Title:
To Rally Discussion -- Media and the City

Journal Issue:
Places, 19(1)

Author:
Hardy, Hugh

Publication Date:
2007

Permalink:
http://escholarship.org/uc/item/34b0818s

Media and the City

Hugh Hardy

What defines a city? Cities are all about people, about their interaction, finding different ways to reach them with new forms of communication. Tall buildings, yes, and complex transportation systems, yes, and busy streets, yes; but what animates these urban places is the reciprocal actions of people. The media now make it possible for this interchange to take place in the streets at an unprecedented scale. The physical fact of New York's street grid roots everything in place as much as any of its individual buildings. The permanence of the streets continues to define a sense of place more strongly than any single piece of architecture or any electronic display.

The public realm is changing under the onslaught of new reproduction techniques. Whether these employ electronics or injection-molded plastic, they create "synthetic cities" like those found on late-night television talk shows. In TV studios the experience of performance is electronic *and* actual. It takes place in enclosed spaces where audiences can view both images of performance on monitors *and* the actual performance in front of them. Both are "real" in that they take place at the same point in time with the same people and settings, but what appears on the monitors can be more intense because they are viewed through the cross-cut images of different cameras at different focal lengths. By comparison the "real" actors and settings have less power and become the means to create a packaged product whose ultimate reality is electronic.

Above: Proposal by H³ Hardy Collaboration Architecture for a twenty-first-century Shakespearean theater in Times Square.
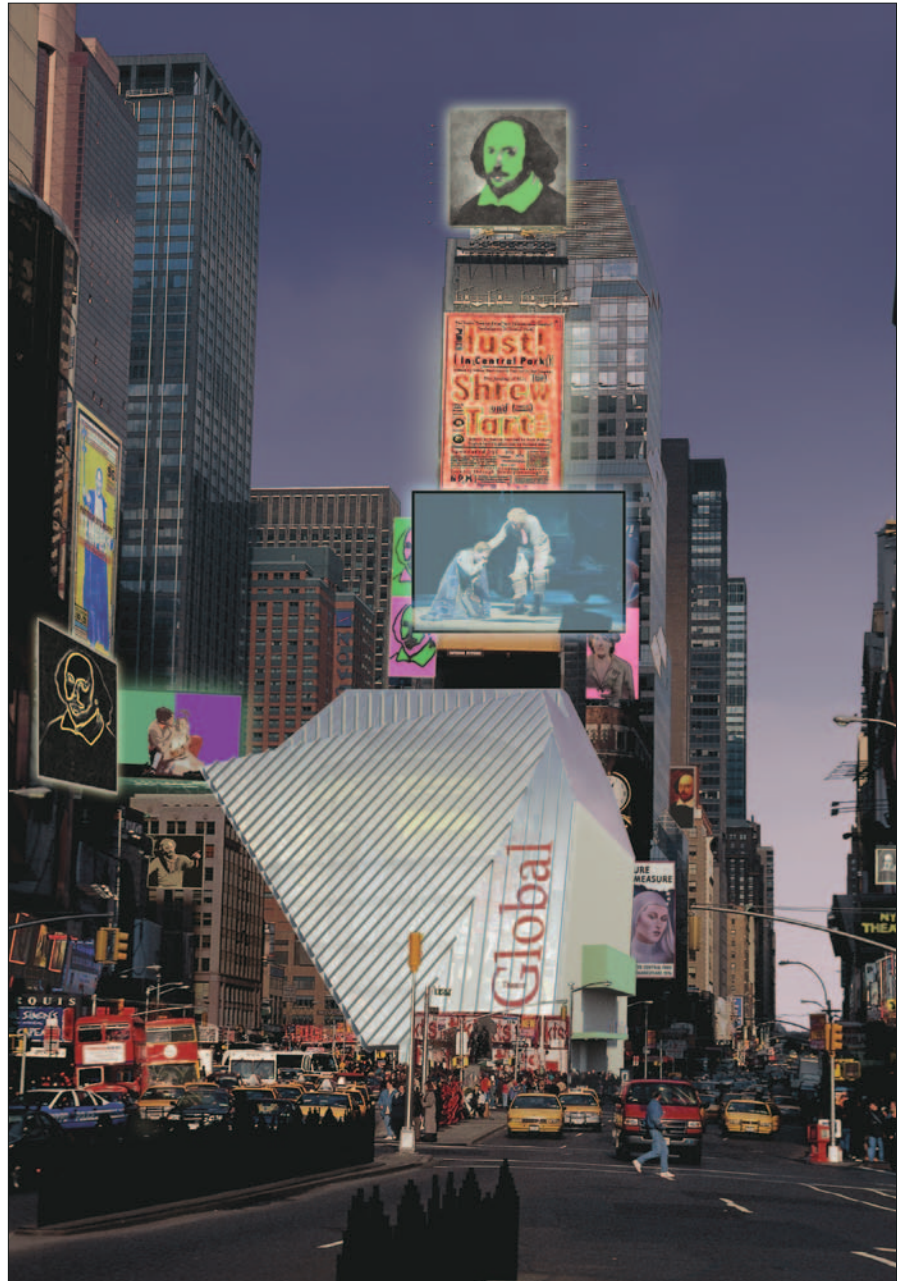
New forms of media have made communication in the public realm possible in ways that both define and embellish the urban environment. No place represents this more than Times Square, New York's LED playground. This place of animated commercial messages assaults the senses in a glowing expanse of popular entertainment. It is where the diagonal of Broadway cuts through Manhattan's rectangular street grid to create the distinctive street plan of a "bow tie."

