

Time Out

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Picks and plans

Rebuild Times Square, block by block, on your PDA **By Lisa Sweetingham**

If you could remake Times Square anyway you wanted, would you bring back the sex and sleaze of the Square's seedy '70s? Would you banish the grid? Now's your chance to tell the world what you think about the center of the city. PDPal (a.k.a. Personal Digital Pal), a new public art project, aims to inspire New Yorkers to record their perceptions of the district (both real and surreal) by using their PDAs to make personalized maps of the area that can be shared on the Internet.

Three years ago, artist Marina Zurkow started to notice the PDA beaming stations that were cropping up in bus shelters and phone booths around New York City. "Everything was just beaming ads," Zurkow recalls, "and I thought, Can't this be used for something else besides things people don't want—you know, Bear Stearns pie charts and Banana Republic catalogs?" She shared her idea with Carol Stakenas, curator of the nonprofit public arts organization Creative Time, who was also interested in how beaming technology could be used to bring content to the community. But, Zurkow says, "We couldn't get media buyers to entertain the idea of putting anything besides advertising in those beaming stations."



HAND JOB Streetside PDPal beaming stations let armchair cartographers rechart Times Square.

When Zurkow teamed with architect Scott Paterson and technologist Julian Bleecker, they thought up a new kind of cognitive tool, the PDPal application. Artist and flash designer Adam Chapman helped develop a website repository for the maps, and this fall, with the support of Creative Time, Panasonic and the Times Square Business Improvement District, PDPal was launched to invite New Yorkers to chart, among other things, their "emotional coordinates" of the storied district. Users can download the free mapping

program onto their PDAs by logging on at PDPal.com, or by going to one of two beaming stations. (The stations are available until December 12 and are located at 125 West 42nd Street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue, and at a roving kiosk whose current location can be found at PDPal.com.)

Here's how it works: Once you've downloaded PDPal (you'll need Palm OS version 3.5 or higher), a simple street map of the area will appear on your screen. Click on a locale on your map, give it a "rubber stamp" icon (like the symbols you find on real maps, but more playful), name it, and then select attributes and ratings from drop-down lists to describe your empirical landmark. "The map is more so people can capture their visceral experience of Times Square, and less like a MapQuest—'Where is this location and show me a map please,'" says technologist Bleecker. He sees the project as an "experience harvester": It can collect one's representations of a moment or be used to convey the different roles we inhabit as we walk along the streets,

from steadfast worker to wandering dreamer. And the rating system, says architect Paterson, is purely subjective: "Instead of Zagal's, where you give a place a quantitative rating of 7, we wanted people to make more qualitative and idiosyncratic ratings of their experiences."

For instance, say you're standing at 46th Street when you're struck with the memory of a first kiss. Whip out your PDA, click your location on the map, choose a rubber stamp (perhaps a movie-reel icon) and type in a name for your location ("first kiss").

Next, give it a rating by choosing from adverbs on a drop-down list ("lustily"), select an attribute ("bright") and then type your comments in the "annotation" field: "Standing under the bright neon lights of Times Square, reminded of *Sweet Smell of Success*, the movie we were watching when we first kissed." When you HotSync your PDA to your PC or Mac, log on to PDPal.com and upload your map to the PDPal "community," where you can also view and make comments on other users' maps.

So far, the PDPal site has drawn some 45 registered users, whose maps depict anything from random cab rides to personal journals. User "Maggiehopp," for instance, listed her picks of Ninth Avenue eateries; and "Jake B," marked where he saw *The Empire Strikes Back* at age 8, the start of a bike ride home on September 11 at age 28, and the place where he had a "halfway dangerous, three-martini laser-tag game" at age 30.

"I would love to see a group of people redesign Times Square...or a documentary on Times Square through the eyes of its street performers," Zurkow says. "Writing your own city is the process of defining the space as it exists for you." PDPal's creators plan on doing workshops with students from Parsons School of Design and with Glowlab (an independent psychogeography group that studies the effect of physical setting on mood and behavior) in order to facilitate more dynamic, even politically engaging map-making. "We see this as an experiment," Zurkow says. "There's all this potential for urban-planning, urban-studies discourse. A lot of our future plans about the project will depend on what we discover in Times Square."

Ready to make your own map of the Square? Log on to PDPal.com for more information.