

THE FLOATING MAP ON GREENE STREET

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110 Greene Street

• Transport: N and R trains/Prince St



**Milling
ants
or electrons**

There's an alien scrawl in the sidewalk of Greene Street that takes a moment to puzzle out. At first it would seem to be a blown-up flowchart or circuit board, and these guesses are close to the mark. The stainless-steel pattern is a work of urban art by Belgian artist and architect Françoise Schein, and has long held the title of New York City's largest subway map.

"My life as an artist began," says Schein in her project notes, "on a sidewalk in SoHo." The artist had come to New York in 1978 to study urban design at Columbia. Immersed in the literature of mathematics and the dawning information age, she became bewitched by the brute force of New York transit. "This subway fascinated me: its filth, its life, its graffiti, the millions of travelers who used it every day like milling ants or electrons in a computer..." She had a creative flash flying into New York, watching from the jet window as the city's strings of lights approached: it was like plunging into an enormous microchip.

Schein would get the chance to translate these impressions into work when real-estate developer Tony Goldman asked her in 1984 what she would do with the sidewalk in front of his building on Greene Street. Schein proposed a project called *Subway Map Floating on a New York Sidewalk*; Goldman immediately answered: "I'm buying it."

Illustrating the New York tenet that no one ever got anywhere by being timid, Schein spent the next year presenting her map to a jury of the SoHo community board; she then had to endure the mocking eye of the Department of Transportation officer, who made the young architect in tee-shirt and tennis shoes return dozens of times to explain why New York needed a gigantic puzzle of urban philosophy underfoot. Once the map was approved, Schein got to work cutting and welding stainless steel, pouring terrazzo, blowing her own glass for the station roundels. The finished project earned her the 1985 Award for Excellence in Design from Mayor Koch. Schein went on to make a niche of urban art in subways, with works in Lisbon, Brussels, Berlin, Paris, and Stockholm.