

No Exit?

The 78th Street block between Lexington and Third is one of New York's best in terms of the city's rapidly diminishing history and style. It has what it is the current fashion to call "environmental amenities." Lined with trees and continuous, handsome, small-scale houses including designated landmarks, this is the kind of street that is an asset to the total city. But it is also the street that the city has selected for a badly needed power installation for the Lexington Avenue subway.

There were other choices, but the decision was based purely on expediency; 78th Street was the halfway point on a map between uptown and downtown power stations and there were fewer subsurface utilities to contend with than on the neighboring blocks. No environmental considerations were weighed. At this point everyone involved in the decision knows that a mistake has been made. The 78th Street residents have been engaged in a nine-month obstacle race from city agency to agency only to find what others have learned before: Nothing short of a miracle can undo a municipal error; it simply hardens with time.

The city "regrets," and with Alice-in-Wonderland logic points to the nine-month delay and a good deal of money spent on wrong plans—a cost the residents have offered to defray. Officials admit there is danger to the houses. But they also warn of a power-failure possibility on the subway if the installation is further delayed.

It is obvious, and inexcusable, that the environmental factor has still not been plugged into the city's decision-making process. Now the Transit Authority's hope is to return the street to something like its present condition—with luck—but there are no guarantees. The city's philosophy seems to be: when in doubt, do. The increasingly desolate streets of New York, like the infernal regions below them, are paved with good intentions.