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Incidental Architecture

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Among the elements that tell us about a place—the forms of architecture, the shape of the sky and the character of incidental things—it is the character of incidental things about which cities can do most and whose impact we understand least.

Incidental means a chance or unde-signed feature, something casual, hence minor, of secondary importance. It also refers to an incident, a chance event. Incidental architecture consists of the expressions, gestures and touches that inform us about what a place is like. It is both incidental to buildings and infrastructure and a happening—an object in space and an act in time.

Little of incidental architecture is permanent. It is around for just a while—put there, moved around, taken down, or left to tatter. But while it is there, it tells us who has been by, the way things are done and the kind of care that's been given. It is the conversation, tone, or voice of a place.

Incidental architecture is signs and banners and “public art.” It is fences, flowerpots and checkered table cloths; window curtains, mailboxes and trash; cars and vendors and the sounds of each; and the smell of urine, washed pavements and coffee.

Collected by habit and happen-stance, molded by culture and sculpted by rules, this undefined, unnoticed stuff of city life has, overtly and subliminally, an overwhelming effect on everything from how we feel about where we are to how we feel at all.

We spend most of our time as professionals creating the buildings and the infrastructure of our cities. Yet most of the sense or feeling of the city comes from incidental things that just happen—seemingly without intention, but with far more impact than most of the architecture to which these things are incidental.

What we plan and design—the facades, the bulk, the surfaces and detail—is the armature on which the sensory life of the city is built. Like an armature, our architecture succeeds or fails on its ability to support this stuff of life, not by cleaning it up and putting it away but by knowing what it is, understanding how it works and setting a place that makes room for it to happen.

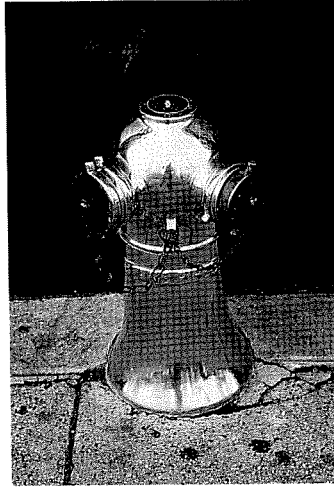
Shop signs for “specials,” posted announcements, flags, balloons and graffiti all speak about our daily tasks, our elation and our discontent. Even garbage waiting for pick up tells us what's being done, who cares and the way they live.

The accompanying photos show ordinary visual moments in an ordinary day in an attempt to reconstruct what we sense around us. Not what we think we ought to have sensed, nor things that we think should be meaningful—but what is actually out there. Most of the shots were taken in Manhattan on a single day by me or my associate Andy Johnston. They show how one would ordinarily see the street, but without the eye or the instinct of a “trained” observer who might look beyond all the clutter and activity to the architecture, thus missing what is really there.

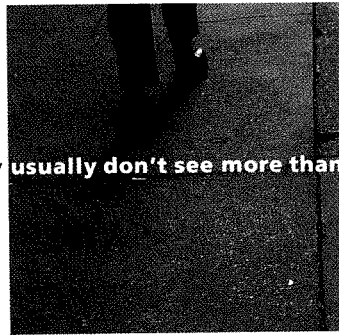
Clearly, what we find in our lively, scruffy New York has no relation to what exists in more sanitized communities. But the concept of incidental architecture as reflections of habit, culture and rules applies anywhere.

The sooner we acknowledge it as a significant continuing part of our environment and as vital and articulate communication, the sooner we'll build to support it for all of us to enjoy.

Then there is the intended incidental architecture—officially recognized street furniture—but often so anthropomorphically expressive.



Most people are not trained observers, they usually don't see more than the sidewalk—the New Yorker's horizon.



Few things tell as much about ourselves as trash we leave around.

