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NEW YORK CITY SUBWAY GRILLES

“Public Works” is a new feature of Places that highlights design projects that enhance the public realm. We encourage readers to send reports of projects in their communities. Readers are encouraged to send brief articles along with black-and-white prints or color slides.

New grilles in New York City’s subways.

Photos courtesy New York City Transit Authority, Arts for Transit program.

The New York City Transit Authority’s Arts for Transit program is getting down to the nitty gritty. The sponsor of successful station art projects is now taking aim at the guts of the system — starting with the crusty, grimy fences that separate paid from unpaid sections of subway mezzanines.

When the TA decided to replace the fences as part of a project to automate the subway fare collection system, Arts for Transit Director Wendy Feuer urged that artist Laura Bradley be asked to prepare designs. Bradley already had created special grilles for one station and wanted to design more.

Although engineers already had standard designs on the drawing board, TA officials handed Bradley a stack of technical specifications and gave her three months to work.

Ultimately, two of Bradley’s designs won approval — one for use in streamline modern stations built in the 1930s and the other for use in the Beaux Arts stations built before then. The TA assigned staff architects to work with Bradley in developing technical drawings and ensuring the grilles were in modular form.

“There was a will, and it came from the top,” Feuer explained. It didn’t



hurt that Bradley’s buffed and painted stainless steel grilles could be manufactured for the same price as the polished stainless steel fences that TA engineers had designed.

Through this summer, grilles had been installed in 127 stations. They strike a subtle balance, enlivening the subway’s drab atmosphere yet melding quietly into the worn patina of the stations, just like the mosaics installed when the subway was originally built. Says Feuer: “They’re very modest, but that’s perfect, because they’re in so many places.” — *Todd W. Bressi*

