



1 Actors Peter Falk and Jack Lemmon with Mayor John V. Lindsay during the filming of *Law* on the Williamsburg Bridge, 1967

Adventure Playground:

John V. Lindsay and the Transformation of Modern New York

2010

In recent years, it has been scarcely possible to walk down the major streets of New York (at least in good weather) without sooner or later coming across a film crew at work: fleets of specialized vehicles, and scores of craftspeople—directors, cinematographers, camera operators, production designers, property masters, gaffers, grips, and, of course, world-famous actors and performers—busily transforming the everyday city into the setting for some larger-than-life vision of urban life.

Similarly, it is hardly possible to walk today into a movie theater, or look at a television screen, and not soon find New York City serving as the setting—and often enough the subject—for romantic comedies, thrillers, police dramas, science-fiction fantasies, or any of a dozen other popular genres regularly shot on location in the city. Over the past decade, no fewer than 200 feature films, and hundreds more episodes for television, have been filmed *each year* on the streets and sidewalks of New York, a total that no other American city—not even Los Angeles—can match. Thanks to this pervasive filmic presence, audiences across the country, and indeed all around the world, have come to know New York as well—or better—than their own hometowns.

The city's onscreen prominence is so taken for granted today that it is hard to imagine that as late as 1965, the last year of Robert F. Wagner's mayoralty, New York hardly appeared in films at all. That year, only two features were shot substantially in the city: *The Pawnbroker*, an early landmark in the career of veteran New York director Sidney Lumet, and *A Thousand Clowns*, directed by Fred Coe, which used extensive location work to “open up” a Broadway stage hit of a few years earlier by the playwright Herb Gardner.

The big change came with Wagner's successor, John V. Lindsay—who, soon after taking office in 1966, made New York the first city in history to *encourage* location filmmaking: establishing a simple, one-stop permit process through a newly created agency (now called the Mayor's Office of Film, Theatre and Broadcasting), creating a special unit of the Police Department to assist filmmakers, and ordering all city agencies and departments to cooperate with producers and directors (1).

The founding of the Mayor's Film Office—the first agency of its kind in the world—remains to this day one of the Lindsay administration's signal achievements, an innovation in governance which has been replicated by agencies or commissions in almost every city and state in the Union, and scores of countries and provinces around the world. In New York, it helped to usher in a new industry, now generating over five billion dollars a year in economic activity and bringing work to more than 100,000 New Yorkers: renowned directors and stars, working actors and technicians, and tens of thousands of men and women employed by supporting businesses—from equipment rental houses, to scenery shops, to major studio complexes that now rival those of Southern California. Along the way, it has also helped to ensure that New York retains its status as one of the most familiar and compelling urban landscapes in the world.

Yet in retrospect, the creation of the Mayor's Film Office, important as it was, can be seen as simply one piece of a much larger and more pervasive transformation that began during Lindsay's two terms in City Hall. It is a shift in sensibility so pervasive—from the city as a place of *function*, essentially, to a place of *pleasure*—that today it surrounds us, everywhere, having quietly revolutionized the way we think about the meaning and purpose of New York and other cities.

To understand this tectonic movement, there is no better guide, ironically, than those last two films of the pre-Lindsay era, *The Pawnbroker* and *A Thousand Clowns*, which together serve almost perfectly to frame the dramatic turn about to come.

The Pawnbroker centers on a middle-aged Holocaust survivor named Sol Nazerman (Rod Steiger), the proprietor of a decrepit pawnshop on East 116th Street, who fills out his days amidst a universe of unwanted objects—clocks, jewelry, appliances, musical instruments—and trudges to work and back each day through the grim streets of East Harlem. Though Nazerman's horrific wartime past inevitably gives *The Pawnbroker* its special narrative import and trajectory, it is easy to look beyond the particulars of the story to see the film in broader terms, as a portrait of the kind of ordinary working life that prevailed across much of Manhattan in the first half of the 20th century—the city that remained very much in place through Mayor Wagner's three terms in office. It is, in fact, a portrait of the traditional industrial city: a place of endless labor, devoted primarily to the making, moving, and selling—in this case, *reselling*—of physical goods. (The shabby pawnshop, in its way, represents one small corner of the vast wholesale and retail industries that did so much to sustain the city's economic engine in the hundred-plus years from 1840s to the 1960s.) For Nazerman, as for so many of the unsung millions of men and women who toiled in the city's factories,

