

Downtown Art

BY MELISSA ROBBINS

Designing manholes to commemorate Downtown's forgotten buildings

Local artist Michele Brody is placing her art-quite literally-at the feet of the community.

With a penchant for detail and a reverence for days gone by, the installation artist has set her "sites" on Lower Manhattan's manhole covers. Through her project, "Re-covering the Cityscape: Impressions of History Under Foot" Brody aims to leave her imprint on the canvas of daily, urban life.

Her plan involves the redesign and temporary replacement of thirty-six manhole covers in or near ten historic districts south of 23rd Street. With site-specific patterns inspired by, but not copies of the architectural details of eight buildings that have been demolished as well as two sites that no longer exist, the new covers will memorialize lost landmarks in relief sculpture on the sidewalks and gutters of their perimeters.

She will have the artistic manholes made in Michigan and hopes to have the first covers installed later this year.

An unlikely spot for artistic expression? Brody thinks not. The young visionary- who most recently applied her talents to an arrangement of a demolished building's concrete remains to protest the new waste transfer station in Williamsburg,

Brooklyn-believes in "creating art that surrounds the viewer in public spaces."

Currently engaged in acquisition of funds and permission for the first of her four-phased project, Brody has begun to actively court local community boards who oversee the proposed locations. Having garnered nods of encouragement from Community Board 1's Financial District Committee-which holds jurisdiction over four of the sites-Brody will appear next before the board's Seaport Civic Center Committee on Tuesday, March 14.

Eight of the ten sites are in the C.B. 1 area. Selected on the basis of unique architectural design or social and economic impact, the commemorated sites include the Frederick Philipse House: 66 Pearl Street (which illustrates traditional Dutch "crow-stepping" design) the Produce Exchange: No. 2 Broadway, the Assay Office: 30 Wall Street (whose façade is preserved in the Metropolitan Museum) and the Singer Tower: 1 Liberty Plaza-the tallest of the city's buildings ever to be demolished, the World Tower: Pace Plaza (formerly known as "Newspaper Row") an extinct fresh water pond called the Collect Pond: Foley Square, "Tombs" Prison: 111 Centre Street; and a seedy entertainment district of the early 1800's called Five Pointsat the juncture of Baxter, Worth, and Park Streets.

The other two sites are Jefferson Market Prison, 425 6th Avenue, and the National Academy of Design: 320 Park Avenue South.

A resident of West 16th Street, Brody said "I wanted to work first in an area with which I'm familiar."

"It is my earnest hope," expressed Brody, that the project "will greatly enhance [the public's] experience of the city and its history as a venue for public art."

With a budget of approximately \$261,000 for the three-year endeavor, Brody

has enlisted the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council as "fiscal conduit" to facilitate fundraising for the venture.

For her desire to create "something interesting and with character that commemorates our area," Paul Goldstein, Board 1 district manager, commended Brody.

With an approving smile, he remarked, "I think it's a very creative idea."

This design of an artistic manhole is proposed to be placed at two sites near 66 Pearl St., near Coenties Slip, site of the Frederick Philipse House from 1689 to the early 19th Century. The design illustrates the Dutch custom of "crow-stepping" rooftop cables.

