

Tom Burr. Mirrored Platform. 1995.

Sleazy City:
*42nd Street Structures and Some Qualities of Life**

TOM BURR

Forward

Imagine yourself in Times Square thirty years ago. Twenty-five-cent peep shows have sprung up all over the area, tucked into the corners and back rooms of small businesses and porno bookstores. Hundreds of curtained cubicles have arrived on the scene with the Supreme Court's new relaxed views on obscenity laws in place since 1966. It's the late 1960s, and you're watching a film projection with a light beam cast over your head and the shuffling sound of machinery located somewhere on the other side of the cubicle partition. This experience of compartmentalized privacy is something of a new thing for the porno shops of Times Square, evolving out of the distinct theater seat, where the outer edges of one's privacy are defined by the mutual negotiation of the shared armrest. It falls in place in the late 1960s, somewhere between a semiprivate bathroom stall and a voting booth, a modern structure to be alternately built upon and transgressed in the decades to come. Outside, the "crossroads of the world" retains its famous veneer. In recounting architectural photographer Cervin Robinson's commissioned views of Times Square, Ada Louise Huxtable writes:

Immediately surrounding the Square were block fronts of small, non-descript structures, one- or two-story buildings, faced or surmounted with giant gridlike scaffolding holding the familiar, chaotic melange of signs and messages. Larger buildings were anonymous and recessive, upstaged and dematerialized by the displays. This was a non-architecture of place, with one of the strongest images of place in the world.¹

* *42nd Street Structures* is the title of the exhibition documented in the following pages. It took place at American Fine Arts, Co., New York, in November, 1995. "Qualities of life," is meant to echo New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani's "Quality of Life" campaign, which has been responsible for closing, through rezoning ordinances, hundreds of "adult businesses" in New York City. In addition to sex shops, many bars and nightclubs have come under attack and been closed due to so-called violations. In particular, numerous gay and lesbian bars, nightclubs, and gay-populated spaces have been closed because of technicalities, generally in the name of "neighborhood improvement." It is significant to note that in many of the cases in question, "neighbors" were not complaining.

1. It may be precisely this effect of "non-architecture of place" that has allowed for the complex

A decade later, Show World Center opens to the public in 1977, bringing with it the polished, flashy, porn club style which will dominate Times Square up through the late 1990s. Clearly forming part of the plastic glittery genre which includes the discotheques and nightclubs of the same moment, it offers multi-levels and multiple pleasures in a variety of media, all within a sanitized environment distinct from the dark curtained cubicles of the previous decade. The improvised quality which typified the rapid insertion of the peep shows into the existing floor plans of small businesses in 1966 has been replaced by newly customized spaces. The film loops are now reflected within angled mirrors inside the individual booths, creating an illusionistic, more precisely cinematic space. You're privately tucked away in your stall, highly conscious of your neighbors privately tucked away in theirs. No longer a single booth or two strung with a curtain at the back of a bookstore, the peep show booths have swiftly multiplied over the last few years to produce full configurations of booths, side-by-side and back-to-back. In addition to the film loops and magazines, the 1970s have brought with them the reintroduction of live performance to the Times Square sex shops. Glazed windows allow spectators three-minute intervals of viewing time from within their individual cubicles out onto the enclosed stage area. For a brief period, between 1978 and 1980, the glass was removed, allowing a certain partially restricted physical contact between the spectators and the performers.²

It's Times Square in the late 1980s. Billboards have changed, and the electronic signs attached to storefronts and movie theaters have evolved with the current advancements in computer technology and fiber optics, or, in other cases, deteriorated from neglect, but essentially the place looks the same. Some new building has occurred, much more is on its way. Inside, the peep shows have developed again, the mazelike structures becoming even more mazelike, and the glass window treatments developed for the live performances have been adapted to create a new type of booth, one that allows spectators to gaze and interact with each other through the use of mechanized windows between the individual booths themselves. Video has replaced film, transforming the industry and transforming the sex shops. Bookstores have largely become video stores (with

hybrid architectures of public and semipublic spaces to develop. Official Architecture fell into disrepair, allowing for the repossession of spaces for alternative uses. Although issues of isolation and privacy are closely linked to any discussion of sex shops and pornography, I think of the spaces discussed and evoked in this project as essentially *public*, specifically because of the fact that they constitute the locations for the practice of public sexualities, and publicly accessible sexual culture.