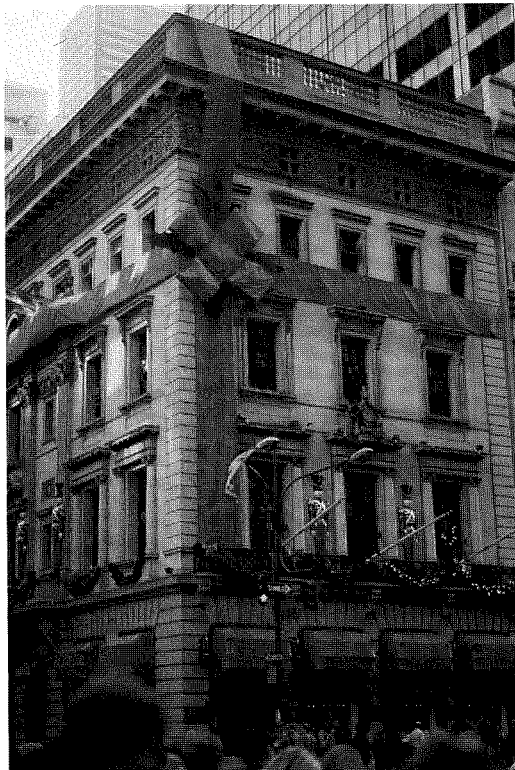


Photos by Stuart Pertz and Andy Johnston.



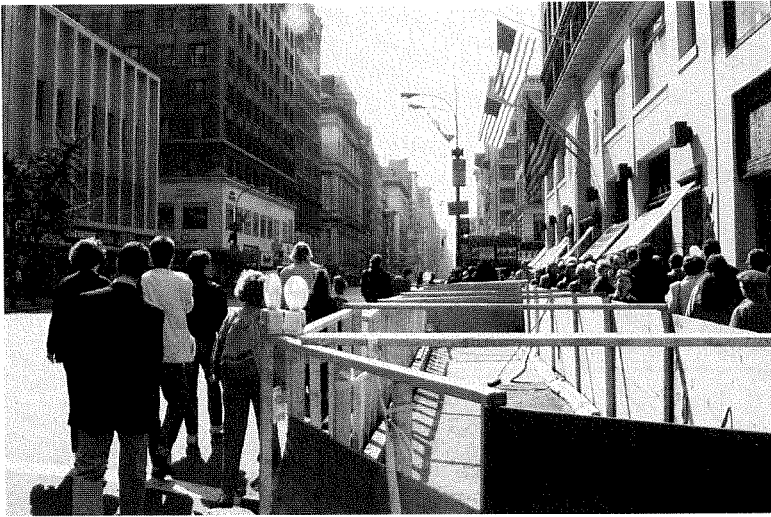


Sights, sounds, smells and sidewalk activity inform us about where we are. Our response depends upon . . .



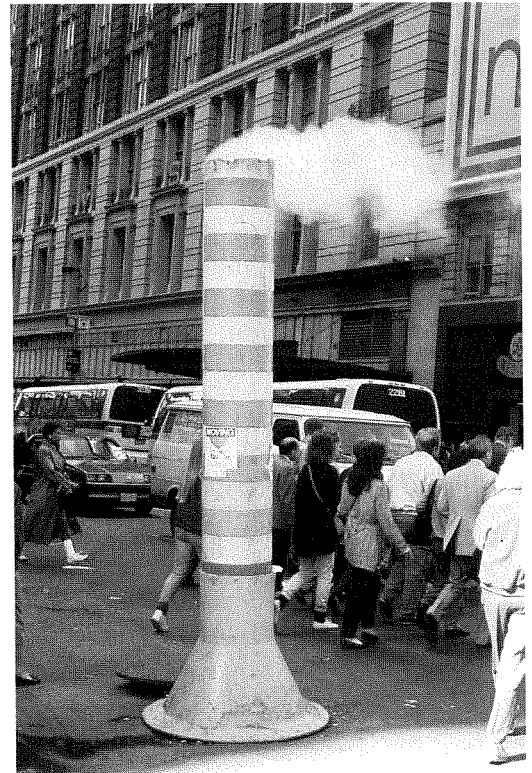
And then there are signs that say something — with words, or without them — Hey! Look at me! I'm here!!





We all assume construction is a temporary phenomenon—a momentary adjustment until we're fixed or finished. Not so. We are permanently in con-

struction, and the sooner we recognize it the sooner we will make it a less intrusive and more responsible part of our street life.



... how closely we can or must identify with the things we experience. Who we are matters: stranger, visitor, denizen.



Some incidents are quite contrived—parades, street fairs and block parties where the choreography of the crowd is the incident.