warehouses, and stores, the city is above all a place for *work*: a cheerless, functional environment in which to spend five or six days each week, to be valued as a place of gainful employment, perhaps, but certainly not regarded as a source of delight—or even, in a sense, as any kind of setting or “landscape” at all. Indeed, Nazerman barely notices the city as he walks to and from his shop each day, except to take note of an occasional strange sight or distant horror, triggering a flashback of his nightmarish past. Otherwise, the gray, gritty city simply passes by—not a “place,” really, but merely a serviceable location for commercial activity (2).



2 Sol Nazerman (Rod Steiger) opens his East Harlem pawnshop in *The Pawnbroker* (1965)



3 Murray Burns (Jason Robards) and his nephew (Barry Gordon) touring the East River waterfront in *A Thousand Clowns* (1965)

A Thousand Clowns offers a completely different view of the city—and not only because its main character, a television writer named Murray Burns, played by Jason Robards, is part of New York’s newer “post-industrial” economy rather than the older, goods-oriented world of Sol Nazerman. In fact, during most of the film, Murray is *out of work*, having earlier chosen to quit his job on a daytime children’s show. Instead, he spends much of his time touring the city with his live-in nephew (Barry Gordon) and a new girlfriend (Barbara Harris)—meandering on foot and by bicycle, binoculars in hand, seeking out picturesque corners of the urban landscape, enjoying the unusual or eccentric attractions (often on the water’s edge) that lie outside the mainstream of busy, white-collar Manhattan (3). His relationship with the city is based not on its role as a center for commerce, but on something else entirely: as a kind of spectacular, full-sized stage set, through which he is free to wander joyfully, like an overgrown child, finding delight in its endless surprises and discoveries, its hidden retreats and unexpected vistas. For Murray, the great urban construct that is mid-century New York serves, at some real level, as a giant stage set—or playground.

If Sol Nazerman’s New York was, in some real way, the city of Mayor Robert F. Wagner—a gray, functional environment, devoted almost entirely to commercial pursuits—then *A Thousand Clowns* perfectly presaged the new vision of the city that John Lindsay and his colleagues sought, consciously or not, to put forward: a new, officially sanctioned spirit in which the city was actually to be *enjoyed as a place*.

The notion itself was hardly new. For decades, writers, artists, filmmakers and others had drawn attention to the pleasures of New York as an urban setting, one that—though devoted largely to commercial purpose—could offer a romantic, exciting, even delirious sense of place. But rarely, if ever, had there been any *official* approval or appreciation of the city’s existing physical environment,

as such. Indeed, by the late 1950s and early 1960s—as postwar urban renewal and highway programs leveled and remade huge swaths of the city—exactly the opposite was true. “Everyone, it would seem, is for the rebuilding of our cities,” the urban critic William H. Whyte observed in 1958, “with a unity of approach that is remarkable...”

But this is not the same thing as liking cities....[M]ost of the rebuilding under way and in prospect is being designed by people who don't like cities. They do not merely dislike the noise and the dirt and the congestion. They dislike the city's variety and concentration, its tension, its bustle and bustle.

By contrast, Lindsay and his colleagues generally *liked* cities, in the sense described by Whyte and portrayed in *A Thousand Clowns*. But that was only part of it. In a variety of ways, Lindsay and his team would promote the other notion suggested by the 1965 film: that the landscape of New York could be considered a kind of giant outdoor “stage,” one to be enhanced as a theatrical designer or art director might transform a stage or film set: with “scenic” improvements—ingenious, temporary, even whimsical—that would allow it to serve as setting for the widest possible range of public and private pleasures.