2. The reasons for the brevity of this "open window" policy had more to do with commercial competition between the sex shop owners and the sex workers who benefited from the actual physical activity and chance for verbal exchange, leading business out of the shops. For a longer discussion of this period, see Laurence Senelick, "Private Parts in Public Places," in *Inventing Times Square*, ed. William R. Taylor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). Also within this volume is George Chauncey Jr.'s essay, "The Policed: Gay Men's Strategies of Everyday Resistance." This extraordinary text, and Chauncey's writings in general, have been instrumental in making visible lesbian and gay history in New York. This text in particular has been important for me in understanding the complex dialectic of visibility/invisibility with regard to public sex, and public sexual identity.

magazines on the side), and a direct link has been established between what is on view in the booths and what is for sale up front. It is now possible to take away, to the privacy of your own home, what you've just experienced publicly in the back of the store.³

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The project that is documented in the following pages, *42nd Street Structures*, took place in November 1995. It was constructed both out of an immediate response to a set of transitions occurring within New York City in general and Times Square in particular, and my longtime contemplation of those conditions as they've evolved. The exhibition was mounted to position itself, however marginally, in relation to the highly visible spectacle of change rendered, being rendered, and soon to be rendered by the 42nd Street Redevelopment Project, and the production of "The New 42nd Street" and "The New Times Square."⁴

In addition to the complete redesign of the area and the roster of new corporate tenants, in October of 1995 Mayor Giuliani and the City Council announced their intentions to pursue zoning ordinances to force the relocation of sex shops in New York City. "We changed the rules," said Giuliani in September of 1997.

[B]y adopting the same laws that apply to drug dealers and zoning regulations, we have cut the number of sex shops drastically. We made sure that no sex shop could operate within a set number of feet from schools, churches and community centers. Basically, with the tight new regulations, it will be nearly impossible for a sex shop to open in this city. In my personal opinion, one is too many.⁵

3. Paul Thomas Anderson's recent film *Boogie Nights* (1998) focuses on this transition as its underlying structure; all plot developments revolve around the crisis which occurred when the porn industry was forced to replace film technology with the new video technology. Radically new modes of production and distribution essentially divided the era into a "before" and "after," economically crippling those who could not produce or perform under the new working conditions. Video editing diminished the importance of the individual performers, and physical endurance and consistency were no longer all-important factors. The reproducibility of video and the ease of distribution transformed the access to material, and the public nature of its reception.

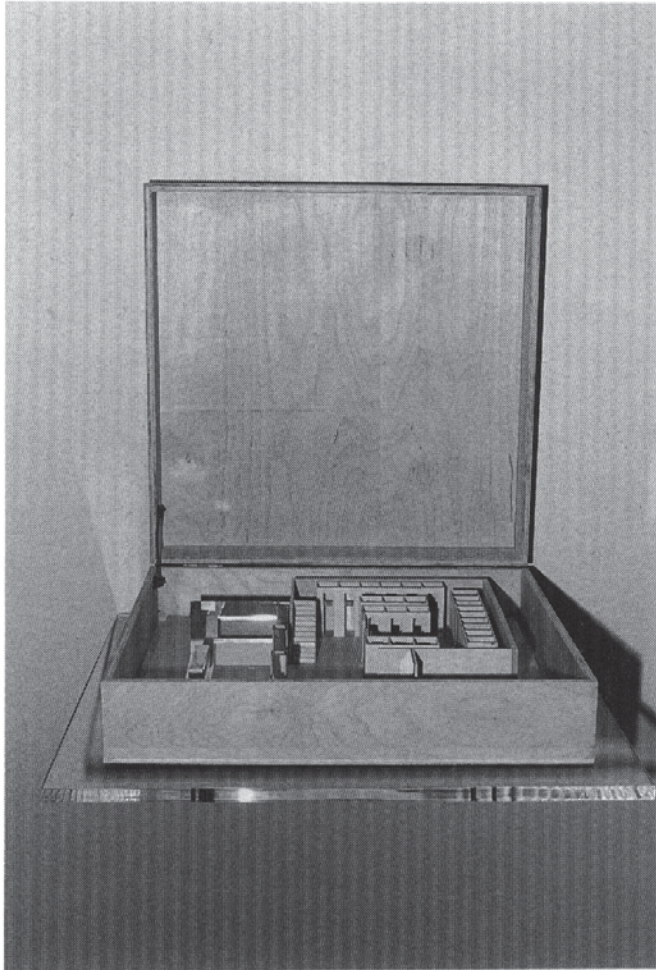
4. Both terms are part of the official discourse of the Times Square Redevelopment, and The Times Square Business Improvement District. Both terms circulate in the press statements and tourist literature for the area, and both are displayed on the official city street signs.

