



manhattan's

little

secrets

Uncovering Mysteries
in Brick and Mortar,
Glass and Stone

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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Introduction

I am not a philosopher by nature. I like things that are concrete, which is why I like New York City. Now here's the rub: While I like to think that New York is a concrete thing, it isn't. It is a living thing, and like any healthy organism, old cells die off, to be replaced by new ones. That fact, of course, is part of the city's mystery, its mystique, and a large part of my discomfort.

The city is here today, and although it won't necessarily be gone tomorrow, it will be different. It's called progress.

This progress makes it difficult to write a book on the contemporary city. In the relatively short time since I started working on this book, some subjects that I had hoped to include have already disappeared. Gone is the building at 29 West 57th Street that included the Cross of the Legion of Honor on its rooftop, there to honor the Chickering Piano Company. The Frank Lloyd Wright Jaguar showroom at 430 Park Avenue is gone. And as good as gone is a poster painted on a wall on Lexington Avenue and 135th Street that reminded us that all cars—meaning streetcars—transferred for Bloomingdale's. It was there until someone whitewashed it into oblivion. And the already-faded sign heralding the presence of Macy's on 14th Street just east of Sixth Avenue, like the old soldier it was, just faded away.

Another problem presented by the ever-changing cityscape was the ability to photograph all the subjects. In the summer of 2017, thousands of buildings in the city were covered in scaffolding. The result is that wonderful subjects such as the Tammany Hall on Union Square East, which was enshrouded, fell by the metaphorical wayside. The Breese town house on West 16th Street was covered, but its next-door twin was pristine, so our photographer, Kathy Gerhardt, shot the neighbor in the foreground.

The good news is that there is still plenty of stuff of interest to see and enjoy, and I hope that I lead you on a merry chase. Running the risk of the pathetic fallacy and ascribing feelings to inanimate objects, the stuff is sitting there just waiting to be discovered, like the aspiring actress at Schwab's Drug Store on Sunset Strip in Los Angeles.

Only a Little Out of Context

110 Greene Street, between Spring and Prince Streets

At first it appears to be an abstract landscape, but upon second look it is a very familiar landscape to the average New Yorker. Even after you've figured it out, it still comes as a surprise to find an art installation, *A Subway Map Floating on A New York Sidewalk*, actually floating on a New York sidewalk.

Instead of ink on paper, you find stainless-steel tracks on terrazzo, and serving as station indicators, you find vault lights. Vault lights are thick, round pieces of glass set into cast-iron frames that light the vaults below, and they represent SoHo, New York's great neighborhood of cast-iron.

The artist who created this subway map is the Belgium-born **Francoise Schein**, who was only 27 and a recent graduate of Columbia's School of Architecture with her master's in Urban Design when she accomplished the task in 1985. **Schein** intentionally chose the vault lights to mark the stations because they were traditionally in the sidewalks of SoHo, as you might have seen in the bottom left-hand corner of the photo of 465 Broome Street. **Schein** included vault lights in the hope of resuscitating the local building practice. The use of vault lights was practical, and it was not exclusively limited to semi-industrial SoHo—some subway stations such as Bleecker Street had originally had vault lights lighting the platforms, and the practice is beginning to return. Updated vault lights now light a passageway for the underground promenade at Rockefeller Center, for instance.

The use of vault lights was the architectural-preservationist side of **Schein**. Her intellectual side had her thinking of the city as a giant integrated circuit, with people the electrons moving on a giant map, and a map on the sidewalk synthesized the idea.