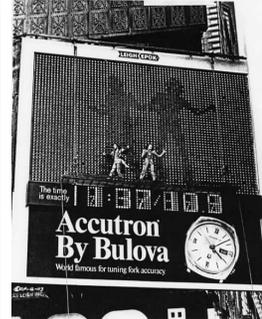
4 Shooting *The Night They Raided Minsky's* (1968) on East 26th Street, Manhattan, redressed to the film’s period, the 1920s

The most obvious example of this, of course, was the effort to encourage location filming, which set off a sudden explosion of energy, as dozens of filmmakers fanned out across the city’s urban landscape, eager to exploit it as—literally—a giant stage, and determined to adapt it to their own cinematic purposes. (In 1967, just a year after the Mayor’s Office was founded, forty-two feature films were produced in New York.) Audiences tended to imagine that location-shot films represented some kind of simple, documentary-like “truth” about their setting, but nothing could be further from the truth: cinematographers, production designers, and set decorators almost always modified or transformed real locations—sometimes quite ambitiously—to meet the needs of story and script. This was most evident in period films, which employed artful production design and set-dressing techniques to allow contemporary streets to be turned back to the 1920s (for *The Night They*

Raided Minsky's, 1968) or the 1940s (for *The Godfather*, 1973) (4). But it also held for films set in the present day, which adapted the urban landscape no less imaginatively to their own ends: turning Lincoln Center's central fountain, for example, into a thrilling set piece in *The Producers* (1968), its waters exploding into the sky to underline the joyous moment a repressed accountant, Gene Wilder, agrees to join forces with impresario Zero Mostel (5). Or transforming the contemporary high-rise landscape of New York—by eerily emptying it of people—into a haunting and somehow timeless setting for a musical retelling of St. Matthew's Gospel in *Godspell* (1973) (6).



5 Leo Bloom (Gene Wilder) and Max Bialystock (Zero Mostel) at the Lincoln Center fountain in *The Producers* (1968)



6 Musical number filmed on an electric sign on Times Square, in *Godspell* (1971).

Lindsay's radical new approach to location shooting—actively encouraging moviemakers to transform (or creatively re-imagine) every corner of the city's urban landscape—was the most literal embodiment of the impulse to turn New York into a kind of giant outdoor stage. But that same impulse underpinned a far more ambitious effort by the administration: to extend the similar approach to the actual fabric of the city, which was not only to be regarded as a source of delight, but manipulated and enhanced as if it, too, were somehow a kind of scenic environment.



7 Sign at entrance to Bryant Park, Manhattan, 1960s

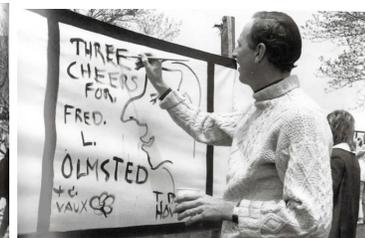
The obvious place to start was the city's parks—one of the few spots, even in the days of the relentlessly commercial city, to be dedicated to the timeless values of respite and delight. Yet for decades, New York City's parks, under the heavy hand of Robert Moses (who had run them directly as Park Commissioner from 1934 to 1960, then through loyal surrogates ever since), had been

curiously dull and joyless places. Obsessed above all with orderliness and propriety, Moses sought to disallow any behavior outside the strictest possible norms—an authoritarian instinct embodied almost risibly in the grim, forbidding sign posted at every park and playground entrance, featuring a giant printed “NO” followed by a longish list of proscribed activities. (7) Though he had been known in his early career (nearly forty years before) for his imaginative and even whimsical approach to the design of Jones Beach and other Long Island state parks, the structures and equipment the older Moses installed in the city's parks and playgrounds in the 1950s and early '60s were almost uniformly stolid, banal, and uninspired, plainly more concerned with ease of maintenance and imperviousness to vandalism than inspiring any feeling of delight or whimsy.

But all that would change overnight, when, even before he took office, Mayor-elect Lindsay appointed Thomas Hoving, an iconoclastic 34-year-old curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as the city's new Parks Commissioner. Declaring that “the old rinkydink, hand-me-down stereotype of the park is out, OUI!” Hoving proclaimed the advent of the “park as public theater”—and within months, had set in motion a series of startling initiatives to make good his promise. To the astonishment of cab drivers (and transportation commissioner Henry Barnes, who predicted traffic jams stretching “from Maine to Florida”), Hoving ordered Central Park's drives closed to cars on early Sunday mornings to allow bicyclists to savor its 19th century landscape—much as Murray Burns had done in *A Thousand Clowns*. He borrowed an art-world idea from the curator Alan Kaprow and introduced what were soon dubbed “happenings”: loosely structured—or entirely *un*structured—public events and gatherings in the city's parks, from a five hundred-person game of “capture-the-flag” on Central Park Mall, to a Gay Nineties-themed cocktail party at the Naumburg Bandshell, which drew thirty-five thousand participants. There were “kite happenings,” a “folk song happening,” and a nighttime “scientific happening” to observe a meteor shower (8, 9).