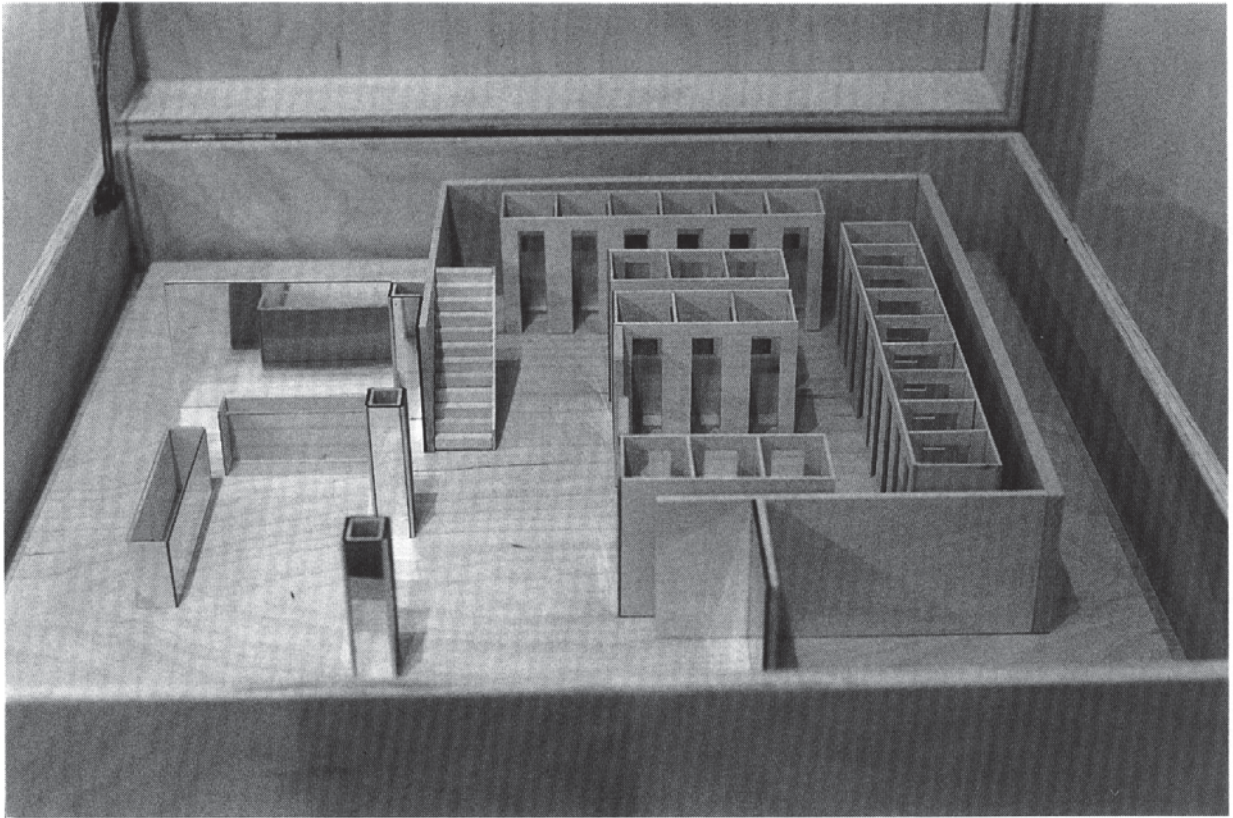
5. *Hells Kitchen Development News*, September 1997.