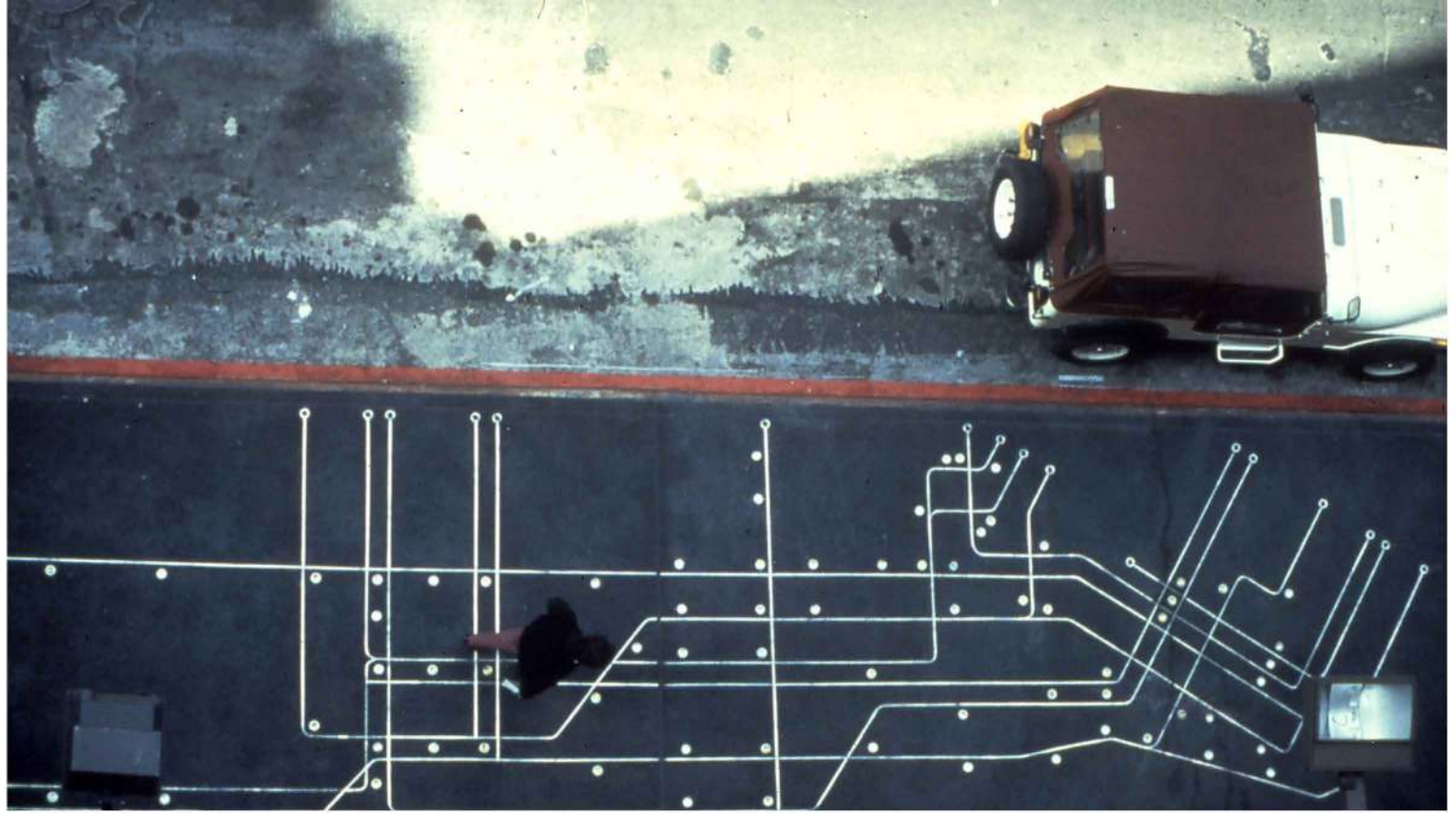
If you know anything about dealing with a large city's bureaucracy, you'll understand that Schein's accomplishment was literally much greater than the sum of the parts required for the design and installation of an imaginative work of art.

The first hurdle to clear was the quasi-governmental local community board. The project was being commissioned by Tony Goldman, who owned the property and was one of the leading preservationist-owners in the neighborhood. The board welcomed the idea.

Then, because the map would be in a sidewalk in an Historic District, came the Landmarks Preservation Commission, and a higher hurdle. One question a commissioner posed was why a major site in the center of SoHo should be given to a young, unknown artist when the likes of Richard Serra lived nearby. Another commissioner did not like the piece because it lacked a frame. A third considered it dangerous, a potential hazard. One by one, the objections fizzled.

Next came the Department of Transportation, and **Schein** had a race ahead of her that combined the high hurdles and a marathon. The department had no idea how to define this particularly strange object, and they asked **Schein** to put all the technical information in the form of an architect's plans. If she had been just a plain old artist, she would have been stopped cold, but the trained architect in her drew the plans to the department's specifications. A year later, permission was granted.

For **Schein**, the subway map is her homage to the city, her present to New York. And, after all the stumbling blocks that the bureaucracy had thrown in her way, one city department saw the light. In 1986, about six months after the opening, **Schein** received a letter from the office of Mayor Edward I. Koch revealing that The New York City Art Commission had presented the project with an "Award for Excellence in Design."



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Pequot

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