

## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# Games Gnomes Play With the Urban Landscape

**T**he gnomes are busy in and around New York again. Gnomes, in the modern definition, are creatures specializing in acts of perverse illogic or malevolent nonsense that result in situations of consummate absurdity in which the rest of us are trapped. They are particularly active in official circles. Gnomes, for example, had the dandy idea a few years ago of widening Fifth Avenue by cutting back the park side in order to speed traffic; when the outcry started they crawled right back under their manhole covers. Really professional gnomes would have gotten the job done when no one was looking; they usually deal in the sneaky *fait accompli*.

Gnomes are responsible for removing all those nice old blue and white enamel street signs that carried both street and avenue identification on each side, replacing them at random with ugly yellow signs that read on one side only and look as if they had been lettered by, well, gnomes. It is part of their technique to see that an unpredictable and irritating number of street corners remain totally anonymous.

Halloween week, not surprisingly, turned out to be a good one for gnomes. It was trick or treat on the Governor Thomas E. Dewey Thruway. Assemblyman John A. Esposito complained to the Thruway Authority that the Hot Shoppes kept their curtains drawn, encouraging "funeral parlor atmosphere" and blocking out the fall foliage. Gnomes always draw curtains where there are views. That is one of the first laws of gnomery. The Thruway Authority then ordered the restaurants to open the curtains so the customers could enjoy the autumn leaves with their snacks. Rest assured, the curtains will be pulled shut again.

I have always known that gnomes design all thruway restaurants anyway; no one else would be clever enough to select just those fixtures, fabrics and colors that



Drawing by Edward Koren

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are such a perfect combination of the dreary and the ordinary that everything is reduced unerringly to the same hokey-deadly, bargain-basement décor. Real people couldn't possibly be responsible. There will never be any escape from the standard vista of mechanical folds of horrid cloth, whatever cerulean sky or autumnal hills may glow beyond. And of course, there are gnomes in some central commissary creating food to match.

In the same week, back in midtown Manhattan, a mural appeared on the naked walls next to the spot where the Franklin Savings Bank razed a good old building at Eighth Avenue and 42d Street. It appears to be a Mural with a Message. I don't know what the message is, but this mural clearly has one or it couldn't be quite so belligerently unpleasant. In the general messiness of the area, it is not clear whether the Bar-B-Q and Parking signs are part of it. But to give credit for obvious good intentions—it is the work of some fine people called the City Arts Workshop—it is undoubtedly meant to heal the demolition wound.

What it replaces, sort of, is a building of notable—  
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I'm afraid I must say considerably more notable—artistic quality. What hit the blacktop was a superior classical Beaux Arts structure with museum-worthy sculptured bronze doors and solid detail and trim. Where it once stood is now a parking lot, a dubious urban and esthetic achievement that gives the bank a less-than-civic-spirited image and a tax break. Meanwhile, at the Museum of Modern Art, there is a big exhibition of Beaux Arts buildings. There is also an Architectural League guide to the city's Beaux Arts landmarks, but it does not list Beaux Arts blacktops. I don't say the gnomes worked out this scenario consciously—although there are gnomes making tax laws and sitting on bank boards, and the destructive nonsense involved is disheartening. But as a gesture to art and the city, the irony of this mural is profound

And then there is the matter of the city's litter baskets, those 500-pound concrete bombs (esthetically and functionally) that were supposed to advance street cleanliness and curb vandalism while carrying a rainbow of profitable advertising on their sides. At last and final count—they are being phased out, although one wonders, with manpower cuts, who will be left to carry them away—the city had collected \$635. And the streets have collected 2,200 of these blockbusters in assorted stages of visual pollution. The holes for trash were too small, the tops rusted while the bases became stained and discolored, the trash piled up and overflowed and the ads failed to materialize. It was a devilishly ingenious, pre-tested debacle.

Taxi-top ads are supposed to be another bonanza. Inevitably, the assault on the environment becomes a reality, but the bonanza doesn't. What we have now is

taxis with pointy heads. New York's basket-case cabs, notable for their advanced condition of unsanitary decay, have been topped by Rube Goldberg. It must have been hard to find an act to follow those hand-cobbled interior partitions behind which New Yorkers crouch on broken seats in coffin-like gloom. They are surely produced by Dr. Caligari or the cottage industries of some early-Triassic culture—or gnomes.

Not to be outdone, the MTA has cleverly added billboards to the exit structures of subways; very effective, of course, because they get everyone right in the eye at the moment of re-entry into the city's streets. In response to public protest, a few have been removed where they blocked views of Central Park. (Remember gnomic law number one.) But the rest are at best visual trauma, at worst a legal violation of historic districts and an invitation to mugging. The environmental sabotage is far greater than any dent that can be made in the MTA deficit. This is nickel and dime vandalism, and there are reports that the MTA is now doubling its efforts.

At Rockefeller Center, a lease on a 19th-century building with an old bar has not been renewed so that a lease could be given to someone else who will reconstruct it to turn the real 19th-century building and the real old bar into a phony 19th-century building and a phony old bar. This is happening at Hurley's, a landmark watering place of honest mien and little pretension, where a no-frills bar has existed continuously since the construction of the building around 1870. It even held out successfully as Rockefeller Center was built around it. The new lessee is going to turn it into a "real old-fashioned 19th-century tavern" with gas lamps and gismos and instant ersatz nostalgia. Absurdity is destiny in New York. At least we can laugh while we cry all the way to default.



"Gnomes designed these 500-pound concrete litter baskets."