

Notes From Underground

A conceptual artist with a thing for rivets is turning Union Square station into an homage to infrastructure. It's up to you to make the train on time.

TO MARY MISS, THE SUBWAY STATION AT UNION SQUARE is not merely a clammy expanse of concrete to be traversed at a brisk pace but a building as rich with detail and significance as the palace at Versailles. "I must say that I think the station is fabulous," declares Miss, a conceptual artist best known for the sinuous waterfront structures she devised for Battery Park City's South Cove, a tranquil enclave at the end of the esplanade. "It's like a maze," she observes happily. "It's like you're lost in this turn-of-the-century industrial building."

One day in early December, Mary Miss and I visit the station during the evening rush. As we descend the steps to the L-train platform, over the noise of crowds, trains, and a folk musician trilling about love, Miss shouts, "Look at these rivets!" She points to the thick metal knobs that hold the ceiling girders in place. With great difficulty, I trail Miss along packed platforms, through passageways, and up and down stairs as she waxes poetic about the things that lie beneath the surface of the city. "There's a potency in these places," she says.

Miss, you see, is a fiend for infrastructure. When not working on her art pieces, usually subtle marriages of landscape and man-made structures—recent projects include a demonstration wetlands in Des Moines and a viewing area for the La Brea Tar Pits—she travels the world photographing fences, staircases, and walls.

Miss is a key player in the renovation of the Union Square station, probably the most intensive collaboration between artist, architect, and engineer in the subway system since the first years of the century, when the firm of Heinz and LaFarge filled New York's original IRT stations with mosaics and friezes. For two and a half years, Miss has worked on a 113-element, \$280,000 design that will be both an integral part of the renovated station and a commentary on its history.

Below ground, Union Square is a disjointed collection of corridors and stairways linking three subway stations from different eras: the 1904 IRT stop, the 1918 Broadway BMT

station, and the 1930 station for the Canarsie Line of the BMT. The décor is a patchwork of 90-plus years of good (and often misplaced) intentions, a collage of old ceramic tiles, linoleum, stainless steel, and half a dozen shades of gum-mottled cement. And the construction that's been going on since 1994 (and will continue until 1998) makes one of New York's most confusing subway stations seem even more illogical and intolerable.

The mission of architect Lee Harris Pomeroy is to make the station less of a maze. His plan will create a hub for the three subway lines at the southeast corner of the station, from which riders can find clear paths to the different trains. To visually unite the three branches of the station, Pomeroy is making the mezzanine areas polar-bear-in-snowstorm white. They'll be trimmed with a frieze of terracotta tiles: white tiles, white background.

While the mosaics that still exist on the Canarsie and Broadway platforms will be restored and preserved, elsewhere Miss is acting as a sort of postmodern graffiti artist, tagging the seamless new surfaces with bold references to the station's old ornamentation and infrastructure. Inspired, for example, by the orange lines that engineers paint on station floors and walls to point out spots where damage needs to be repaired, she translated them into fire-engine-red steel frames in various shapes—a device to catch the eye of a notoriously inattentive audience.

At regular intervals, slim, vertical red-framed "windows" or wall slots will allow riders the illusion of being able to peer inside the walls of the station to see structural elements—electrical cables or rivets—or will call attention to fading mosaics. But the most dramatic area will be

above the IRT tracks, where a wall decorated with the last six Heinz and LaFarge ceramic eagles, a long-hidden fragment of a platform abandoned for 30 years, will be treated like a relic of Pompeii, illuminated and surrounded by a giant red frame.

Today, if you go down the newly reopened entrance on the south side of 14th Street in front of Bradlees, you will see a preview of the completed renovation, a cool, clean white space where four of Miss's red frames have been mounted.



The illusion of looking through walls: Mary Miss with one of her windows on the inner world of Union Square station.

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One of them surrounds a conspicuously unrestored strip of mosaic, as if it were an archeological find. Then there are two of the vertical wall slots. Peer into one and you'll see yourself reflected in a mirror, as well as a black-and-white photo of the cables that run through the walls. The effect is like peeking into a very sophisticated kaleidoscope, with the images repeatedly reflected and the depth of the box distorted. Each of the 35 wall slots that will eventually be installed throughout the station will contain different images.

"I decided to use mirrors," Miss explains, "because everybody likes to check themselves out. Once you get there and are engaged just slightly, then you see these other things."

The Union Square station, with its hidden passageways, is like a structure that Miss might have built herself. By the late seventies, she had moved from fashioning simple sculptures of wood or rope to constructing large works that people could explore.

One, built in 1977 on the grounds of Long Island's Nassau County Museum, included an underground courtyard that visitors reached by climbing through a small square hole and down a ladder. Below the museum's lawn, Miss concealed a vast room. "You can't tell how far back the excavation extends because of the darkness, so you don't know how far the ground you originally walked across is undermined," Miss wrote about that work. "I think it interesting all of a sudden to be unsure of the limits of a space."

The quirky things Mary Miss loves about the Union Square station—the curve in the IRT track that demands the use of clunky mechanical "gap-fillers" between the trains and the platform, the multiple levels of the station, the meandering passageways—are the same things the engineers and architects are struggling to correct. Still, Pomeroy insists that the architectural renovation is not at odds with the work of the artist. And, curiously, it's true: Though Miss's red rectangles are like gashes in Pomeroy's smooth white fabric, to the viewer, the artist's salvage work is what makes the architect's otherwise monotonous facelift palatable.

And vice versa. Pomeroy's expanses of white space are the perfect backdrop for Miss's fragments. Together, the artist and architect have concocted a visually potent, nostalgia-free way to bring the past into the future. ■