## LIGHTNING STRIKES



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## out and sketches: by the author

## NOT ONCE BUT TWICE

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In cities vice is hidden with most ease Or seen with least reproach; and virtue, taught By frequent lapse, can hope no triumph there Beyond th' achievement of successful flight.

> The Task William Cowper 1785

URPLUS OF FOOD caused specialization of labour and a new social class structure which gave rise to the first true cities. Cities since that time have been centres of attraction that drew people in for various reasons, mostly social or economic in nature. This magnetic nature had the effect of consolidating city centres. The centre, in smaller cities, may have been the town square which also served as marketplace and where other major festivities, such as public hangings, were held. Along with economic and social prosperity came also the means to afford and satisfy one's unvirtuous tendencies. This further generated more economic prosperity for some as entertainment of various calibres was marketed, the stalwart being that of ladies of loose morals and loose dress.

As cities grew, they tended to decentralize somewhat. The town square remained but other centres big or small - developed. Certain were known for their specialized activities. Even today, our cities have their financial districts, shopping streets, hotel and entertainment areas, red-light districts and so on. The setting of the sun gives cities a nightlife.

As can be deduced, nightlife districts are certainly not recent inventions. Since prostitution is ill-reputedly the world's oldest profession (after law) it may be safe to assume that red-light districts have existed for some time. Of today's more colourful and better defined red-light districts, we have Hamburg's notorious Reeperbahn; Amsterdam's red-light district where red lights actually do shine and svelte professionals pose promiscuously in the front windows of row houses fronting on small streets or lovely canals; and Paris's Pigalle with its romantic

history due to its Montmartre location and resident dignitaries such as Toulouse-Lautrec.

However, when analysed, these red-light districts are basically one-industry towns based on vice of the carnal persuasion. As such, they don't really qualify as complete nightlife districts because they lack variety and depth. There are few city precincts that have the democratic depth - the highs and the lows - to encompass a wide spectrum of nightlife. One such city centre is found in New York.

Manhattan's asphalt grid is the rolling surface for the city's horde of automobiles. The meandering diagonal path of Broadway crosses Seventh Avenue to form a long intersection and it is here that, at night, that New York fluoresces orgiastically. Here one finds legitimate theatres, posh restaurants, fast food outlets, cinemas, peep shows, strip joints, rooms, hotels, baths, stores, bars, clubs, and discotheques - all united by some sort of glitter that is a schizoid scuffle of advertising.

The Times Square area was once occupied by stables and was known as Long Acres (in parallel with a similar area in London). The first theatres and restaurants were built in the 1890's and the New York Times moved in in 1903. This was and still is the theatre district of New York. commonly known as 'Broadway'. The Broadway theatre, although still a major part of New York's cultural life, is not what it was many years ago. The decline began in the 1920's with the advent of talking movies. Great Depression was a further blow and many of the theatres on 42nd Street became movie theatres and burlesque houses. 42nd Street in the

Times Square neighbourhood is still the most porno-flick oriented two blocks in the city. The coming of television further lessened the importance of Broadway and in a fifty year span the number of legitimate theatres decreased from about eighty to thirty-five, with only about half open with Broadway productions. However, through special zoning four new theatres, the first to be built in the area in over forty years, opened in 1972 and housed in new, flaccid skyscrapers. In the face of the theatre's decline, Times Square diversified over the years. one-third of Manhattan's movie houses are located in the area. The physical fabric and the texture of the place have changed since the early days. It is now dead flash at night and somewhat drab and transparent during the day. Scars and holes are covered by a blanket of darkness after sundown when Times Square earns its

When in Times Square one encounters many types of people from many avenues of life. The distinguished members of the drugmasters' guild graciously offer their bonbons and magic powders and live up to their "Coke adds life where there isn't any." Groups of youths from the city's ghettoes hang around the subway exit blasting forth bop and boogle to the passing populace. Assorted pornophiles - civilians and professionals - go about their business or pleasure. Affluent theatre-goers stop in at an 'in' restaurant or discothegue before retiring to their high rise apartments on the East Side to rest for the next day's luncheon with the partners of their legal or architectural firm or perhaps for a day's shopping at Bloomingdale's for the little lady with the big account. Tourists and conventioneers carefully but casually



walk around, taking in the neon just like normal people. Cab drivers - the wit of New York - work overtime to pay the bookies, all because the Yankees lost.

