

# Sabotaging Fifth Avenue

There is sound reason—and sad experience—to believe that scuttling through New York City's vast bureaucracy is a legion of gnomes charged with widening streets, narrowing sidewalks, cutting down trees, bunching buses and making expressways of residential avenues. When they are not busy with these more serious activities, they spend their time removing street signs semi-permanently and playing traffic roulette with bus stops.

Right now, they are really doing their thing. Because the Highways Department is about to start the badly needed repaving of Fifth Avenue, the gnomes of the Traffic Department propose to widen this unique thoroughfare from 93d to 109th Streets, lopping off sidewalks as well as removing several hundred unfortunate trees that happen to be in the way, including some that have stood for more than a century. The objective is to make Fifth Avenue a thruway, sacrificing both trees and the park-edge promenade to the express buses that in recent years have proliferated seemingly without control.

The first gnomonic law is that this outrage is to be inflicted where it will do the most damage and attract the least attention, at the upper end of the avenue, so that the second gnomonic law can follow, which is that once you have your foot in the asphalt you finish what you have started. Any experienced gnome-watcher knows that the next step is from 93d Street south.

The third gnomonic law is that it is essential that such projects be totally illogical. There is no time like a gas shortage with an uncertain traffic and transportation future to widen Fifth Avenue, if it were desirable to widen Fifth Avenue under any circumstances, which it is not. And there is no time like springtime to narrow the park walk—one of the most useful, and used, parts of Central Park—when all New York emerges to enjoy it as a favorite pedestrian promenade.

To consider destroying one of the city's historic amenities for an express bus system that ought to be largely rerouted anyway is an act of criminal sabotage. Even if the bus program did not desperately need restudying, which it does, it would surely be simpler to enforce a ban on parkside standing and parking, and building-side double parking than to dig up the sidewalks, chop down trees and turn a great boulevard into a concrete sluice.