Urban Entertainment Centers: What are They and How can They Survive?

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An urban entertainment center (UEC) is an urban area that has been revitalized or repositioned as a leisure destination. In those cases, the urban environment, such as streets, sidewalks, and buildings remains intact; however, the function has changed to an entertainment center. UECs can be quite diverse in nature, ranging in size from a block or two to a large urban complex such as the entire downtown of Las Vegas, Nevada. Because UECs are adapted to local geographic, cultural, and historical contexts, they can be quite diverse in content and structure.

There are two fundamental kinds of UECs: districts and complexes. The district is an intact area that is altered to provide an entertainment core. Typical districts include Times Square in New York City and the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica, California. In each case, a commercial area in decline was redeveloped and revitalized to bring increased pedestrian traffic to the area. In the case of the Third Street Promenade, the street was closed off to traffic and a walking mall was instituted. The mall contains pushcart vendors and entertainment areas where street performers put on shows.

The redevelopment of Times Square involved the replacing of dilapidated single room occupancy (SRO) hotels with midrange and luxury hotels and the redevelopment of 42nd Street to the west of Times Square, with the primary investor being the Disney Corporation. Times Square, in the early 1970s, had become quite seedy. Even though it was surrounded by legitimate theaters and

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some popular restaurants off the Square, such as Virgil’s Bar-B-Q and Carmine’s Italian restaurant and Restaurant Row on 46 Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. the Square itself was ringed by a police department substation, a military recruiting station, low-level fast food joints such as McDonald’s, Popeye’s, Wendy’s, Sbarro, and Burger King, urine-reeking and rat infested movie theaters -- some showing action films, others showing pornography, video and pinball game parlors, and single room occupancy (SRO) flophouses. The Square in itself was populated by derelicts who rented rooms at the SROs, young people out looking for cheap thrills, prostitutes and their pimps, merchandise hawkers who set up tables between police sweeps, religious proselytizers calling out their messages with bullhorns, and street performers, such as break dancers. Mixed in with the sleaze of Times Square were middle-class theatergoers and tourists who were brave enough to risk having their pockets picked.

Dilapidated movie houses showing pornography were replaced by legitimate theaters, movie multiplexes, and other entertainment venues such as BB King’s Jazz Club and Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum. In addition, the area contains several theme shops, including a Disney store, Warner Bros., and the Yankees Clubhouse, all of which sell franchise merchandise. The removal of SRO’s dramatically reduced the derelict population in Times Square and also generated a precipitous decline in street prostitution. Although Times Square still has its seamy underside, the seaminess has been reduced from the dominant aspect of the Square to the fringes. Now, the lowlife aspects of Times Square add to the “color” of the area, providing out-of-town tourists with a kind of slice-of-life authenticity. Times Square now gives tourists a sense of being at the cultural edge where people from all social classes and ethnic backgrounds intermingle, while at the same time making such an experience relatively risk-free.

Entertainment complexes are cohesive, managed properties that have a similar structure to a mall. Unlike districts, entertainment complexes are usually run by a single management. A typical urban entertainment complex is Universal CityWalk outside the gates of Universal Studios in Hollywood, California. The CityWalk was designed to bridge the Universal Studios theme park.