

The City Under the Manhole Covers

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When that water main broke and flooded the Brooklyn Academy of Music last week it left sodden costumes, soaked sets, and \$1 million worth of damage. It was also a muddy reminder of the city's antique infrastructure—the world of pipes and conduits that make up New York's underground life support systems. The Academy, or BAM, is a 19th-century landmark that has been painstakingly restored in recent years to become a lively focus of the city's culture. It will need all the help that it can get now, from all its friends, to open its scheduled fall season. Eighteen feet of dirty water was not part of the scenario.

If the Academy building is a vintage item, so is the subsurface network that serves it, although no one has designated it as a landmark yet. The failure of the water main is simply diagnosed: it was very old. Its cutoff valve was so stiff with age that it could barely be turned. It was even hard to find.

Above ground, New York is a 20th-century city, or

likes to think of itself that way. Below ground, it is a 19th-century city, with water lines and electrical systems that were designed for a much younger metropolis. Look down, and there are the intricate iron patterns of old manhole covers that are a directory of Victorian ornament. Out of those trapdoors of the netherworld come clouds of billowing steam that suggest the city's explosive vitality to surprised visitors. Explosive antiquity would be more accurate. Look up, to towering glass and steel, and the anachronism becomes acute.

Theoretically, everything beneath the surface of the streets should be replaced. Practically, it can never be done. And so New Yorkers will continue to live with the construction roulette of random holes and the unscheduled music of jackhammer quartets, as services break down, and are endlessly patched and repatched. Some kind of crazy odds seem to hold it all together in reasonable working order. That is also a good definition of New York.

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