

Closing Times Square is a bad idea

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If history is an indicator, security officials are right now toying with the idea of completely shutting down sections of Times Square in hopes of protecting it from more explosive-laden SUVs. Let's hope they don't.

In response to 9/11, these same officials orchestrated a widespread lockdown of Lower Manhattan that has obliterated the public realm and stripped the city of its openness. Our research found that more than 25 percent of streets, sidewalks, and public spaces in the Civic Center and Financial District are closed entirely or severely limit public access. But New York is not alone: security planners in London, Jerusalem and Washington, D.C., have created garrison states in our most popular districts. High-profile global cities are filled with hard and soft security, from concrete bollards and Jersey barriers to surveillance cameras and security guards. But besides increasing safety, the security mobilization itself can increase concern and breed distrust. In the words of social critic Mike Davis, "fear proves itself."

Public spaces are the lifeblood of cities. More than simple physical entities, truly public spaces are sites of interaction in which individuals are sometimes forced to interact with those they dislike. Our most open-minded cities are full of freely accessible spaces allowing for unplanned encounters. Public spaces can educate the city-dweller about others and can increase interpersonal empathy and understanding.

From its seedier adult business days to its recent Disneyfication, Times Square has embodied this very open-mindedness. It is a gathering place for tourists and an icon central to the construction of New York's external image. Before we shut down large swaths of this celebrated, 24-hour destination, it is worthwhile to reflect on what we might lose by doing so. Some might argue that "good fences make good neighbors," but creating symbolic walls around a potential terror target has never worked: one need only visit London's City District to see that the infamous Ring of Steel produced a veritable ghost town after 9-to-5 financiers leave work. Instead, public spaces can be the connective tissue that breaks down social and spatial barriers and creates a more vigorous street life common in the cosmopolitan city.

Jane Jacobs put forth this message 50 years ago in her "eyes on the street" hypothesis: the more people around, the less likely an opportunistic criminal would commit an offense. The safest spaces are self-policed by residents and visitors; closing off an entire district to vehicles and pedestrians alike would surely produce a more dangerous setting. That the bomb-filled SUV was discovered by a vigilant T-shirt vendor is proof of her hypothesis. Streets and sidewalks are for people, not just SUVs. In fact, pedestrian districts are often the most vibrant sections of cities, and the lack of traffic in Times Square surely contributed to the vehicle's discovery. While barring vehicular traffic in U.S. city centers remains a difficult and controversial task — just ask Mayor Bloomberg or New York City Department of Transportation commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan — keeping pedestrians in prominent public spaces will go far in keeping places safe. Shutting them out and locking down such public spaces bleeds them of their democratic vigor and may even make them more dangerous, more susceptible to attack.

So how do we create such open, safe urban spaces? Through security planning processes that are broad-based and include experts in planning, design, development and intelligence. Design innovation has made it easier to introduce less intrusive, even invisible, security measures in urban places. City officials should engage in close discussions with property owners, residents and users of Times Square to find the right mix of security measures.

What New York City needs is a more sensitive approach to deterring future attacks. Security and safety are essential components of any sustainable city, but planners and policymakers must balance these needs

with civil liberties and urban mobility. It is possible to retrofit the area to reduce the chance of future attacks while maintaining the communal spirit of freedom and democracy on which this city, and this country, are built.

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