peep scumatorium

In 1966 peep shows arrived on Forty-second Street. In 1967 the Supreme Court loosened the obscenity laws and peep shows flourished. Also in 1967 the Lindsay administration decided that Times Square was in trouble and invented a program to “preserve, protect and promote the character” of the area by awarding various zoning bonuses for the building of new legitimate theaters. In 1976 Fred Papert of the Municipal Art Society founded the Forty-second Street Redevelopment Corporation, its mission being “to rescue West Forty-second Street from four decades of misuse and neglect, to reverse Forty-second Street’s fall from grace, creating in time a river-to-river grand boulevard that would become a magnet for private investment, visitors, jobs and tax revenues.” The Forty-second Street Redevelopment Corporation’s first action was to take over the Crossroads Building located at Broadway and Forty-second Street. In the words of journalist Josh Alan Friedman, “A sawdust peep scumatorium, where kiddy porn had been available, was evicted and replaced by a police substation.” The Forty-second Street Redevelopment Corporation hired the artist Richard Haas to paint a large mural across the front of the building.

By 1978 Fred Papert and the Forty-second Street Redevelopment Corporation had transformed a block of buildings that lay between Ninth and Dyer Avenues. The block had been home to the French Palace, the Mermaid Bar, the Studio \$10, and others, before its redevelopment into Theater Row, a grouping of not-for-profit theaters and restaurants. Richard Haas painted a large mural across the front of buildings on Dyer Avenue, the approach to the Lincoln Tunnel.

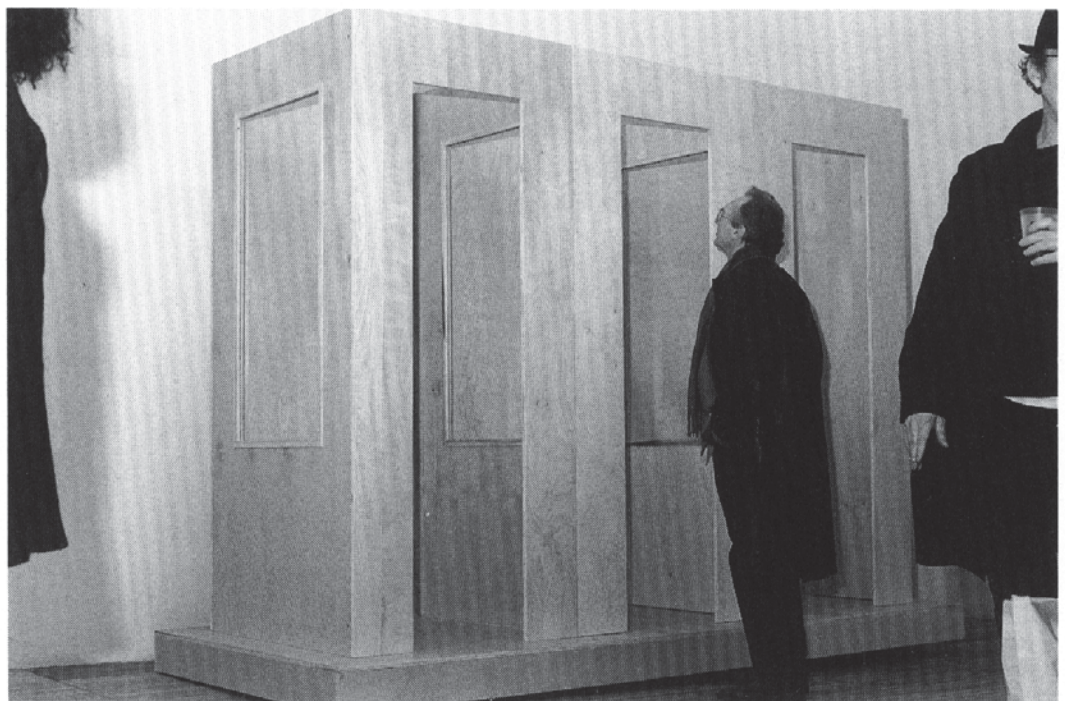
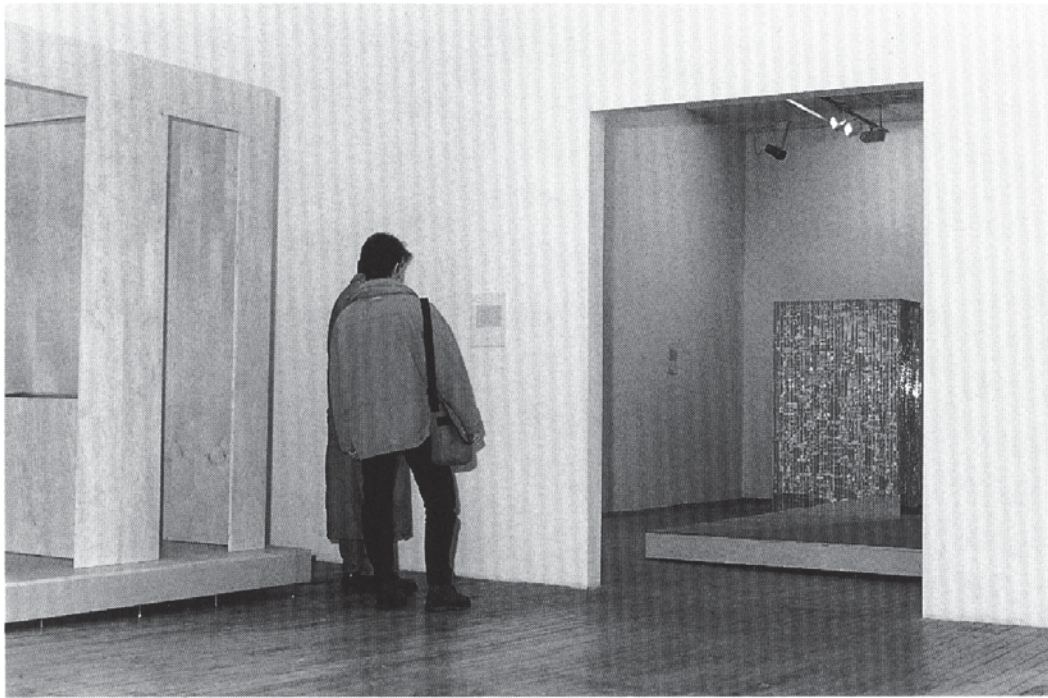


