

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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A Delightful Walk Downtown

The Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Design—a branch of the Smithsonian Institution in the process of rebirth in the Carnegie Mansion—is not letting its current state of unreadiness keep it from putting on exhibitions. If the visitors can't come to the museum, the museum will go to the visitors, or even to the exhibitions. And that is exactly what it has done in the case of "Immovable Objects," subtitled "An Outdoor Exhibition About City Design On View Throughout Lower Manhattan from Battery Park to Brooklyn Bridge."

This ambitious undertaking is essentially a walking tour of lower Manhattan with the grand idea of making visible not only buildings, streets and artifacts, but the devices and processes that have given that legendary part of the city, with its equally legendary buildings, its familiar form. The intent, in the museum's words, has been to transform the area into an outdoor gallery. The project has been designed by Robert Mangurian of the architecture-design firm of Works, and it has been funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts and over 20 philanthropic and business organizations.

This is an absolutely smashing concept, but as an exhibition it is a fizzle. The display devices do not work. The identifying green and white "ticker tape" that is

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A Walk Among Downtown's Delights

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attached erratically to buildings along the route — evidently not all "exhibits" welcomed it—is singularly unrevealing of its purpose unless one reads the small type and makes some careful deductions.

The exhibition catalogue, a tabloid-size paper sold at local newsstands for 50 cents, is maddeningly helpful. I am probably a dummy, but I found it unusable as a walking tour guide. The only general map, on the back cover, is keyed (I think) to eccentrically placed page numbers at odds with other numbers, and the obscure layout and unreadable type and clues, including buildings standing on their heads as a coy indication of their place on the street, drove me up several Lower Manhattan walls. I have always believed, perhaps innocently, that the purpose of graphic design was to make things clear, or to give measured visual emphasis to an idea or theme. Here the medium is the message, all right, and the game is to try to get it.

This is particularly unfortunate since the editing by Stephen West is both scholarly and valuable, and there are rewarding articles on everything from the development of the skyscraper and an exposition of the city's creative zoning to charming, informative histories of Wall Street and the Woolworth Building. There are surveys of styles and revealing interviews with two of the area's biggest builders and architects. It is excellent art history and journalism although there is no index to anything. Buy it and read it and keep it as reference, but walk bravely on your own. You'll hit the jackpot in any direction.

The failure to organize the area didactically or spotlight its features does not in any way change the impact of one of the most remarkable building conurbations in the world. Nothing alters the fact that Lower Manhattan is an urban spectacular. The area is packed with the 20th century's most characteristic, cosmopolitan architectural drama; it is tough and beautiful and bold and rich. There is quality and a sense of time and place. Its form is the result of accident and plan, of vision and greed; it is an urban design laboratory and a demonstration of laissez faire. It is to be experienced and explored in the same way one visits Florence and Rome. I urge everyone to go. This is the quintessential New York. Even New Yorkers don't knock it.

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Try the South Street Seaport at night—that burgeoning historical enclave that represents a triumph of obstinacy and cunning by New Yorkers, both official and unofficial, who care about their past. Enjoy the unabashed romantic beauty of the jeweled and filigreed Brooklyn Bridge with its massive Gothic Stone towers, the old ships in the river, the lights and sounds of passing craft, and the music or drama of special Seaport events on the piers.

Or join the daytime rhythms of the financial district, an epicenter of commercial vitality that is also a living museum of early 20th-century skyscrapers of incomparable art and style, from palatial lobbies to stepped and gilded spires. Go into those lobbies—Cunard, Woolworth, 60 Wall Tower—for a dazzling display of the arts of decoration and design.

Try shadowed, small streets, for the contrast of 19th-century brick and cast iron; there's not too much left, but it is a revealing record of New York's art and history. And take a moment to mourn something you can no longer see—the Georgian and Greek Revival streetscapes that existed here for well over a century, until they were ruthlessly "renewed" about 10 years ago. The new Water Street, which lost its brick and granite warehouse rows to street widening, now offers I. M. Pei's chaste, white, number 88, one of its better features, and a bleak new Jeanette Park. You can still find the old building functioning on South Street, at least until the Fulton Fish Market moves.

This is the season to see it all, with breezes from the river gentling the austere new plazas and summer sun glinting from glass walls. There used to be dark old bars on Front Street (there used to be a Front Street) in small 1830's houses that were perfect refuges from the heat; today's retreats are less historical.

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In addition to the "immovable objects" of the exhibition there are several small, explanatory shows, strategically placed. And there are guided tours of special features, arranged and arrangeable. The histories of two contrasting blocks are attractively presented at Fraunces Tavern and 1 Liberty Plaza, the one representing a near-unique early 19th-century survival, and the other an exemplar of the speculative building explosion, a story mapped in the rise from land value of pennies a square foot in 1700 to \$500 a square foot in 1974. The city has on exhibit the pioneer urban design work of the Office of Lower Manhattan Development at 55 Water Street, and there are childrens' painting at Federal Hall. The story of "The World's Tallest Building, 1913" is presented at the Woolworth Building.

But for sheer delight, do not miss the ongoing "reconstruction" of Manhattan, a studio project being carried out by Red Grooms and his Ruckus group in visible ground floor quarters at 88 Water Street. There you can watch Lower Manhattan's landmarks being built in cardboard, fabric and wood, all slightly askew—colorful, cockeyed Wall Street towers wear their spires at a gently drunken angle like fancy crowns, the World Trade Center is weighed down crookedly but ingratiatingly by its own banal pretensions, and there is an insouciant, dressmaker confection of a City Hall. When this fantasy-mockery Lower Manhattan is completed next fall the public will be invited to enter it over a rocking recreation of the Staten Island ferry.

Perhaps the unforgivable sin of this troubled city, to outsiders, is its refusal to take itself too seriously. New York, thy name is irreverence and hyperbole. And grandeur.