

Current Comments

The Philadelphia Transit Story Continued— How We All Worked Together to Improve Our Subway Station

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We live in a world where we exercise little or no control over many things that affect our lives. It is not surprising that so many people feel a sense of helplessness, if not despair, about such large issues as war and peace, recession, crime, or human rights. These are global problems which inspire political, collective solutions. There are, however, problems which are solvable, so it was with a sense of hopefulness that I recently seized the opportunity to deal with a problem I've addressed before in *Current Contents*® (CC®).

In an essay devoted primarily to the inadequacy of signs in public places,¹ I specifically referred to the deplorable condition of the Philadelphia subways. Since I've been urging you to visit Philadelphia for the celebration of the 300th anniversary of the landing of William Penn,² I thought it appropriate now to report on a small bit of progress in dealing with this problem.

You may recall that I have voiced my displeasure over the squalid condition of the subway station which I frequently use.¹ Happily, this situation has been drastically and dramatically changed for the better. Thanks to a joint community effort, in which ISI® was a prime mover, this station is now beautifully renovated. I'd like to tell you how this happened.

Until this past summer, the 34th Street subway stop was filthy, graffiti-ridden, poorly lit, and poorly marked. It was so

poorly marked, in fact, that I missed it several times when traveling to work. More importantly, ISI employees use this station daily, as do students and faculty of Drexel University, the University of Pennsylvania, and other institutions in the University City area. When we moved ISI's headquarters here in the fall of 1979, I was appalled to find that a station serving such a large community was so poorly cared for. I voiced my complaints to a number of people, including Philadelphia's mayor, William Green, and several members of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), the organization that runs the transportation system for Philadelphia and its suburbs. As a matter of fact, I used the occasion of a West Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce awards banquet to do this.¹

Early last summer, action was finally taken to improve the station and a program of renovation involving several community organizations was begun. Organized and managed by the West Philadelphia Corporation, a nonprofit community development corporation, the project combined efforts from SEPTA, the West Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, Crisis Intervention Network, Inc., the University of Pennsylvania, Drexel University, the University City Science Center, and ISI.

The first step in the renovation was the removal of graffiti that had pro-

liferated in the station. (Graffiti, incidentally, is a derivative of the word *sgraffito*, a technique I described in connection with one of ISI's murals.³) The problem of graffiti is not unique. Graffiti covering the surfaces of public buildings and transportation vehicles is a long-standing problem in many large cities such as Philadelphia, New York, and London. As a social phenomenon, it has been discussed in the scholarly and popular press. At one time, in fact, writers raved about the artistic value of graffiti.⁴ However, most now agree that graffiti is an eyesore and a problem that has gotten out of hand.⁵⁻⁷ Some, like Nathan Glazer, Harvard University, even regard graffiti as a general social depressant. It instills and confirms the fear of the onlooker that the subway is dangerous. There is also a sense of helplessness since the proliferation of graffiti cannot be controlled.⁷ Judging from my own experience, I would say that that was certainly the case with the 34th Street station.

Some successful attempts to stop the graffiti "artists" who publicly invade our sense of privacy have been made. New York's Metropolitan Transit Authority, for example, uses trained guard dogs to patrol one of its rail yards. The project has proved successful so far, and it is to be expanded to other yards as well.⁸ Especially promising in the war against graffiti are graffiti-resistant paints now being developed by several companies. Graffiti applied to the surfaces of buildings coated with one type of paint, for example, simply runs off. Graffiti can be washed off a second type of paint, regardless of the amount of time it has been in place. The major problem with these paints so far is their price. Painting any sizable area is still prohibitive.^{4,9}

Removal of graffiti in the 34th Street station was undertaken by SEPTA, who agreed to clean up the station as

its part in the renovation program. SEPTA crews began working in the station in late June. They removed debris, repaired lights, repainted, and generally cleaned the area. The result of their work is a clean subway stop painted a pleasing light yellow color. Royal blue paint accents stair rails, columns, and other "trim." Unfortunately, the paint is not graffiti-resistant. However, SEPTA has provided security guards to enhance the overall safety of the station and to cut down on the defacement of the station by graffiti artists, most of whom are teenagers. Teenage vandalism is, in fact, a major problem.¹⁰

While SEPTA was working at the station, the West Philadelphia Corporation was busy coordinating the rest of the project. Under its director, George Brown, the Corporation arranged for the creation of 20 paintings to be placed in the station. They engaged the services of Crisis Intervention Network, Inc., an agency that aims to cut down on juvenile delinquency by providing job opportunities for disadvantaged teenagers.

Crisis Intervention Network, Inc., in turn, located five local artists—Valerie Haywardo, Elizabeth Jones, Patricia Mundy, Mimi Oritsky, and Wayne Still—to design the paintings. All of the artists are from the Philadelphia area, and four of them still live and work here. All but one have attended local schools as well. Jones and Still, for example, have degrees in art from the Philadelphia College of Art. Mundy graduated from Temple University's Tyler School of Art. Oritsky holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Pennsylvania. Haywardo is currently in her senior year at the University of Maryland, where she is majoring in Business.

