

DESIGN YEAR IN

the "100" show

the
eighteenth annual of
the american
center for design



Figure 1. Manhattan 96th Street subway station mosaic designed by Laura Bradley. *Courtesy, MTA Arts for Transit.*
Photo: Mike Kamber

Forward Furniture

susan
yelavich

When I was first asked to think about the three most important artifacts of 1995, I realized that my own product epiphanies would be of little use. The fact that I am still reveling in the new freedoms acquired with my first cordless phone and dishwasher last year seemed only to illustrate the time lag between invention and consumption – say, a decade or two, for a family somewhere in the middle of the economic food chain.

Furthermore, the icons of excellence within the professional realm of industrial design had already been well established in the fall/winter issue of *Innovation*, conveniently routed to my desk in the waning weeks of 1995. However, as it was irrefutably the publication of record on the subject, I decided to conduct my own analysis of the winning entries to test a theory I'd been harboring for some time now. With only one gold medal awarded to a quasi-public space – the ESEO Federal Credit Union in Oklahoma, it seemed that product design was rarely associated with the civic realm. Or, if it were, no one was much interested in writing about it or in giving it prizes.

So I set my sights on the public sector. As it happened, I didn't have far to look for my first candidate. I found it in the East 96th Street subway station in Manhattan, pushing my way through what I now know is called a highwheel exit. This particular revolving web of interlocking bars was not the usual menacing black comb, but a glistening series of stainless steel arcs.

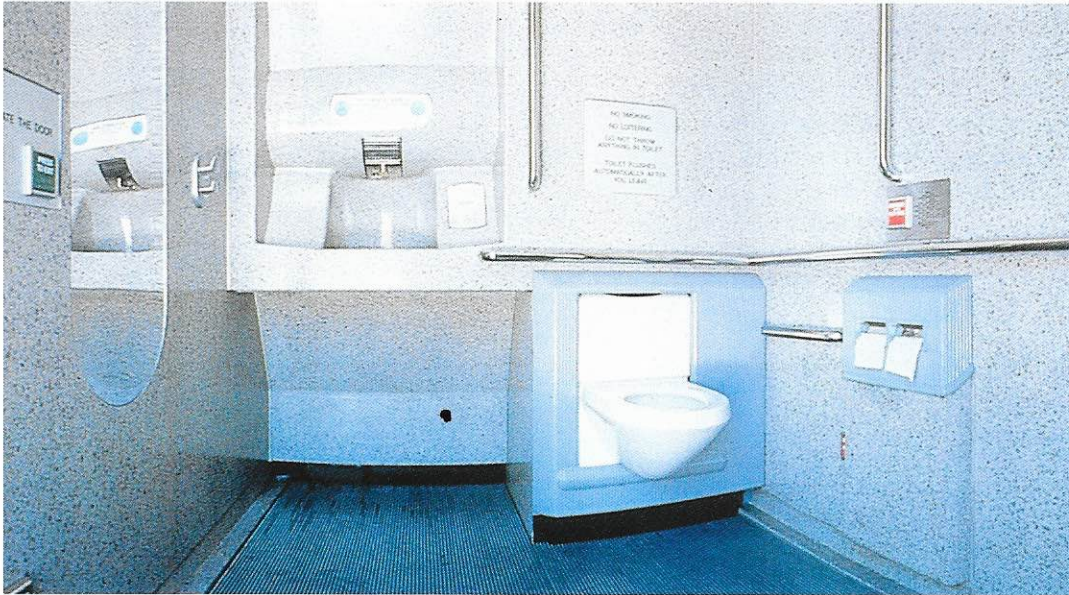
Here was an object vastly improved, if not totally reinvented, that I didn't have to buy, beyond the price of my token. This new exit turnstile – to be put in place throughout the entire New York subway system – turned out to be the brainchild of an artist named Laura Bradley. Without the benefit of a design team, Bradley employed all the now vogueish anthropological tactics of the design trade – endless hours of observation, public interviews, meetings with police officers, station managers, engineers, fabricators, and agency administrators – to radically rethink an everyday artifact of the commuter's life.

Bradley was originally commissioned by the Metropolitan Transit Authority's Arts for Transit program to design the mosaic leitmotif of the 96th Street station (figure 1). Subsequently, Arts for Transit introduced her to the system-wide effort underway to "harden" the entries where fare beaters had cost the MTA millions of dollars annually.



Figure 2. Manhattan subway station grillwork designed by Laura Bradley. Courtesy, MTA Arts for Transit. Photo: Mike Kamber

susan yelavich



Figures 4 and 4a.
JCDecaux accessible public
toilet in San Francisco.
Courtesy, JCDecaux

Figure 5.
Interior of JCDecaux
accessible public toilet.
Courtesy, JCDecaux



Bradley seized the opportunity to soften the prison aesthetic of the new floor-to-ceiling grillwork by successfully proposing two new railing designs that featured modular decorative motifs and fit the vagaries of the historic system (figure 2).

The idea to improve the exit highwheels was also entirely Bradley's. With the support of Arts for Transit, she succeeded in convincing a reluctant agency to halt its own plans and adopt hers because of the meticulousness of her specifications and the assurance that her design would cost no more than the highwheel in current usage.

The results: the gently arced bars immediately signal which way to push (no more jamming in the wrong direction); the skirt, which envelops the user once inside, is lowered slightly to give more visibility and is patterned with delicate perforations (figures 3 and 3a.) The overhead canopy, which had heightened the sensation of entrapment, is eliminated. Bradley's training in anatomy and fascination with the economy of measure in mosaics made her designs for the MTA keenly responsive to the needs of both the body public and the body politic.

