

The City

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Section 14

NEW YORK UP CLOSE



Ting-Li Wang/The New York Times

Below, Echoes of What Once Soared Above

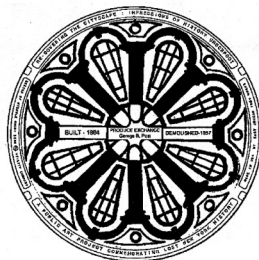
Michele Brody sees New York as an archaeological site, with remarkable buildings buried underfoot.

For example, she says, you could be standing on the sidewalk in front of the glass-skinned tower at 1 Liberty Plaza in Lower Manhattan and not realize it was once the site of the Singer Tower, which many preservationists consider the greatest skyscraper ever torn down in the city.

Ms. Brody, a 34-year-old artist and Brooklyn native who now lives near Union Square, wants to make strollers in Manhattan aware of these architectural ruins by having them look down at, of all things, manhole covers. She is preparing to install a public art project that will place 36 manhole covers around Lower Manhattan, each one evoking a notable New York structure lost to history.

Ms. Brody said she gained an appreciation for the lowly manhole cover when she moved from Chicago to New York five years ago, sold her car and became a pedestrian. "I was dodging the droppings of people's dogs," she said, "when I started noticing them."

Her first 10 designs are shown at www.recoveringthecityscape.com. One bears the Singer Tower's distinctive silhouette and records the building's name, its architect and the years when it was raised and demol-



Michele Brody, top, with light fixtures inspired by manhole covers, above, that she designed to evoke lost buildings.

ished. She plans to place the manhole cover in the sidewalk at 1 Liberty Plaza. "It will be like recovering a former layer of the city," she said.

The project is privately financed and has received preliminary approval from the city's Art Commission. Consolidated Edison, whose workers will use the covers, is lending the project technical support.

Ms. Brody's first design, which is being cast at a Michigan factory, recalls the former Assay Office at 30 Wall Street near Nassau Street, where an office building now stands.

The Assay Office refined gold and silver into bullion for the United States Government from 1854 to 1912. It was torn down in 1915. But the entire building was not lost. Its Greek Revival facade was moved to the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum, where it is on display.

Though Ms. Brody's designs contain historical information, she said she sees them more as meditations on the past. The design for the Assay Office, for example, repeats the building's Ionic columns and triangular pediment in a geometric pattern that recalls the original.

"The idea is not to do a perfect picture stamp of the building," she said, "but more of a mandala, or an abstract response to the architecture." **JIM O'GRADY**