

Bova, Bianca. "Build Up the House II by Brendan Fernandes," *Whitehot Magazine*, 12 April 2025.



Build Up the House II by Brendan Fernandes



Build Up the House II (2024), still images courtesy of the Artist, Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago, and Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC. Furnished by the Times Square Alliance.

By way of public art initiatives, the [Times Square Arts'](#) Midnight Moment series has a decent conceit. Nightly from 11:57pm to 12:00am ninety-two of the advertising screens that face the rise of the buildings in Times Square from 41st to 49th Streets, in one synchronized motion, shift to display a work of art. The project began in 2012, and has featured the work of over one hundred artists since its inception. It bears a companionable relationship to Chicago's own projection-based public art initiative [Art on the Mart](#), often sharing commissions for the project. This includes the most recent edition *Build Up the House II* by Brendan Fernandes, which debuted Friday, March 14th of this year.

Fernandes' work is impactful in a way that meets the prompt perfectly: visually punchy with supergraphic motifs that foreground choreography that speaks both to club culture and to Fernandes' ongoing incorporation of classical dance motifs in his wider interdisciplinary practice (even as the monochromatic silhouettes of the dancers against the candy-colored backgrounds does put one in the mind of those old iPod commercials; a gesture that, even if unintentional, serves as a suitable and playful nod to the occupation of ad space by the piece). The

inauguration of the work was feted with a late night dance party in the street, replete with a DJ decked out in DKNY Jeans garb setup behind jersey barriers just beyond the Red Stairs.

Times Square in its present day iteration is primed for just this kind of manufactured, capital-F Fun. It's beyond me (perhaps beyond us all) what accounts for its historical tendency towards havenhood for bottom-of-the-shaft American culture. Something about its layout maybe, the riotous unnatural cleave of Broadway away from 7th Avenue. Regardless of the reason, the pendulum doesn't swing much farther than it has on Times Square. At midcentury, following the post-war boom years in the city, and long after the New York Times vacated and subsequently sold the building that serves as the area's namesake, it teetered on the edge of what would work out to be a long decline. This was the Times Square of Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*, what lay beyond Chrissy's *Gates*. At once melancholically down-at-the-heels and emblematic of promise: a radiantly neon-lit expression of the American Dream.

When the 1970s arrived they heralded the proliferation of the adult entertainment industry in the area. Triple-X theatres, peep shows, and go-go bars crowded the streets, openly advertising their fare. Drug problems plagued the area, and crime rates soared. By 1981, the stretch of West 42nd Street at the heart of Times Square was christened "[the sleaziest block in America](#)."

Much ink has already been spent documenting the failed efforts at "cleaning up" Times Square during this period. In the end it was of course the all-powerful toolkit of real estate redevelopment and corporate dollars that sparked significant change. In 1992, Disney took a long-term lease on the New Amsterdam Theater. A once-storied turn-of-the-century playhouse, it had become a derelict moviehouse showing kung fu films, purported to have [holes in the roof, dead cats in the basement, and mushrooms growing through the auditorium floor](#). The cultural authority of Disney in the family-entertainment sector proved sufficient in paving the way for Times Square, in an almost whiplash-inducing manner, to become a sanitized central destination for families vacationing in the Big Apple. Through the 1990s and early aughts, the decaying pornographic theatres and adult bookstores disappeared and came to be replaced by a different kind of equally tasteless dreck: the M&M's store; Planet Hollywood; the Ripley's Believe It or Not! Odditorium.

The Times Square of today lies temporally and characteristically somewhere down the line from all of this. One need not look farther than the aggressive off-brand Elmos attempting to coerce families into photo-ops for cash to realize that we are—as much in Times Square as anywhere—living in the shadow of our collective cultural past. It seems equally implausible as it must have to anyone in, say, 1975, that anybody should ever be nostalgic for this current iteration. People being what they are though, there will someday be those who long for the nights flooded by the supermarket-dairy-aisle ambience of the LED Jumbotrons that blot out the notion that one is out of doors, and circling cavalcade of tube-lighted pedicabs blaring Jay-Z's *Empire State of Mind* on an infernal, interminable loop. This will inevitably come to be seen as the halcyon days of *something* in Times Square, though lord knows I can say not what.

Still and all, to participate—to exit the subway at 42nd Street and come up alongside the billowing street grates to alight on the infamous intersection, familiar if not by experience then by sheer collective conscious force—is to participate in the American culture. As I am oft given over to believing is true of the whole societal project, its salvation (if it has one) lays in its sincerity. The people populating Times Square at any given hour of the day or night have come seeking to experience a version of New York that lives at the core of the American consciousness. Whether it's the derelict theatre featuring nude dancers, the Disney store with racks of gleaming mouse-eared merchandise, or the swell of house music at the midnight art-fueled dance party in the street, they are all monuments; and when we gather in Times Square, we are all pilgrims.