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## New York Wages Perennial Struggle

By N. R. KLEINFELD

As early as the 1840's, dauntless pushcart vendors and stationery stores hawked lewd postcards of women in considerably less than full attire. It was only a matter of time before there was a topless shoeshine parlor in Times Square.

In one form or another, the sex trade has always had a durable X-rated visibility in New York City. It is a stubbornly resilient industry that has stumbled and rebounded under the force of the law and changing tastes and technologies. But it has never gone away — not nearly.

The city's peep shows and topless bars, however, now face the most formidable test of their bare-bodied, multimillion-dollar buoyancy, with Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani's administration seeking to enforce zoning regulations that could severely limit the city's lineup of sex shops.

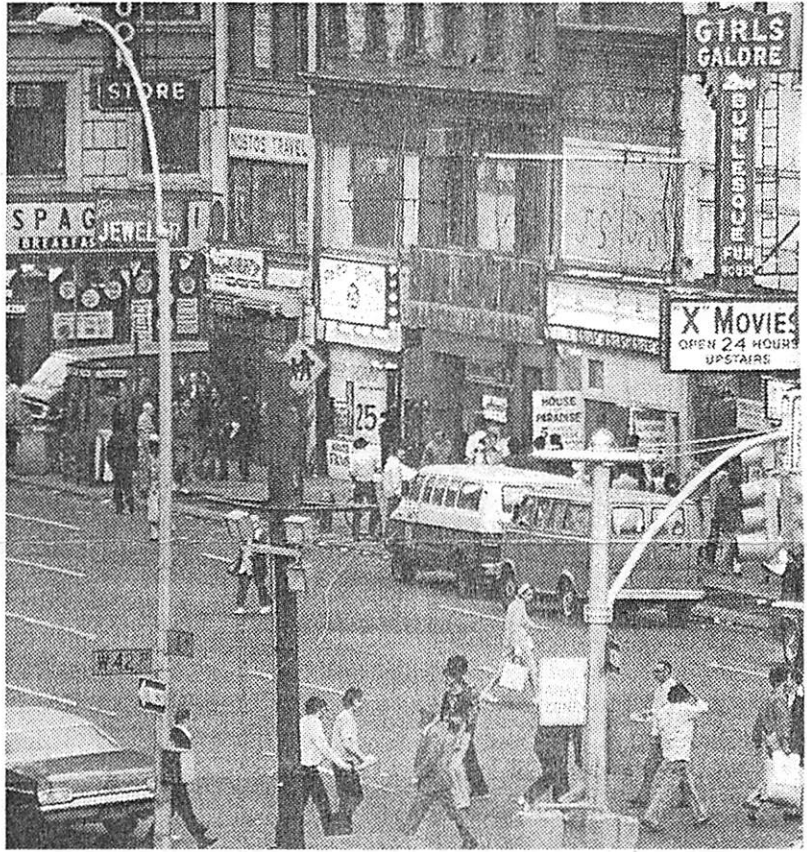
Last week, the State Court of Appeals upheld zoning rules that bar sex-oriented businesses from operating within 500 feet of residential areas, schools, churches, day-care centers or one another. On Friday, a Federal judge issued a temporary restraining order preventing the city from acting on the zoning rules, pending a hearing.

How radically the sex trade will be revamped by this fresh campaign remains to be seen, but it is hard to imagine the city barren of a sex industry, for the very reason that it never has been. Prostitution and the sale of erotic material trace back to the early days of the city. Before the end of the 19th century, even respectable vendors sold lascivious postcards and photographs.

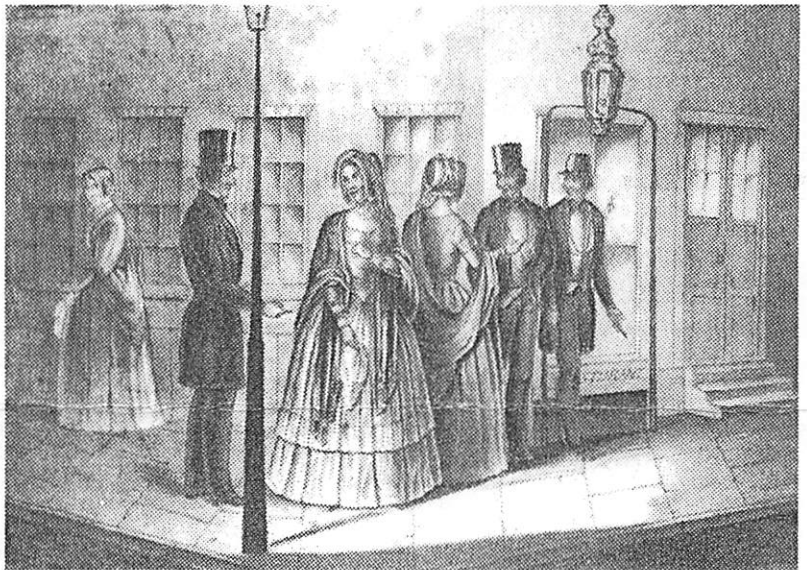
During the Depression, Times Square began its steady descent from a thriving theater district into seediness. While it continued to be a center for a wide range of entertainment — movie premieres and burlesque shows, taxi dance halls and dime museums — many theaters were transformed into "grinder" houses that offered continuous showings of nudist films and, eventually, sexually explicit movies.

In the 1960's, the face of an explicit sex shop industry emerged as Times Square coalesced into the nation's capital of retail sex. It was a ripe place for Martin J. Hodas. In the early 1960's, he hatched the notion of putting pornographic movies in nickelodeon machines. The public enthusiasm for his innovation amply enriched him and gained him notoriety as the "King of the Peeps."