In contrast to the almost puritanical modesty of the origins of the highwheel, there is the unquestionably commercial saga of JCDecaux. A French street furniture company, JCDecaux has also made bodily functions the mainstay of its business by grafting advertising onto public toilets, kiosks, bus shelters, and newsstands.

For cities throughout Europe, JCDecaux had commissioned litter baskets by Phillippe Starck, park benches by Martin Szekely, and bus shelters by Norman Foster – all inspirationally hip and forward-looking. So I was heartened to learn that an American city had struck a deal with the French firm to upgrade its sidewalk amenities, particularly after New York City's controversial public toilet debate in 1992. San Francisco, in all its civility, had indeed signed on for a suite of twenty accessible public lavatories, twenty public information kiosks, and seventy newsstands. Described by the local press as "Parisian-style," they recall not so much the Paris of the Grand Projets as the Paris of the Beaux Arts (figures 4 and 4a).

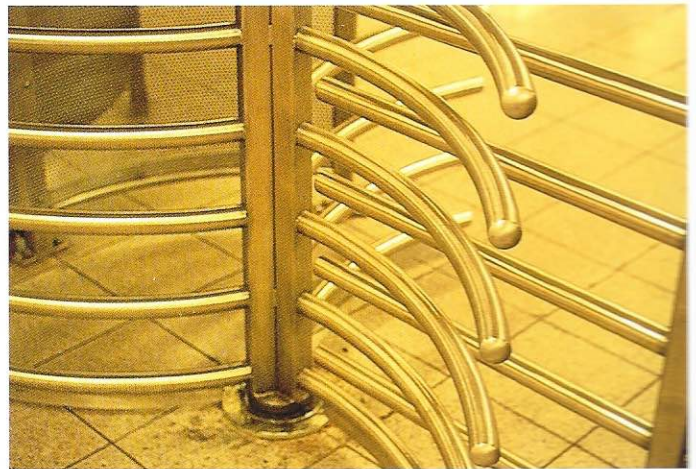


Figure 3.
Manhattan subway highwheel designed by Laura Bradley.
Courtesy, MTA Arts for Transit.
Photo: Peter Hamblin

Figure 3a.
Highwheel detail.
Courtesy, MTA Arts for Transit.
Photo: Peter Hamblin

Be that as it may, the inside of these latter-day *pissoirs* is quite another matter, which is why I am nominating their fully accessible interiors as my second selection. (It also neatly sidesteps the politics of profit associated with the advertising carried on the outside of each commode.)

For a mere quarter, the door slides open, offering city folks and tourists, in wheelchairs or on foot, a safe, clean, attractive restroom (figure 5). After use, the toilet neatly retracts into the wall where it is disinfected and blown dry before reemerging. Sensing the user's hands, the sink dispenses warm water and soap without a command. There are two red call buttons for emergencies, one on the floor and one on the wall, which can send off a call to the local 911 operator via a speaker and microphone located inside the unit. Users are accorded eighteen minutes before a recorded voice informs them that the doors will open in two minutes. A failure or inability to exit in twenty minutes sets off an alarm. The heady efficiency of it all is like a rare fulfillment of the prophesied future of World's Fairs past.



Figure 6. Armchair and Tripod from the Puzzle Series designed by David Kawecki.
Courtesy, 3-D: Interiors

If urban design is a conservative endeavor with little stomach and even fewer tax dollars for idiosyncratic taste in its street furnishings, one can always exercise one's first amendment rights of taste at home, bringing me to my last selection – a piece in the Puzzle Series designed by David Kawecki (figure 6).

A former computer graphics designer, Kawecki's studio consists of a mouse and monitor. The furniture is the product of his newest software programs and the economic constraints of a start-up enterprise. To be affordable to both producer and consumer, the line had to be made from one material in a single-run fabrication process, with no assembly. Each element is precisely notched by laser. His two-person San Francisco based firm, 3-D: Interiors, can then ship the flat, stacked components at the ludicrously low cost of twenty-five dollars a unit to customers who assemble their birch-ply, three-dimensional, jigsaw puzzle in about fifteen minutes.

Belying the ascetic nature of their structure and almost Luddite inversion of Kawecki's computer application is the playful character of the pieces themselves. Offered in a palette of slightly off-key pastel hues, the salon table, which I purchased in lime, is rife with associations (figure 7). Notches animate the surface with a Morse code of dashes that bring to mind stitched leather. The key holes on the side panels have a whiff of roboticized carpenter Gothic with their serialized stamped-out repeat. French literary concepts of absence may account for the designer's muse and discipline, but the aesthetic is decidedly American – casual, hybrid, bordering on frugal.

Clearly, this San Franciscan's leanings are more on the vanguard than his counterparts at City Hall who selected his home town's more traditionally styled kiosks. Perhaps more official tastemakers would do well to talk to Laura Bradley and David Kawecki, or, for that matter, any number of progressive American designers. They might be inspired to take modernity out of the water closet and back to the streets again.

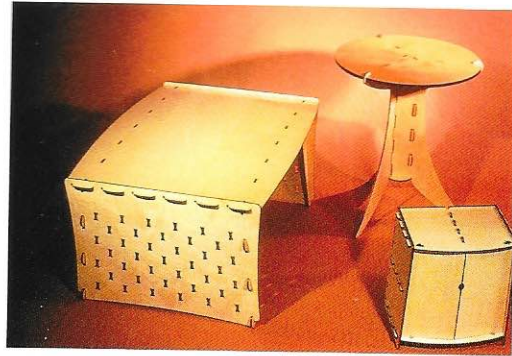


Figure 7. Salon Table (left) with Tripod Table and Tansu Cabinet designed by David Kawecki. Courtesy, 3-D: Interiors