



METROPOLIS

The Metropolis Observed



Beyond the Brass Plaque

preservation

A competition elicits artistic ways to identify New York City's lesser-known but culturally significant sites.

The kinds of places that preservation laws are designed to protect—such as brass-plaques of history as Teddy Roosevelt's birthplace and Grand Central Terminal—are of undeniable importance. But throughout New York there are innumerable less visible places, lacking perhaps historical or architectural significance, that are vitally important to the communities that host them.

In 1998 an organization called Place Matters (a partnership between the Municipal Arts Society and City Lore) began reaching out to New Yorkers in an effort to identify the culturally significant places in the five boroughs that have contributed to the city's distinctive character. The results of those efforts have been cataloged in an ever-growing "Census of Places That Matter." To date some 500 sites have been recognized, from the Bohemian Hall and Park in Queens (the last remaining Czech beer garden in the city) to the Brill Building (where songwriting teams like Burt Bacharach and Hal David crafted hit after hit).

Last year Place Matters held a competition, called "Marking Places That Matter," to devise ways—beyond the brass plaque—of calling out the census sites to passersby. "What we were trying for was an informational or artistic system," says Marci Reaven, Place Matters codirector.

"How do we crack the silence of these sites?" The eight finalists, chosen by jury from more than a hundred applicants, took approaches that range from View-Master 3-D installations in construction site fences to paths of colored vinyl taped to the street that guide pedestrians through a typical Lower East Side resident's day.

The latter project, among the strongest of the entries, is part of Urban Vessels, by Gary Stoltz and Adam Lubinsky. They worked with the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and other neighborhood groups to determine what issues were of importance to the community. "We wanted to do something interactive, that had a past, present, and future to it," Lubinsky says. In addition to the pathways, which lead from St. Augustine's Church and wind their way around the neighborhood, Stoltz and Lubinsky conceived of several other components—including a satirical take-out menu distributed in the neighborhood that comments on the area's rapid gentrification. Another element, geared not to visitors but to neighborhood residents, is a playground in the Vladeck Houses (the first public housing project in New York) comprised of movable scale models of that development's buildings on a map of the street grid as it once existed. Bus shelters that convey

By positioning the viewer exactly where the historical photo was taken, "Historic Overlay" makes the past palpable.

aspects of the neighborhood's history are the last facet of their scheme.

One of the competition's more elegant ideas is David Provan's Historic Overlay, a piece of street furniture that displays a historic photo of lost New York. The marker is positioned exactly where the photo was originally taken so the viewer can look through a frame and correlate the city as it is with how it once was. "Standing on the spot where the photograph was taken, the history becomes very tangible, very visceral," Provan says.

Other proposals include ideas such as a postcard dispenser, putting census sites on Metrocards, a cell-phone-accessed audio program, and signage with an iconographic representation of the site (a giant safety pin would mark punk-rock legend CBGB, for example).

The best of the ideas move so far beyond the brass plaque that they lose their ability to serve as a ubiquitous marker suitable for all the varied census sites. But deployed in tandem, the schemes would go a long way toward shedding light on the currently invisible significance of these sites. —Jonathan Ringen

David Provan (Luna Park photo courtesy Brooklyn Historical Society)