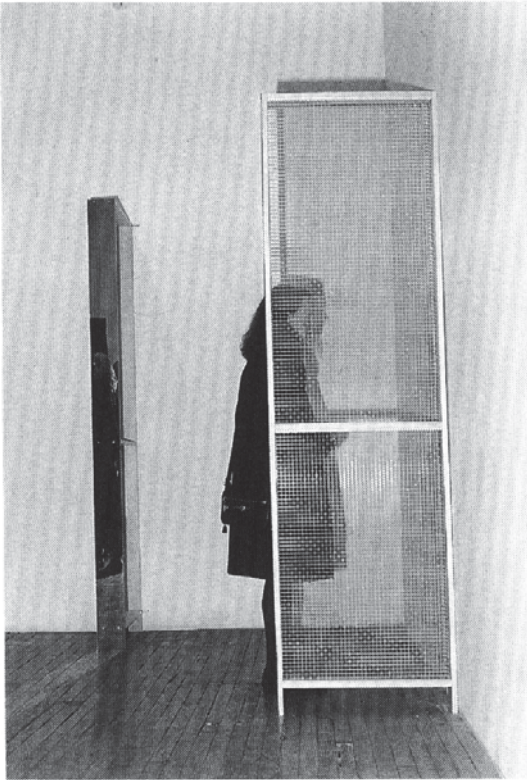


*Detail of Model in a Box with wall text.
(Photo: Til Hohn.)*

X-rated movie houses

Many of Times Square's X-rated movie houses and show palaces have been housed in early twentieth-century relics of the theater district. Inside, the lobbies, halls, balconies, and lounges have been periodically refurbished and occasionally restructured, to disguise the archaic effect of the original interiors. Fragments of paneling and mirror, and sections of carpet and tile have been laid down over older surfaces and earlier treatments, producing an accumulative interior design scheme of layer heaped onto layer, decade onto decade, until a kaleidoscopic effect of alternately dull and shiny materials emerged. Hallways leading to the restrooms, and the restrooms themselves, containing some of the barest examples of these cross sections of time, reveal the particular location's changing roles throughout the last half a century on its walls, ceilings, and floors. Bare incandescent bulbs and singular power-saving fluorescent tubes have been worked into existing sconces and light fixtures. New hollow doors have been fitted into heavy structural door frames, with plywood panels fitted around to fill in the excess space, the entire section painted over in matte black. Older carving and tile work have been painted over in browns, grays and muted or faded colors, with arbitrary, painted-on wainscoting dividing the room into two, over the walls, over the tiles and over the metal toilet stalls, with lighter colors on the top, and darker, glossier paint on the bottom, masking the dirt and stains.





