

welcome visible to the naked eye

LET'S SAY IT IS A BREEZY SUMMER DAY and you are zipping off with the top of your convertible down, in the mood to admire the world around you in the streetscapes of the city, on the shoulders of the highway. Before you can stop yourself you begin to pay attention to the small, functional things that accompany any daily journey. These are the things that send us in the right direction, guide us along the road, throw light in the dark passages, give our weary bones a place to rest. You try to stop noticing these things, because they are disturbing, and (if you are a visually sensitive person, and most of us are, whether we know it or not) you try to learn to blot them from consciousness.

But there is too much to ignore in the world of streetlights, mailboxes, street signs, exit signs, newspaper boxes, planters, dividers, curbs, benches, all the things that cross our line of vision day after day, year after year. They affect those of us who walk or bicycle through our towns and cities; they affect those of us who drive to work and home again. They are a democratic blight, bad in the best and in the worst neighborhoods, ugliness for everyone. And they spread relentlessly. I think of what I see on my morning commute: Sidewalks of poured concrete without even the beguiling mica flakes that used to make the concrete glimmer and sparkle. At the train station, bleak, bone-chilling concrete slabs for benches. Rickety newspaper boxes. Lighting that couldn't be more dim-bulbed; this particularly pains me because a neighbor has the original, turn-of-the-century lamps from the train platform lining his driveway, so we can all see their elegance. At a time when great design is celebrated around the country, available at every price, and created in countless materials, our public scapes have never looked so bad and felt so neglected.

I have trained myself to tune out this stuff to such an extent that I couldn't even recall what a New York streetlight looked like while I was reading an article about a campaign in London to save the historic, cast-iron lampposts that line the Embankment. "A grim sight will confront those who find their way down to the London Embankment," Ptolemy Dean writes in *Country Life* (and, while we're on it, why can't we preserve names like that?). "The ground will soon be awash with the debris of dozens of shattered cast-iron dolphins." I shuddered for those muscular creatures—faithful lamp bearers who gave generations their service—floundering on the concrete, victims of the maniacal anxiety of

city authorities. The lampposts are aging, the iron corroding; they need shoring up. Don't we all? The prospect of damage from toppling giants has sent authorities into a frenzy of tearing down—because it is cheaper to replace the noble lampposts. But it is not a wiser decision.

Perhaps it is because these things from the gritty side of the drawing board were once designed to celebrate our industrial accomplishments—what we believed was part of what was best in our way of life—that the old versions look so good. Some are still with us; some are gone for good. I'm thinking of the stalwart, curvaceous fire hydrants; the elaborately scrolled manhole covers; the mosaic signs in the New York subway stations; the charming shingled tollhouses along older parkways (and the very idea of a parkway!); the successfully refurbished gaslights lining Benefit Street in Providence, Rhode Island. Even the gas stations of the '40s and '50s had more panache and personality. They all proclaimed in wonderment at how lucky we were—in their materials, in their typography, in their seductive lines. We have fuel! Water is plentiful! Our tunnels are magnificent! You have arrived! The community had pride in the services it provided, pride in giving light and water and speed, and even pride in the taking of tolls.

I'm not suggesting that everything is worth saving, or that everything new be made to look old-fashioned. Far from it.

We are in a time of unprecedented levels of interest and training in design. We have seemingly infinite varieties of durable materials to play with. But we do have to decide that we don't want to live surrounded by things we would rather not see. I'm sure we can figure out how to go forward without going backward, if we could only find a comfortable enough bench to sit on and think awhile.



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