Times Square, although not a square, is very urban in character, unlike that other American glitter spot, Las Vegas, which is very suburban in character. One of Las Vegas' main strips is a three-and-a-half-mile stretch just outside the city. Las Vegas does not have the depth nor the social variety of New York. Its strip consists of slick lights, call girls, businessmen, private detectives, shotgun marriages, crap entertainment, crappy entertainers, craps, impotence, and mediocrity. Las Vegas is neither hot nor cold; the proper water temperature for enemas.

Comparable to Times Square (or vice

versa) is its European counterpart, Piccadilly Circus in London. This is the downtown where Petula Clark would go. Like Times Square, Piccadilly Circus is an awkward traffic intersection where seven streets converge. It is surrounded by a riot of neon billboards. It is the city's tourist and entertainment centre and the theatre district lies around it. Leicester Square and its cinemas, theatres, restaurants, and clubs is nearby and the city's naughty neighbourhood, Soho, is immediately northeast of the Circus. Fashionable Piccadilly also runs into the Circus, as does Regent Street. Oxford Street, the city's principal shopping street, is in the near north. Unlike Times Square, the area is clean and safe (while London burns elsewhere) and even somewhat elegant by American standards.

The Circus derives its name from peccadils, a type of ruffled neckware that was made in the area of what is now Piccadilly. It was laid out by John Nash in the 1820's as the terminal point of his Regent Street and was originally called Regent Circus. After 1877, the Circus was no longer circular when Shaftesbury Avenue started its plow through the slums of Soho and St. Giles from it. The aluminum statue of the Angel of Christian Charity, commonly known as Eros, became the focal point in 1893. Although it is seen by some as ugly and vulgar, Londoners have become attached to the Circus. During the Second World War, London was blacked-out because of nocturnal German air raids and the Circus was silenced. There was happiness when the big lights came on again. In the late Fifties and early Sixties, there was considerable talk of redeveloping



and changing the shape of the intersection. A few schemes, including modern highrises, were brought forth but abandoned because of their blandness. The possibility of drastically altering Piccadilly Circus now seems as likely as discovering the Royal Family speaking Cockney behind closed doors.

Piccadilly Circus's backstage is Soho and Soho has a certain reputation. It was formerly a French quarter in the sixteenth century and over the years it has been a home to other ethnic minorities. The ethnic influence is still felt in the number of ethnic restaurants and markets found in the neighbourhood. Soho is a centre of British youth culture. Carnaby Street was the mod shopping street of the swinging London of the 1960's and many of the original British Invasion bands did some of their early

However, Soho is groundwork here. best known for being London's red-light district. The most visible manifestations, albeit audio-visual, are around bright Windmill Street where numerous cinemas, theatres, peep shows, and sex shops are established. Prostitution is not immediately visible since steet-walking was made illegal. Brothels are now known under the names of massage houses, hostess centres and other such 'a.k.a.'s'. Advertisements for these establishments, managed in large part by Maltese brothel keepers, regularly appear in magazines. Mingling with these concerns is the infringing cleaner image of London's theatres.

Quite obviously, places like Times Square and Piccadilly Circus were not planned and are really quite accidental. They are not from their origin an act of will, although now the dominant will is to ensure their continuation. The question can be put forth: "Would it be possible to consciously make such a place from nothing?" The making of such places is not only a matter of creating a physical entity but inducing a certain social climate. In considering such places, however, the question should be: "Do we want to purposely make such places?" Behind the spastic flashing facades that lend warmth to the air stand the cold scaffolds, inhabited by the 'priests' who venerate the sound of clinking and rattling silver.