

Subway Slum

The sheer bad graphics and classic confusion of subway signs and maps, the atrocious obstacle race of concessions, the wrongheadedness of so many "improvements" make it almost seem as if the whole grotesque thing were put together by vindictive underground gremlins. Well, it's not gremlins; it's the Transit Authority. Even stratified filth (a layer for every administration) and grim cellar lighting fail to obscure the authority's abysmal standards of non-planning and antidesign.

The latest disaster is a thick layer of prisonlike slabs covering BMT station walls, narrowing the already too-narrow, cluttered platforms still more, with the dubious purpose of covering up the old tile for "uniformity" and "improved appearance." Of the original mosaics that have provided a few touches of humanity and New York history in the shabby old stations—beavers at Astor Place, the remnants of genuine graphics and Early Underground style—the T.A. says, "We didn't consider these things had any great artistic merit, anyhow."

The only thing more disturbing than the T.A.'s repeated demonstrations of basic design incompetence is the doggedness with which it clings to its own terrible way of doing things. Better the big-tile boondoggle and penitentiary modernity than soap and water and mastic for repairs when possible. Under pressure, a few cosmetic concessions are given out to pretty up the "decor" of some sample stations—a ludicrous approach to chaos. Other cities have subways that are models of functional order and esthetic sophistication. New York has a subway slum.