TKTS

Choi Ropiha, Perkins Eastman and PKSB remake the experience of Times Square.

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It was pretty big news at the time, in architectural circles throughout Australia. Back in December 1990, the announcement was made that John Choi and Tai Ropih, two young architects from Sydney, had won the international competition for a new TKTS booth in New York’s Times Square. Part of the news worthiness must have been a flash of parochial pride – the competition was, after all, the biggest that had ever been held in New York at that time, with 683 entrants. Winning it was a mighty coup, and even more so for a pair of architects from the other side of the world, entering their first international competition. But as soon as you saw the scheme, any jingoism evaporated. The architectural idea was so simple, elegant and absolutely right for the location and the brief that it seemed almost inevitable it had won.

As with all great design, looking at it made you think of course. It is obviously right. Naturally these things are only ever obvious in hindsight, and like the concealed, furious padding by which the swan appears to glide so effortlessly, coming up with an idea that seems inevitable is a difficult and often laborious task.

Equally strenuous can be the process of getting a great idea actually built, and this one was no exception. Political, economic and administrative changes, the appointment of local architects Perkins Eastman to develop and document the design and supervise construction (“inspired” or “based on a concept” by Choi Ropih, as the press coverage has all carefully said) and a major contractor going broke all meant that it is not until now, nearly ten years later, that the project is complete and open, having been inaugurated by Mayor Bloomberg on 16 October 2008. Choi Ropih are philosophical about their limited role in the actual realization of the building, arguing that high-profile public projects are almost always fraught, compromised and longwinded, and this one was no different. They were kept informed throughout the process, but they had little direct input after the first stage. Perkins Eastman took the project on a severe towards high technology, with an all-glass structure of beams and load-bearing glass walls. The actual booth itself is housed in a fibreglass pod, fabricated by a yacht builder and slipped into the outer shell. The level of finish is sleek, and Choi Ropih are diplomatic about the overall end result – saying that while of course there are things they would have done differently, it is a pleasure and a relief to see that the original idea was robust enough to come through largely intact.

The competition scheme proposed a terraced, inclined plane of glowing red stairs, lit from within, splayed outward to follow the diverging lines of Broadway and Seventh Avenue, and with the ticket booth tuck underneath. The design completely reframed the existing statue of Father Duffy, World War One chaplain and local hero, releasing it from behind the railing that had so cramped the previous ticket booth, and bringing what had become an “invisible” monument out into active public space. (The final plaza design was the work of PKSB.) The previous TKTS office had been constructed in 1973 by the Theatre Development Fund, as part of the City administration’s attempt to spruce up what was then one of the most seedy and dangerous parts of town. The booth, which sells cheap tickets for same-day shows, was an immediate and spectacular success, bringing a steady stream of locals and tourists who in the years since its opening have purchased a staggering $5.1 million tickets. But the first TKTS booth had only been intended as a temporary measure, and as Times Square itself changed dramatically, and the lines of queuing ticket-buyers sometimes numbered up to three thousand and spilled into the adjoining streets, there was a need for renewal.

The Van Alen Institute, which organized the original competition on behalf of the Theatre Development Fund, describes Times Square as “the most illuminated, walked upon, televised and recognized intersection in New York City... familiar even to those who have never set foot there – the quintessential symbol of the city that never sleeps.” The Choi Ropih scheme took this riotous cacophony, vibrancy and speed, and proposed a moment of pause within the rush, a viewing platform that is equally a stage. The associations are richly layered – the brilliant colour suggests red carpet and...
4. The new structure forms a backdrop to the statue of Father Dely.

5. The "theatre" of Times Square. The new seating/steps are lit from below.

6. Detail of the steps and handrail of the all-glass structure.

7. The business end of the facility – the ticket booth is housed in a fibreglass pod beneath the steps.

Photography
1-7 John Saeby
8 Emilie Wartnaber
9 Art Burling
red theatre curtains, but the form also suggests the bleachers
of audience seating, as well as a stage set — like a high-camp
musical, it invites you to don your tux or feathered headdress
and try out a few high kicks. Over the course of a long, cold
February evening, as a slow dusk fell over the project, it
was remarkable to observe the transformation — as the light
dimmed, the stairs began to glow and the sense of theatricality
and excitement palpably grew.

Manhattan Island has one of the most magnificently
universalist, relentless urban grids of any city, and this rigour
is most keenly revealed where the pattern is broken, where
it is crossed by the dramatic oblique slash of Broadway. The
interference caused when these two systems intersect creates
some wonderful moments in the city — an occasion for a
park like Union Square, a wedge of building like the Flatiron.
At Times Square, Broadway and Seventh Avenue come almost
exactly into phase, meeting to produce a "bow tie" of streets
intersecting at an acute angle, with two thin wedges of public
space left in between. There are few voids in New York’s urban
block, as Choi observes — "There are not many places where
the grid relents and gives you some breathing space" — and
so they were loath to fill the gap with yet another building.
The intention was thus less to make a "building board" and
more to conceive the project as urban design, opting for
something grounded. In any case no conventional booth
could possibly compete with the scale and visual cacophony
of the surrounding signage, nor with the volume and speed
of circulation through the site. We know this because there
is indeed another such booth. In the reflected position on
the opposite side of the "bow tie" is a US Armed Forces
recruiting station. While even this has been glammed up,
with an American flag in strips of neon across one wall, its
rectilinear box form shows by contrast just how clever the
TKTS booth is — not a closed container of space, massively
outscaled by the surrounding skyscrapers, but an inclined
platform that appropriates this vertical slot of space for itself,
providing a floor, then taking the surrounding billboards as
its interior walls. In this sense the project turns the city inside
out, reversing the figure ground so that the square becomes
an interior, of infinite height, lined with flickering images.
Dismayingly, some kind of reversal also occurs in the
horizontal dimension — looking at the skyscrapers reflected
at your feet is strangely like standing on a glass platform
above an infinite void, looking downward into the sky. It
is a vertiginous feeling, slightly alarming but exhilarating,
perhaps a little like the feeling of winning a competition like
this or, later, of finally seeing it built.

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