8 Happening in Central Park, 1967



9 Thomas Hoving participates in a Central Park Happening

“A park is like a stage,” Hoving declared, in no uncertain terms. “If you leave it sitting, nothing good is going to happen.” Having re-envisioned the city's parks as a theatrical environment, Hoving now sought to enhance their “scenic” elements, through small-scale interventions intended to bring life to existing spaces. At Bethesda Fountain in Central Park, he created an open-air “Fountain Café,” which dispensed with the need for large permanent structures and instead employed canvas canopies and outdoor café seating—elements suggestively scenery-like in their portable, informal nature (10). In place of the standardized, almost grudging playground designs of the Moses era, meanwhile, Hoving commissioned the first “Adventure Playground” near West 67th Street in Central Park, which, drawing on contemporary ideas of “participatory play” popular in England and Scandinavia,

offered a sophisticated design by the architect Richard Dattner, clearly intended not only to engage the imagination of children, but to engender pleasure and delight in adults (11).



10 Fountain Café at Bethesda Fountain, designed by James Lamantia



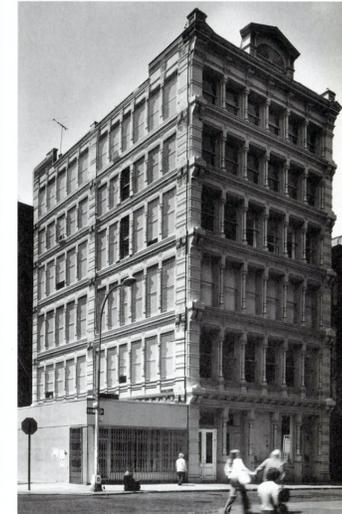
11 Adventure Playground, Central Park, designed by Richard Dattner

As the years went on, Lindsay’s colleagues—some in government, others in arts and civic groups working with the city—extended the same spirit further, reaching beyond the leafy confines of the parks and into the streets of the city itself. If less explicit than Hoving in comparing the city to a stage, these groups were motivated by similar goals: to celebrate the urban environment—and enhance its appeal—through small-scale, imaginative, often temporary or portable installations. These “scenic” elements often took the form of public art—not the traditional bronze statues of military heroes or civic worthies, but unconventional, often light-hearted works that would at once animate the urban landscape and encourage it to be seen afresh. In 1967, the city’s newly founded Office of Cultural Affairs mounted a temporary open-air exhibit called “Sculpture in the Environment,” whose twenty-six art works, placed in pedestrian spaces around the city, were like nothing ever quite seen before: playful set pieces, with no purpose other than to enhance the public’s enjoyment of the urban landscape—at least until the show’s two-month run was over, and, like any theatre experience, it receded into collective memory.

The parallel grew more obvious a few years later, when Doris C. Freedman, a public-arts advocate who had organized the outdoor sculpture show, established a group called City Walls to sponsor outdoor murals on New York buildings. Among their notable projects was a five-story-tall painting by the artist Richard Haas on a building on SoHo’s Prince Street, using an artful *trompe l’oeil* technique to recreate, on an exposed brick side wall, the ornate cast-iron architecture of the building’s street façade—an unmistakable piece of urban scenography, a “redressing” of the city’s landscape (as a film production designer might call it) at the grandest scale (12, 13).



