ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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# An Underground Show Devoted to Subway Design

It's a natural—a subways exhibition in the subway—a rare example of sterling logic combining art, information and the appropriate audience. Most of the people looking at "Subways: An Underground Exhibition," a display open 24 hours a day on the mezzanine level of the subway station at 42d Street and Sixth Avenue through Feb. 28th, have either just gotten off, or are getting on, a subway train. For others, the price of admission is a token, and it is a token well spent.

The neat, compact show, sponsored by the Cooper-Hewitt Museum and funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Urban Mass Transportation Administration, consists of a series of photographs and diagrams of outstanding subway systems in 13 cities—Boston, London, Mexico City, Montreal, Moscow, Munich, New York, Paris, San Francisco, Stockholm, Tokyo, Vienna and Washington. The installation of the pictures and their readable text, mounted in a lighted metal frame in the center of the concourse, has been designed by Samuel Lebowitz; project coordination and research is by Lucy Fellowes of the Cooper-Hewitt staff. An excellent catalogue in the form of a tabloid with essays by experts on design, cities and transportation, has been edited by Peter Blake.

Everything about the show is good: the idea and execution, the succinct and lively presentation, the quality of the pictures, the brevity and interest of the exhibition text supplemented by the greater range of the catalogue, the impact of the messages about transportation and urban design—but above all, the place, and the proximity of the real thing. People are seeing this show—all kinds of people. Spectators come and go to the rhythm of train arrivals and departures; they are obviously interested, and involved, with the theme.

"Subways" is an example of what I hesitate to call, for fear of accusations of exaggeration, the genius of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, in carrying out its self-imposed mandate as the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design—"to present issues of design in the public environment."

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This is the Cooper-Hewitt's second "Immovable Objects" show, which not only presents those issues, but presents them *in situ*, as actual, first-hand displays of the design topic under inspection. You are there—in a way that the age of the medium as the message cannot begin to simulate; nothing can substitute for the direct experience of the subject and its setting.

The first of the "Immovable Objects" shows involved an entire section of New York; it apotheosized Lower Manhattan by using signs, banners, walking-tour guides, and street and lobby displays to explain the art and design of the environment in terms of that unique urban place.

At the time, the Cooper-Hewitt was in the process of remodeling its new quarters in the Carnegie Mansion at Fifth Avenue and 91st Street, and without a home, it literally took to the streets. The result was an extraordinary consciousness-raising show through the direct involvement of the viewer with the objects being celebrated. "Subways" is another consciousness-raiser. And if there is less to celebrate here, there is just as much to learn.

There are, of course, many fascinating facts in the presentation. Rapid transit, worldwide, serves a combined urban population of some 150 million people. There are subways in 50 cities, and 13 more have subways in construction now. New York has the biggest subway system in the world: 6,674 cars, 827 miles of track, 458 stations. The newest tunnel technology used in Austria and Japan cuts through rock like cheese.

Stockholm's most recent line is blasted out of two-billion-year-old granite, and these "cave" stations, 65 to 100 feet underground, are dramatized by "cave" paintings and sculptures, suggesting primitive and prehistoric art. Rome's arched corridors recall Piranesi, and Washington's modern Metro evokes Roman coffered vaults. The 19th-century designs of Hector Guimard's Art Nouveau stations in Paris and Otto Wagner's early modern stations in Vienna are landmarks today.

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There are two approaches to subway design: art-in-the-subway, and technology as style. In Paris, the Louvre station features museum reproductions, and in Mexico City, the Palace of Fine Arts stop displays Aztec sculptures uncovered during subway construction, which produced an archeological bonanza. (Some Roman lines have never been completed because of laws protecting archeological remains.) Montreal has a series of stations devoted to individual design themes, enriched by art and crafts.

The use of decorative images, however, while capable of creating warmth and interest underground, is essentially cosmetic, and is no substitute for the kind of basic design that deals with all of the system's parts for a creative solution applicable to the subway as a whole. This is being done, with conspicuous success, for the new Red Line, or U-Bahn, in Vienna, by a consortium of architects produced by an international competition—Holzbauer, Marschalek, Ladstatter and Gantar. Metal and plastic interchangeable panels, prefabricated elements and standardized furnishings have been designed with great finesse. They endow the subway with sleek drama, in stylish red and white, for a stunning, pared-down esthetic. This is the kind of coordinated solution of all of the system's elements that subway design should emphasize, above all.

Older subways are currently being modernized in many cities. Since the 1960's, Boston has been upgrading what is essentially a trolley-and-tunnel system (73 miles, 44 stations) which now ranges from Toonerville relics to suave new cars and unified station design by an excellent architectural firm, the Cambridge Seven. London is involved in a $1-billion, 20-year modernization program. New York has spent $2 billion on its 75-year-old system since World War II, with substantial Federal grants now coming on a yearly basis. (The current debate about Westway, the proposed replacement for Manhattan's West Side Highway, centers around the proposition that highway funds should be committed to mass transit improvement. The ideal solution is a balanced road, transit and development program.)

There is a very large question never raised by this show, however, and that is whether these beautiful new subways are the end of the line. Fixed rail transit has become enormously costly, even with technological advances; the economics cannot be justified in terms of passenger load except for the most concentrated urban corridors. And today's older cities, in deep financial trouble, face not only deteriorated systems but also soaring deficits. The exhibition never tells us why or how other countries and cities can build so handsomely now.

The contrasts with New York are obvious, constant and painful. As one viewer-and-subway-user put it, loudly and almost cheerfully, "New York is the sewer of the world." But that does not explain why the design standards of its station improvements, with the exception of incompletely installed new graphics by Massimo Vignelli, are so uninspired that they make graffiti seem creative by comparison, or from what subterranean reaches that design policy comes. There is something to ponder when you miss your next train. ■