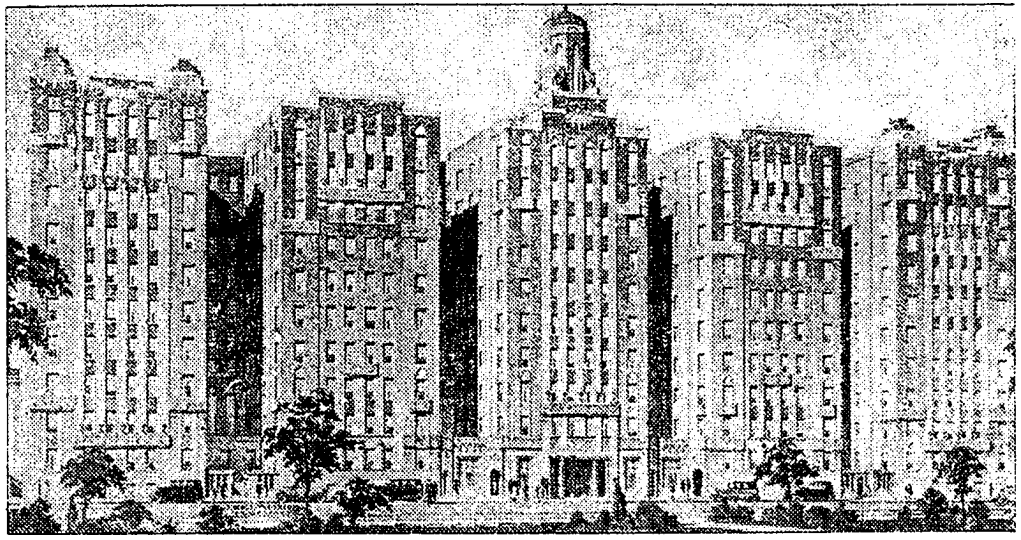
ARCHITECTURE VIEW: THE SUBWAY AND THE SOUTH BRONX ARCHITECTURE VIEW

Huxtable, Ada Louise
New York Times (1923-Current file); Jan 13, 1980; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D25

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Subway and the South Bronx



The South Bronx's Royal Plaza in 1929—"A gruesome history of negative planning impact."

We have started 1980 with the tidy theory that one should begin the new year by closing the books on the old one. Neatness counts; it provides a false, but comforting sense of being on top of things. However, two 1979 events defy this simple treatment, partly because they are still around, in the form of an exhibition and a catalogue, but even more, because they are concerned with subjects that will command our attention this year and far beyond. It is fair to say that both the New York subway system and the South Bronx will be with us for a long time.

An exhibition about the subway system called "Artists and Architects of the New York Subway" was mounted by the New-York Historical Society last year, with the cooperation of the MTA, in honor of the system's Diamond Jubilee. The show will continue through the end of this month at the Society's headquarters at Central Park West and 77th Street, and we hope that a strike by part of the staff will be over by then, for those who have not seen it.

Another exhibition called "Devastation / Resurrection: The South Bronx," put on by the Bronx Museum of the Arts, closes today, but the catalogue by the same name is an important and enduring document that deserves wide circulation.

The subway show commemorates the day in 1904 when top-hatted officials pulled a silver handle made by Tiffany to start the first train from City Hall. Seventy-five years of this particular century is a long time in technological and esthetic terms. The marvel is that the city's subways, decrepit, deteriorated and discredited as they are today, still work as well as they do. But the real marvel is that they were originally built to such high design and engineering standards.

The architects in charge were the illustrious firm of Heims and LaFarge, who were more accustomed to working on cathedrals than on underground train stations. Tiled Guastavino vaults were used to roof over spaces decorated with colorful mosaics and ornate brass trim. The City Hall station (closed in 1945) was described at its opening as "a cool little vaulted city of cream and green earthenware like a German beer stein."

The New York Sun editorialized that the system was "the finest, handsomest, and most complete and best equipped underground railroad in the world." It reached the point where August Belmont, president of the IRT, vetoed a $10,000 solid oak escalator for the 125th Street station as a bit much even for an undertaking of this standard. It was a little "silly," he said, to have woodwork fit for a ballroom.