*Views of 42nd Street Structures. 1995.
(Photos: Til Hohn.)*

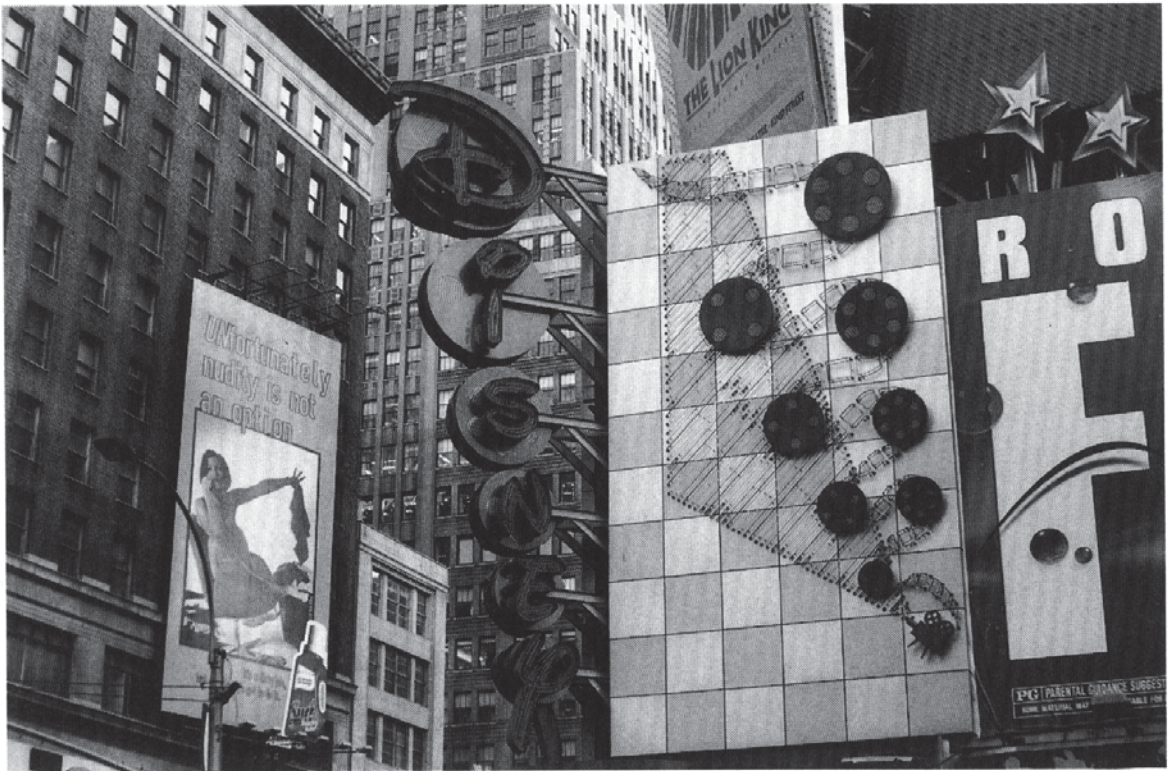
porno disco

Filtering out from the various booths is a mixture of sounds, dialogue, and muffled music. The sounds, dialogue, and music change sporadically as the channels are switched, and are only partially discernible from the outside of the individual booths, forming a larger, chaotic, conglomerate body of sound which carries throughout the space. The familiar riffs of synthesizer music, generally from the late 1970s and early 1980s, create a continual backdrop of sound within the video booth setting. Artificial music—synthesizer based and disco or new wave in flavor—is particularly central to the male/male video booths, producing a fragmented, canned sound, a synthetic slickness which is central to the mood of gay pornography. Once inside an individual booth the sound is up close and direct, partially contained within the confines of the Formica-covered cabin, while the audio tracks from the adjacent booths fall into an allover ambient background. In some male/male video booths, a mechanical window is located in each side of the booth, allowing for the possibility of visual contact to be made with either of the adjoining booths. Green and red buttons beneath the windows let each booth signal the other, and if the other agrees, a dark shield slides up and the window becomes transparent, and contact is made. Many of the booths also have slight six-inch spaces under the partition walls, allowing voices from adjoining booths to carry from one to the other.

Above: Wall text from 42nd Street Structures. 1995

Right: Shots of Times Square. 1998.

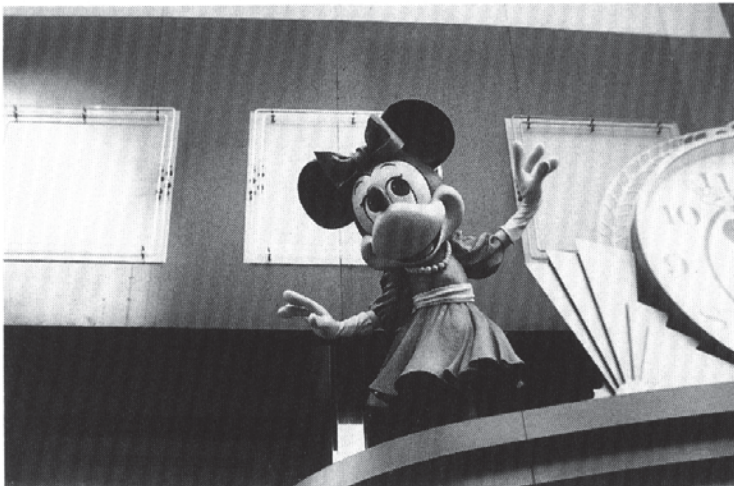
(Photos: Tom Burr.)



blue movies