Shakespearean Theater Proposals

Joe Papp believed theater could be an effective way to reach the general public. He began in 1954 by using the streets as performance spaces and staging productions of Shakespeare with American actors, proving these four-hundred-year-old-plays could still come alive, revealing the human condition. He entertained the public for free, in the same way advertisers now delight the public with their colorful, digital displays in Times Square.

To honor Joe Papp, new performance spaces designed by H3 Hardy Collaboration Architecture form part of an exhibition on the subject of a Shakespearean theater for the twenty-first century, on view until August 27, 2007, at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. H3's design proposes two sites, one in Times Square and the other in water-front parks around the city. Conceived as a way for major corporations to link their advertising programs to the cultural ambitions of this hypo-thetical theater, and to simultaneously present events to a larger public, we imagine a building that rises over the intersection of Broadway and Seventh Avenue. Here the auditorium and public spaces would be visually linked to the surrounding displays, pro-grammed to enhance performance. The experience of attending plays would thus take place in an enhanced dimension that uses commerce to sub-sidize art.

To further pursue Joe Papp's idea of free, public theater brought to audiences where they live, a second building, designed to float, would offer possibilities for mooring in neighborhood parks in all five boroughs. When this mysterious non-nautical form is spotted gliding toward shore, it will excite curiosity and anticipation for the theatrical

wonders it might bring. These pro-ductions would be visibly sponsored by the same corporations as those that inhabit Times Square.

Corporate sponsorship of cultural events is a long-standing part of the American scene, but in this project it offers a direct link between public advertising and the experience of performance in the city. In Times Square, instead of installing a simple billboard representing Shakespeare, we propose integrating images of the playwright and his history with simul-cast presentations from the theater onto surrounding jumbotrons. Unlike simulcast presentations from the Metropolitan Opera House, which now take place in movie theaters across the nation, these productions would not be broadcast from her-metic, enclosed rooms. Rather, they would form part of an interactive environment, where both the produc-tion *and* the urban environment are visible at the same time.

This exploitation of the "synthetic city," of an electronic realm whose appearance is ephemeral and con-stantly changing, becomes possible at street scale. Instead of being repre-sented by the permanent buildings of an enclosed architecture, where the public is separated from its surround-ings, this project accepts an expanded realm of multistory digital displays. Even with these new frontiers of com-munity definition, the permanence of the New York streets continues to convey both the historic and "syn-thetic" cities. These live side by side. Traditional theater performances will retain their importance—as will the traditional city, which survives as the measure of change that, by itself, can offer no orientation to time or place.

Above: Central Park's Delacorte Theater is testament to Joe Papp's belief that theater should have a more public presence. Photo courtesy of H³ Hardy Collaboration Architecture.