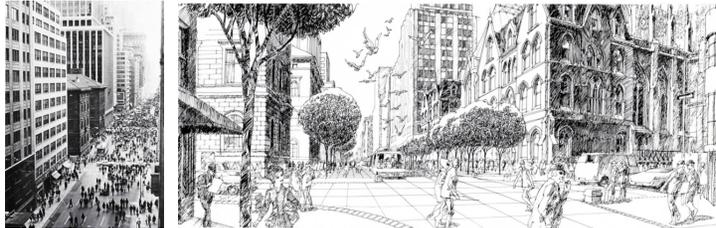
12 112-114 Prince Street, Manhattan



13 112-114 Prince Street, with *trompe l’oeil* mural by Richard Haas

The ironies could not have been more stark. Just a few years earlier and a few hundred yards to the south, Robert Moses, with the blessing of then-Mayor Wagner, had sought to destroy hundreds of similar cast-iron buildings for his Lower Manhattan Expressway, with no thought whatsoever for the area’s historic architecture. Now, under a new mayor, that same architecture was being not only saved (in part by new zoning provisions encouraging its reuse as artists’ living and working space) but lovingly re-interpreted. The desire to enjoy the existing landscape of the city—to find delight in its idiosyncrasies, its mixture of new and old, its picturesque vistas and tucked-away corners—was no longer the private, somewhat suspect pleasure of a few eccentric individuals like Murray Burns, but had come to be societally approved and officially supported.

Toward the end of Lindsay’s second term in office came his administration’s most ambitious attempt to remake the city as a kind of an open-air setting or stage: the Madison Avenue Mall. Conceived by the city’s Office of Midtown Planning and Development—one of the handful of young planning agencies created by Lindsay to pursue advanced urban design ideas—the project called for Madison Avenue between 42nd and 57th Street to be closed permanently to cars (buses and emergency vehicles would be allowed in the center lane) and re-landscaped as a pedestrian promenade. The scheme had been inspired by street closings for the second Earth Day, in April 1971, which had drawn tens of thousands of joyous strollers down the middle of Madison Avenue: a kind of theatrical Hoving “happening” that had somehow burst the bounds of Central Park and occupied the heart of the city—and now, at last, was about to receive a permanent, dedicated outdoor “stage,” twelve blocks long (14, 15).



14 Experimental Closing of Madison Avenue, 1971

15 Rendering of the proposed Madison Avenue Mall, 1972

In the end, the Madison Avenue Mall was killed: defeated at the Board of Estimate in July 1973, five months before the end of Lindsay's second term, by the joint efforts of the city's taxicab industry and department-store interests, fearful of any loss of business from cab-riding customers. In retrospect, the death of the mall project seemed a harbinger, as the brave and fragile new approach to the city that Lindsay had pioneered was soon submerged almost entirely by the tidal wave of troubles now crashing over the city.

To be sure, there had been criticism from the start—from skeptical observers who (not without reason) regarded Lindsay's approach as elitist, Manhattan-centric, and essentially oblivious to the needs of the working families who made up most of the city's population. Many older New Yorkers, meanwhile, were suspicious of the anti-authoritarian undercurrents—and sometimes almost reckless tone—in the words and actions of the young mayor and his even younger colleagues. Prominent among these critics, not surprisingly, was Robert Moses himself. "It has yet to be shown," he declared,

that [an] essentially honest, youthful municipal administration based on impulse rather than experience—with...extravagant promises, invitations to disorder in the name of satisfying youth, uncontrollable events and happenings—can maintain New York's supremacy and livability. We must soon decide whether we want a fun town [or] one guaranteeing outward order and decency.

If it was easy to dismiss Moses' critique as the embittered words of a lion turned out from power, it gradually became apparent that his observation contained more than a grain of truth. Hoving's fervent desire to fill the parks with people any way he could, for example, soon began to succeed all too well—as the fragile landscape of Central Park and other open spaces were overrun and trampled by thousands of visitors who, responding to the Commissioner's liberatory declarations, felt no need to curb their behavior in any way. Within a few years, the city's parks began to fray and then fall badly into disrepair—not only from heavy use and abuse, but because maintenance and operations budgets were being dramatically slashed as the city began its plunge into fiscal disarray.

But parks were the least of it. As Moses had caustically (but more or less correctly) observed, the Lindsay administration's gift for bringing a spirit of joy and "fun" to New York was not matched by an equivalent ability to preserve order and safety to a city increasingly besieged by economic and social problems. The soaring incidence of crime and disorder, in particular, made a brutal mockery of the administration's attempts to inspire a sense of pleasure or delight in the city's landscape. How could one find delight in an urban space that had been vandalized or defaced, or, worse still, in which one felt fearful of being mugged or possibly killed?

