

Former Toys 'R' Us Site in Times Square Is Being Re-Imagined

The 160,000-square-foot space will house Gap and Old Navy flagship stores



Inside the Bow Tie Building in Times Square. The 160,000-square-foot space was once home to the Toys 'R' Us flagship store. *PHOTO: ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By

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At some storefronts in Times Square are the familiar signs of construction: boarded-up exteriors with only small, porthole-shaped windows revealing the project within.

Hidden behind one of those temporary wooden facades is the skeleton of the former flagship Toys “R” Us store, now being converted into locations for clothing retailers Gap and Old Navy.

The 160,000-square-foot space, carved from the historic Bow Tie Building on Broadway that spans the block between West 44th and West 45th streets, has been gutted. Few visible vestiges of the toy store remain. In one corner, pieces of faux, oversize candies hang from an exposed ceiling. A few deflated balloons are caught high in the rafters.

The Toys “R” Us store centerpiece, a 65-foot-tall Ferris wheel, has been dismantled. Not even toe prints from the towering animatronic Tyrannosaurus Rex remain.

“The dinosaur? We shredded it and burnt it to pieces,” said Marc Heiman, chief executive and president of the construction management company Richter+Ratner.



The Toys 'R' Us store centerpiece was a 65-foot-tall Ferris wheel. *PHOTO: DON EMMERT/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES*

A Toys "R" Us spokeswoman declined Tuesday to comment about the closure, but said the search for a new location is ongoing.

A spokesman for Gap Inc., GPS 2.11 % the umbrella company for Gap and Old Navy, said the Bow Tie Building was appealing because it was large enough to house the two brand flagships.

Sentiment aside, the loss of Toys "R" Us and the renovations at the building have brought an unexpected strain on some commerce on Times Square.

“Toys ‘R’ Us used to attract a lot of customers here, especially kids and families,” said Rufai Mohammad, who sells tickets for New York City tours from a plaza just outside the Bow Tie Building. “But when it closed, [in] this part of the square the business is almost gone.”

Touring each level of the Bow Tie Building as the renovation proceeds involves stepping through portals in time. On the lowest floor, the ruins reveal what is thought to once have been an orchestra pit from a live theater dating to the turn of the 20th century.

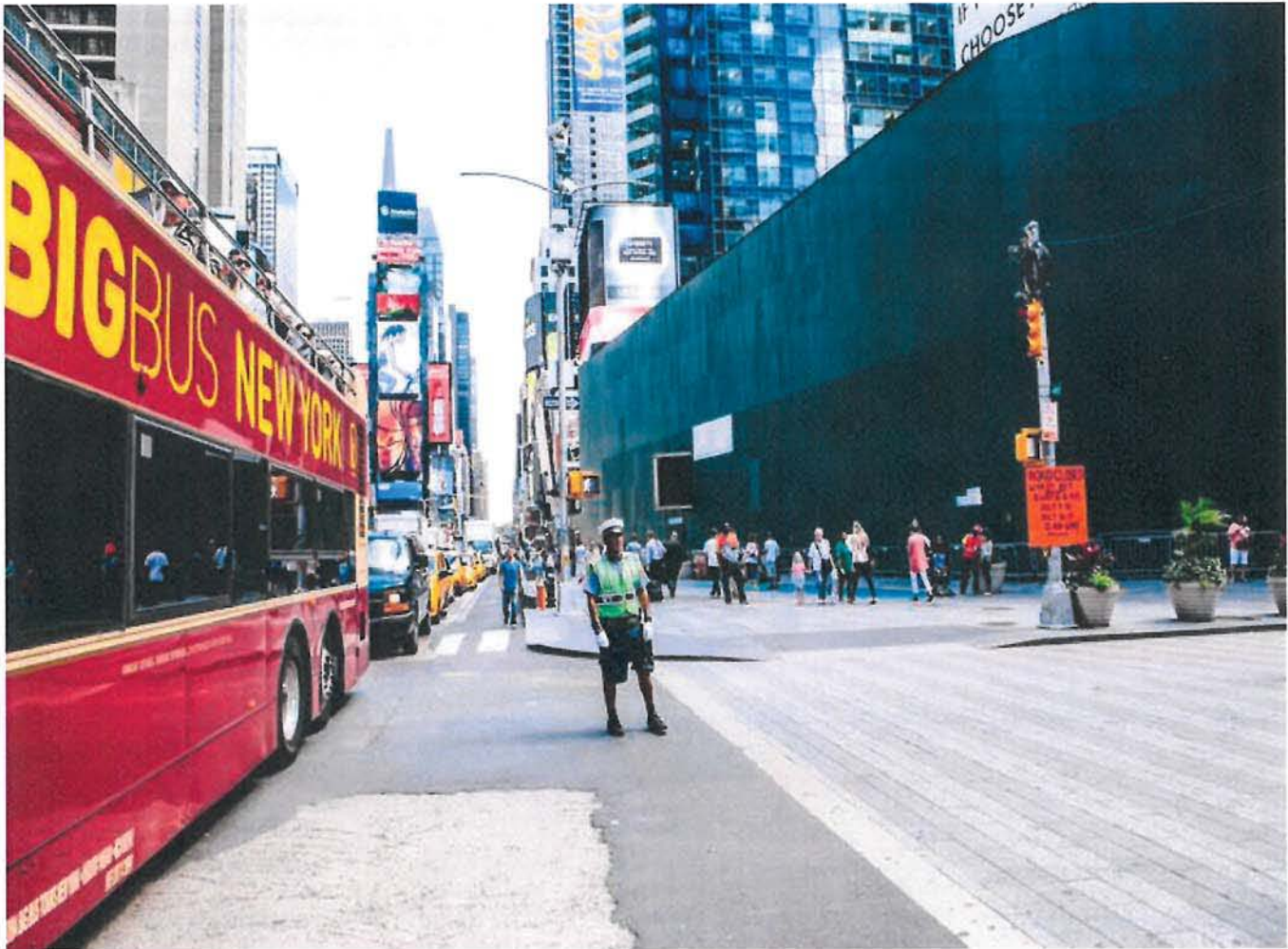
On another level, fashions of the 1930s are evident in excavated terrazzo tile. Ben Moss, a co-owner of Bow Tie Partners, said the tiles could have been the original flooring from an old retail space.

Mr. Moss’s great-grandfather, B.S. Moss, was an original tenant of the building in 1936, where he opened one of the first motion-picture theaters that used sound. The movie theater occupied the building until 1999, which by the time of its closure, had become technologically “obsolete,” Mr. Moss said.

At the time, he was in talks with his father, Charles Moss about redeveloping the building, resulting in a deal with Toys “R” Us.

Not long after that, Mr. Heiman enters the story—but for the first time. He helped develop Toys “R” Us when it opened there in 2001, and now he is helping reshape the site once more 15 years later.

“You know I’m getting old when I’m now demolishing projects that I built,” he said.



Outside the construction project. PHOTO: ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The construction, which is estimated to cost tens of millions of dollars, is scheduled to be finished in early 2017. For now, the site is mostly a demolition zone. The old toy store's lofty atrium is still intact, though the redesign includes filling it in to create 25,000 additional square feet of retail space.

Renovating a building in the middle of Times Square poses its own challenges. The crews must stage their equipment in one lane of traffic blocked off for them along West 44th Street.

And to avoid cars and foot traffic during the day, much of the work is done at night and above street level. Anyone nearby during those late hours would see silhouettes of cranes lifting steel beams up and over the sidewalk shed. One after another, the beams are delivered through a 10-foot-tall hole in the wall that conceals the project.

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