paws in the air, in time with the protest band. War and entertainment — America's greatest legacies — in perfect sync. Could this be the start of a new anti-military entertainment complex?

I had been warned about Elmo. Apparently he — or one of his many incarnations — had been caught groping women, as well as shaking down a Bollywood star after her son posed for a photo and she was too slow on the uptake at the ATM. Disneyland noir, my friends, Disneyland noir.

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Back in the luxurious oasis of the new Times Square Intercontinental, safe from the tumult and the mascots, I had a drink with a Canadian-turned-New Yorker jazz musician friend at the lobby level bar. Designed with a large glass vitrine that opens on to street level, it literally brings the outside in.

It also offers views of the exterior of the famous Birdland — named for Charlie “Bird” Parker. On a whim, we walked over, where my friend (kind of minor jazz royalty) was warmly welcomed by the owner, and where none other than the John Scofield quartet were about to start their second set.

Around midnight, I headed back to my lovely room on the 32nd floor with a view of the river, and dreamed I met Ornette Coleman in a Mickey Mouse costume.

The next day I had a walking tour with a lovely woman named Nancy — a Broadway hooper turned part-time guide — and a group of ladies from upstate New York.

Hers was a tour that gave some insightful historical perspective on the place.

The New Amsterdam Theatre — together with the Lyceum the oldest surviving theatre on Broadway — offered some architecture as neighbourhood metaphor. Its heritage art nouveau exterior had once housed the Ziegfeld Follies before it became a movie theatre in 1937.

It closed in 1985 but was reopened by Disney to be the flagship for their theatrical productions in 1997.

Today its heritage exterior is flanked by a sleek new highrise and giant billboards for the likes of the Lion King.

Or consider its neighbour, the 1914 Candler building, that was built by a Coca-Cola magnate and now houses the biggest Macdonald's in the world on its ground floor.

Over on Eighth Avenue between 45th and 46th Street, at the edge of Hell's Kitchen, a quartet of 1860s era buildings all renovated at different times and with distinctive exteriors, stand like a cut-out facade; modern skyscrapers approved



The sights and sounds of Times Square have their own gravitational pull. Take in a show, have your picture taken with a mascot, or just soak in all that the area has to offer.

by post-9/11 building codes, tower behind them.

The Playwright Celtic Pub, once a '70s gay porn theatre called the Eros, opened in 1996 and boasts brightly painted yellow archways.

At the far end of the block, Frankie and Johnnie's Steakhouse channels both its 1920s-era speakeasy past and its notorious Rat Pack days, when the likes of Meyer Lansky, Bugsy Siegel and Frank Sinatra used to gather at a hidden upstairs

bar (the password for entry was “Frankie and Johnnie”). They still make a mean rib eye at the joint — the second oldest continuously operating restaurant in the theatre district (after Sardi's on West 44th Street.)

Nancy ends her tour at the former Embassy theatre, now the Times Square Visitor's Center and museum. Opened in 1926 as an intimate, 556-seat theatre — with ornate French interiors designed to attract

New York's “high society” — it went on to become an all-woman run newsreel cinema.

Now it's home to the Times Square Spectacular show,

which features the New Year's Eve Centennial ball from 2007, video highlights of the area's history, an exhibit of hats from iconic Broadway musicals, as

well as one called Fantasy and Desire that includes a restored Peep-o-Rama sign from 42nd Street's last peep show.

Like a showbiz shrine, it's also home to the Confetti Wishing Wall, where petitioners can write down their name, address and wishes — all to be added to the two tons of confetti scattered on Times Square on New Year's Eve.

Incredibly, this is how one New Jersey couple met and married, when a woman wrote down the qualities she hoped to find in her “ideal man,” and he fortuitously found her wish in a folded piece of red paper on 42nd Street.

Later, as I look toward Hell's Kitchen from the rooftop apiary (yes that's right — they keep bees there) at the Intercontinental, I think of the giant glittering ball, and New Year's Eve, and all those hopes and desires scattered around Times Square on so many tiny pieces of paper.

No wonder the 19th-century spiritualists — whose “descendants” live on at a variety of Times Square “psychic” shops that seem as prolific as the sex stores once were — thought New York was the new Jerusalem.

Whether you want to avoid it, avenge yourself against an abusive mascot, or catch a show like Bette Midler's I'll Eat You Last (just closed), you can't deny that Times Square has its own gravitational pull.

And who knows, if you make the scene at one of the Intercontinental's famous power lunches, you might just meet the right Broadway producer who could make you a star.

Or at the very least, a chorus member in the latest Disney production.

www.manhattanwalkingtour.com/Times_Square.php