



Street life: New York's BID initiative has helped transform the city into one of the safest in the world

The BID Apple

The first business improvement districts are beginning to emerge in the UK, but in New York they are already well established. **Philip Cooke** visits to find out what difference they have made

You couldn't get mugged out there if you tried," says David Billotti, director of public relations for the Times Square Alliance, as we look out over the shopping epicentre of New York. "Crime here is now at an all-time low and everyone has forgotten that ten years ago this place was a hell-hole. We were in big trouble then, but our biggest problems today are some seriously overcrowded streets and more visitors than we can really handle."

I'm in Times Square to learn more about Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), a local environmental regeneration initiative jointly paid for by businesses operating in an area. With the BID idea starting to take off in the UK, the experience of New York holds important lessons for the scheme's success across the Atlantic. What I see here is an important start – a reality check that, although in crisis only a decade or so ago, New York is now probably one of the safest cities in the world.

Visit any BID area in New York today and you will find yourself in an environment that is guaranteed secure and clean, 24/7, because BIDs operate on the very simple premise that it doesn't matter how slick the marketing: if a place is dangerous and dirty, people won't go there, nor will investment.

The number of BIDs in New York is amazing. Most of them are small, every one is different and each offers a range of activities, from place marketing through to visitor management, economic development and physical regeneration.

For instance, the Times Square Alliance (many BIDs are currently being renamed 'Alliances' or 'Partnerships') is a very retail-orientated organisation, focusing on attracting more flagship stores to the area and managing the astronomical numbers of pedestrians that had been drawn there by some very impressive marketing.

Then, to the north of Times Square, is the Lincoln Square BID, which looks after an area containing the Lincoln Centre, the largest complex of performing arts venues in the world. Here they concentrate on achieving peerless levels of cleanliness, safety and what the partnership calls the "beautification" of New York's cultural focal point, and on maximising the potential of the evening economy it generates.

Just a few blocks south of Times Square is the Fashion District BID, essentially an economic development organisation set up to find new economic uses for the many disused 'sweatshop' factory buildings it still contains. Nearly all the 200,000 sewing jobs that were once in New York have now gone, mainly to China, and the Fashion District BID is trying to retain and re-build its single-industry heritage by turning the area into a centre for fashion-orientated education and technology, and studios for young creative designers who can't afford to be on Fifth Avenue.

Meanwhile, in South Manhattan where real estate is a little cheaper, the Union Square Alliance has a BID company that is positioning the area as New York's Kitchen Garden, based on the famous

Union Square Farmers Market. Consequently, this area claims to have the best organic and eco-friendly restaurants in New York and its wholesalers supply produce to all of the city's top hotels.

It soon becomes clear to me that these BIDs are genuine 'bottom up' organisations that grow out of the communities they serve, addressing whatever needs to be done most. New York has become a BID-inspired fusion of small neighbourhoods each with its own unique heritage and identity proudly proclaimed from every flagpole, street sign and trashcan in the district. You certainly know when you're in a New York BID – but it's equally clear when you're not. You can leave a BID area and quickly discover that the other side of the street is not as clean or safe as the one you've just left.

It's also evident from my visit that New York's BIDs are very independent and self-determining. They are managed by directors' boards that are strongly influenced by local property and business interests, because a successful BID will lead to massive local property value increases as it uplifts the local economy and generally improves the neighbourhood. This is confirmed to me when I meet George Glatter, the New York City assistant commissioner for small business services, who is responsible for the developments of BIDs across the whole of the city. George has real concerns about the UK BID legislation, which places the tax burden on BID tenants and not the property owners.

"Who actually pays the BID tax is the key issue," Glatter says in his office near Ground Zero. "In New York it's the property owners and they are happy to do it. If they want to they can pass the assessment [tax] on to their tenants, but they often don't bother because they know that a good BID will increase local property values, sometimes massively. I'm not so sure that your tenants, especially those without long-term security, will be quite so happy to pay the extra tax. To them, it could be seen as just another operational cost and not an investment in their future."

"New York BIDs developed to fill a political vacuum," Glatter adds. "We have a powerful mayor and a strong City Hall, but our borough system is very weak and New York is just too big to manage from the top down. There are nearly 50 BIDs in this city and many have become neighbourhood local authorities by default. Your much stronger local authorities, especially the London boroughs, might feel threatened by this."

"On the other hand, it's really great politics to have extra public services paid for by the private sector, even if they are not as fully engaged in the UK as they are here in New York."

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