Once the city's economic and social fortunes began their vertiginous descent—coming to a bottom in the 1975 fiscal crisis, after Lindsay's mayoralty gave way to that of Abraham D. Beame—it was probably inevitable that the Lindsay-era approach to the city would be discredited. To be sure, some innovations not only survived but expanded: Central Park's drives, for example, were reserved for bicyclists not only on Sunday mornings but all weekend long—an amenity that is today taken for granted and regarded as inalienable. And the Mayor's Film Office prospered, encouraging ever more features to be shot on location in the city—though as the years went on, the image of the city those films presented in those films grew ever grimmer, from the dark expressionism of *Rosemary's Baby*, 1968, *Midnight Cowboy* 1969, and *The French Connection*, 1971, to the anti-urban posturing of *Death Wish*, 1974, to the nightmarish hellscape of *Taxi Driver*, 1976. (16, 17) But for the most part, there was little return at the official level to the Lindsay administration's initiatives—even after the city's fortunes began to improve in the 1980s, under the mayoralty of Ed Koch. With the crime rate still high, and New York in many ways still a grim and unfriendly place, it was hard to ignite the sort of spirit that might see the city's landscape as a source of delight, or a kind of scenic environment.



16 Chase scene from *The French Connection*, 1971



17 Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) in *Taxi Driver*, 1976

Yet something new *had* been introduced, a different way of thinking about the city—and, though it would take decades to come to fullness, a new sensibility began to take hold among much of the city's population.

Not all, by any means. Many parts of New York, especially outside Manhattan, were being dramatically remade in the same decades by waves of immigrants from around the world—newcomers who, if anything, appeared to share the same attitude toward the city as Sol Nazerman's generation: that the city was primarily a place for hard work, and, with luck, gradual economic advancement. But even as that change was underway, other areas of the city (beginning with officially designated "historic districts" in Manhattan and Brooklyn but soon spilling beyond) were being transformed by affluent New Yorkers, often with young families, who in previous decades might have fled the city but who now chose to stay—not only because of its traditional draw as an economic engine but because they *enjoyed it as a place*, valuing its quirkiness and character over the perceived homogeneity and dullness of the suburbs. Though the trend could be (and roundly was) criticized as "gentrification," it continued to gain strength throughout the 1980s and '90s, even as a related change to the city's fabric was underway. By the mid-1980s, keen observers like Phillip Lopate were taking note of the ranks of young people filling the sidewalk cafés that had sprung up along Columbus Avenue and elsewhere, bringing an almost European, "see-and-be-seen"

atmosphere that, Lopate recognized, was essentially theatrical in spirit, turning the sidewalk itself into a kind of extended stage.



18 Sidewalk café scene from "Sex and the City"



19 Filming "Sex and the City" on Bleeker Street, 2003

In the years since the mid-1990s, with the crime rate finally under control and the city again perceived as an essentially benign environment, much of New York has been remade by this flood of newcomers: ambitious young men and women from around the country, attracted—as young people have always been—by the city’s limitless career opportunities, but perhaps even more by a new sensibility, which regards the city as the most desirable place possible not only to work, but to live and, yes, play. (The impact of these newcomers has been amplified by a long-term demographic shift, in which college-educated, middle-class Americans choose today to spend ten or fifteen years finding their life partners—rather than the ten or fifteen months they once might have spent—and so remain for a decade or more in the city’s romantic “market.”)

To complete the circle almost too perfectly, it is a trend that has been dramatically propelled by the portrayal of New York onscreen, thanks the explosion in local film and television production encouraged by the Mayor’s Film Office: the countless romantic comedy features, and cable television series such as “Sex and the City,” whose effective use of New York locations has extended as never before the Lindsay-era impulse to regard the city’s urban landscape as, in some real sense, a giant outdoor stage (18, 19). Like gentrification, it is a phenomenon easy enough to criticize or mock, but, like it or not, it has given rise to an essential reality of modern urban life: that cities like New York owe their continued prosperity (and, to some degree, their economic survival) not only to their traditional role as a functional location for commerce, but instead—as Lindsay and his colleagues had first dared to officially suggest, four decades ago—as a place to be enjoyed, a landscape to be explored, a vast “adventure playground.”