The price of all this was $35 million, a sum publicized at the time as "the single largest contract in the History of Civilization." The entire process, from contract signing to tunnel digging and dedication, was recorded in photographs, many of which are on display. It would seem that every step of the way was noted or celebrated by formally attired and heavily bearded gentlemen in seated or standing groups, with a little something run up for the occasion by Tiffany. These bibelots are also in the show, from a huge silver tray

Continued on Page 28

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

Continued from Page 25

engraved with scenes of the excavation and a map of the subway to an ornate presentation cup for Mr. Belmont of a gadrooned and festooned opulence that must have made Mr. Belmont's own equine trophies seem piffling by comparison.

The exhibition contains the original architects' drawings as well as all kinds of photographs, past and present; actual samples of esthetic embellishments, plus graphics, souvenirs and memorabilia. But perhaps most fascinating as objects of history and technology, or even just as "found art," is a display of the early engineering equipment, including transformers, motors, and signalling and switching gear of tremendous presence. The archaic, abstract dignity of their shining black paint and gleaming brass and copper makes the intervening 75 years seem more like 7,500. The show is a wonder of nostalgia and near-history. Never has art, technology and society traveled so far, so fast.

The only thing the subway and the South Bronx have in common is their deteriorated state, and the fact that it was the subway that opened the Bronx for intensive development in this century, within an easy ride of the center city. The big difference is that the subway still functions, and an infamous part of the South Bronx does not.

As Robert Jensen, the director and curator of "Devastation/Resurrection: The South Bronx" writes in the catalogue's introduction, the South Bronx is not only the name of a place, but a name for despair. It is a term that began to be used in the context of fires, destruction and rubble in the late 1960's. Today, the South Bronx is used to denote everything south of Fordham Road between the Bronx and Harlem Rivers — a community of more than 20 neighborhoods and about 600,000 people — as many as live within Boston's city limits.

The catalogue is missing only the multi-media effects of the exhibition; it contains the essence of the show, and more importantly, a series of excellently researched and documented essays that should be required reading for everyone in New York, and a few other places, such as Washington, D.C., as well.

Those who worked on the presentation have tried to answer the question that everyone asks, "How did it happen, and why?" And while there are no complete answers, there is a lot to be learned from this material. The South Bronx is an absolutely gruesome history of what might be called negative planning impact. It is a demonstration of how Federal policies — aimed at other objectives — can interact with city politics and social economic, and demographic changes in a vulnerable, older city neighborhood, for an urban disaster of epic proportions.

The litany of those Federal actions that dealt older cities a body blow includes bulldozer urban renewal and its community disruption, the building of highways, and in particular, those carved out of poor, inner-city neighborhoods, and the low-cost, FHA loans that not only created the suburbs but offered the option of escape to white populations.

If the package had been calculated to a job on such marginal, older areas, it could not have succeeded better. And nothing was helped by local housing policies. In addition, the area's instability was accelerated by the city's continuing loss of entry-level jobs and small businesses and industries coupled with the large Puerto Rican inmigration and shifting black neighborhoods. Poverty became entrenched, and mobility became flight.

The decline of building stock through deterioration and abandonment to rubble-strewn lots is explained and summarized in two of the catalogue's most compelling and disturbing pages. But the most nightmarish reading of all is the unbelievable, and not untypical, case history of the destruction of Roosevelt Gardens, one of the Grand Concourse's finest housing complexes of the 1920's. This factual account details the most unscrupulous and inhuman kind of real estate exploitation, from deliberate neglect to dummy transfers to avoid taxes and outright non-payment of taxes, with deliberate, rapid tenant turnover in favor of the city's finder's fees and higher rent payments for welfare clients, many of whom had severe social pathologies.

One even learns a common South Bronx phrase, applied to the final purchasers who give such a building its coup de grace. They strip out and sell anything left of marketable value before the arsonists come — if owners as attractive in their management practices as the owners of Roosevelt Gardens have not brought in the arsonists first. They are called the "finishers."

Unfortunately, the lessons of cause and effect of the South Bronx seem to have been lost on City Hall. No premium is being set on the necessary planning ability to deal with these problems by this administration; the city's once-expert, innovative planning agencies have not only been allowed to fall apart, they have been downgraded and demoralized by political gamesmanship. A dangerous planning vacuum exists, in which no one has the understanding or vision, or equipment, to deal professionally or constructively with the enduring physical effects of policy decisions. In the end, the politicans are the finishers. ■