The 1970's were boom times for the sex industry. Dozens of massage parlors staffed with prostitutes lined Eighth Avenue in midtown. Show World opened its doors in Times Square, a glitzy multistory sex emporium that came to be known as the McDonald's of the sex industry.



Eighth Avenue between 42d and 43d Streets in 1975, when the area was



Museum of the City of New York

In an 1850 lithograph, prostitutes ply their trade on the streets of New York. The sex trade is virtually as old as the city itself.

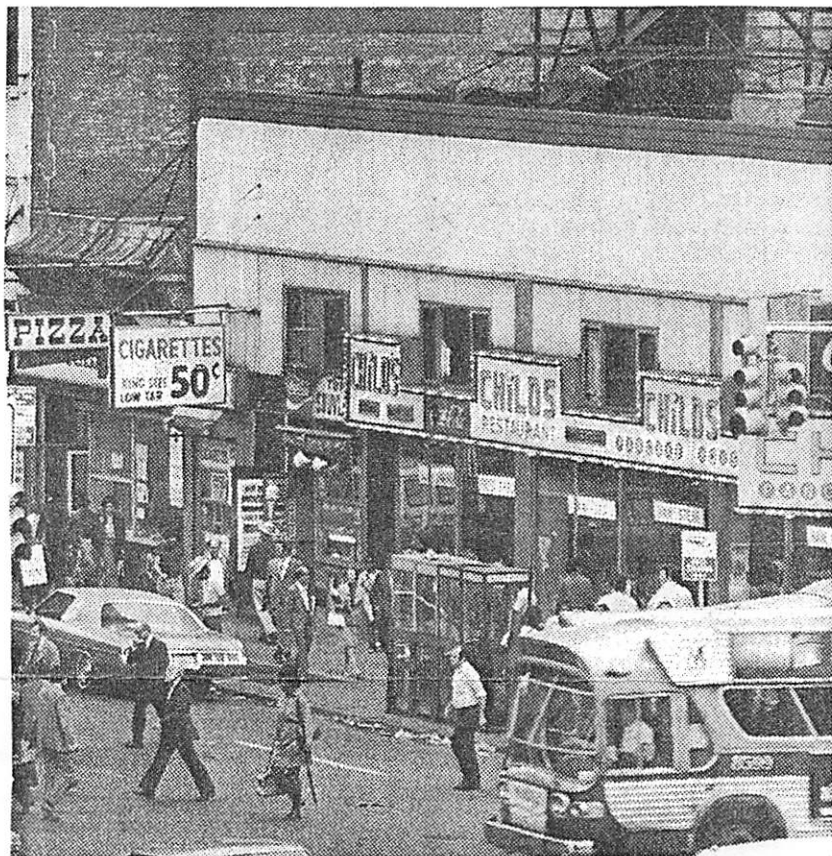
Richard Basciano, one of Show World's owners, came to control an empire of sex-oriented businesses.

By the mid-1970's, more than 100 sex shops and topless bars plied their trade in Times Square, and city politicians had begun their long and exhausting dance with the sex trade. Virtually every city administration would undertake at least one campaign to clean up Times Square.

During the administration of Abraham D. Beame, in 1976, the Mayor's Office of Midtown Enforcement was created to attack vice in Times Square. A new measure, the Nuisance Abatement Law, took effect in the summer of 1977, making it far easier to close illegal sex businesses.

"We used the law extensively and were able to essentially close down all the massage parlors," said Wil-

# to Contain Smut Industry



Jack Manning/The New York Times

even more rife with sex-oriented movie theaters and shops than it is today.

liam Daly, who is now the director of the Office of Midtown Enforcement.

The new enforcement tactics and the fact that the industry had acquired a certain maturity sent it into decline in the 1980's. Increasingly, people favored watching sex tapes on their own VCR's. Between 1975 and 1986, according to the Office of Midtown Enforcement, the number of sex shops and pornographic movie houses in central Manhattan plunged to 44 from 147. Massage parlors and topless bars all but vanished.

But the sex business gathered momentum again in the early 1990's. The upscale strip club arrived as conventional nightclubs that were losing business reinvented themselves. The advent of low-priced sex films led to a resurgence in pornographic video stores rarely vulnerable under the nuisance statute.

Yet the elaborate redevelopment of Times Square has brought about a pronounced dispersion of the industry. Only about 20 sex businesses, including Show World, are believed to be operating in midtown today, but the city appears to have more sex shops than ever — in neighborhoods like Greenwich Village in Manhattan, Forest Hills, Queens, and Sunset Park, Brooklyn.

A 1994 study by the city's Planning Department concluded that the number of sex-oriented businesses rose 35 percent, from 131 in 1984 to 177 by the end of 1993, a number the depart-

ment feels has held steady over the last few years. The study found that video stores and peep shows had tripled in number, while topless bars increased by 26 percent.

These days, the Internet allows customers to bypass storefronts and partake of a virtual sex industry beyond zoning constraints. "With the Internet, the sex shops are going to be obsolete in a few years anyway," said an executive with Stripper magazine, a trade journal, who insisted on anonymity.

The new zoning push will allow the city to close legally operated sex businesses and thus could have an impact unlike any previous effort. Herald Price Fahringer, a lawyer who represents 107 of the city's sex businesses, said the new rules would put 85 percent of the industry out of business. Show World, which is less than 500 feet from Holy Cross Roman Catholic Church, would be among those forced to close.

Mitchell Moss, director of the Urban Research Center at New York University, imagines that the zoning rules will bring additional changes to the industry but will hardly trigger its demise.

"It's going to be less visible in certain parts of the city," he said. "There will be darkened windows and less signage. We're going to go back a hundred years. We're going to put it back in the home and on the side streets and in the pushcarts."