Outside, the buildings are covered with facades of neon and various mirrored and reflective surfaces. Inside the storefronts, basements, back rooms, and upper levels that house Times Square's rapidly disappearing sex shops, peep shows, X-rated cinemas, strip shows, and video booths, a network of windowless spaces unfolds. Retail areas are bathed in fluorescence and occupy the floor space nearest to the street entrances, while passageways and stairways lead further into the buildings, to cinemas, theaters, or configurations of video booths. Varying degrees of darkness and light occupy the different spaces; darkly painted hallways and vestibules are interrupted by the flickering of video, or the glow of a large screen, or the reflections produced by additional interior facades of neon and mirrored surfaces. Low wattage incandescent bulbs, mostly in reds and blues, allow a minimum of light throughout the interiors of the buildings (with the exception of the retail areas lit by the intense fluorescent bulbs), and guide traffic through the many, somewhat intricate, transitional spaces and into the cinemas, theaters, or configurations of video booths.

*Above and below right: Wall texts from
42nd Street Structures. 1995.*



*Left: Shot of Times Square. 1998. (Photo: Tom Burr.)
Above right: Detail.*



blue laws

The term was originally applied to the seventeenth-century laws of the theocratic New Haven colony; they were called "blue laws" after the blue paper on which they were printed. New Haven and other Puritan colonies of New England had rigid laws prohibiting Sabbath-breaking, breaches in family discipline, drunkenness, and excesses in dress. Although such legislation had its origins in European Sabbatarian and sumptuary laws, the term "blue laws" is usually only applied to American legislation. With the dissolution of the Puritan theocracies after the American Revolution, blue laws declined; many of them lay forgotten in state statute books, only to be revived much later.



*Shots of Times Square Visitor Center.
1998. (Photos: Tom Burr.)*