Four of these artists have pursued careers in the art world. Both Jones and Mundy are working as art teachers; Still works as a free-lance illustrator. Oritsky, in addition to doing work which she sells

and displays in several galleries, works on other art projects for Crisis Intervention Network, Inc.

Working from photographs of local sites, the artists first prepared sketches for the paintings. These sketches were then transferred to 35 mm slides which were projected onto the painting surfaces. The actual painting, a sort of giant paint-by-number project, was undertaken by 22 local teenagers, located by Crisis Intervention Network, Inc., under the supervision of the artists. Philadelphia's Community Education Centers provided space for the artists and the painters to work.

In order to pay for the labor and material costs of the project, the West Philadelphia Corporation solicited contributions from ISI, the University of Pennsylvania, Drexel University, and the University City Science Center. Each of these groups donated \$5,000 toward the project. The West Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce donated another \$1,200 to pay for the design of the murals, as well as the preliminary project setup and administration costs.

The results of this community effort are 20 large, colorful paintings, 16 of which adorn the upper level of the station. The other four will be installed at train level soon. They were formally unveiled on September 22, 1981, in a brief ceremony on the site. Officials representing each of the organizations involved were presented with original sketches of the murals at the ceremony, and the artists and their helpers were introduced. (See Figures 1 and 2.) Unfortunately, I was abroad at the time, but I was particularly pleased with the sketch we received—an original rendering of the ISI building.

The paintings and renovated subway station are a very pleasant contrast to the dingy atmosphere one often finds in underground subway stations, although there are notable exceptions in stations around the world. Each of the 16 paintings depicts a scene from "Living Philadelphia"—a variety of well-known landmarks in the University City Science Center. Subjects include the ISI building, a local street vendor, Drexel University's geodesic tri-span, the University

Figure 1: Officials from the West Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, ISI[®], the University of Pennsylvania, the University City Science Center, and Drexel University accept original sketches of the 34th Street subway murals. Peter Aborn, ISI's vice president of administrative services (second from left), is shown accepting the sketch of the ISI building.

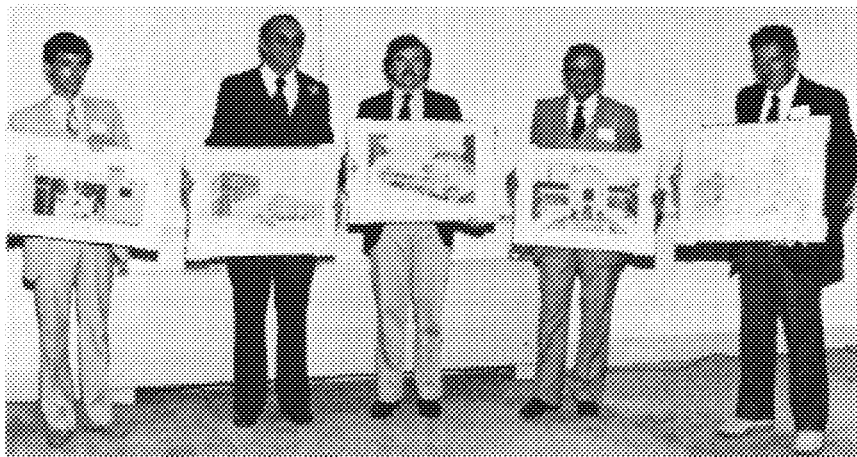
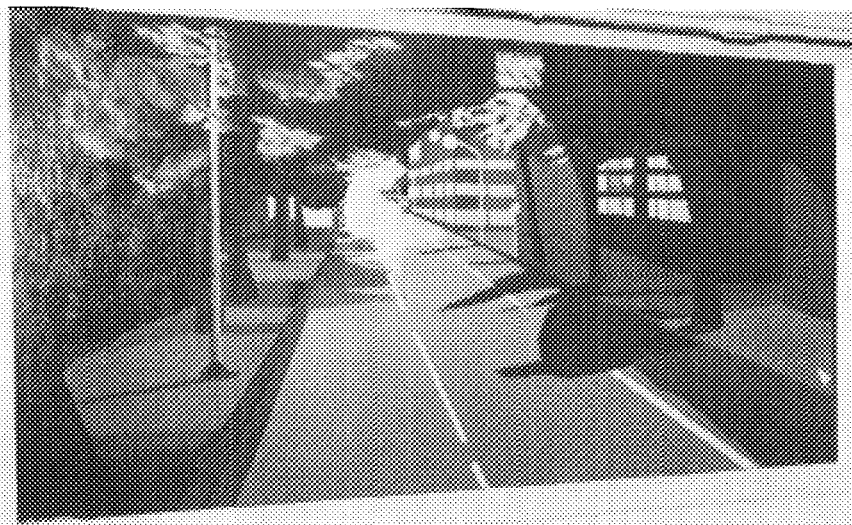


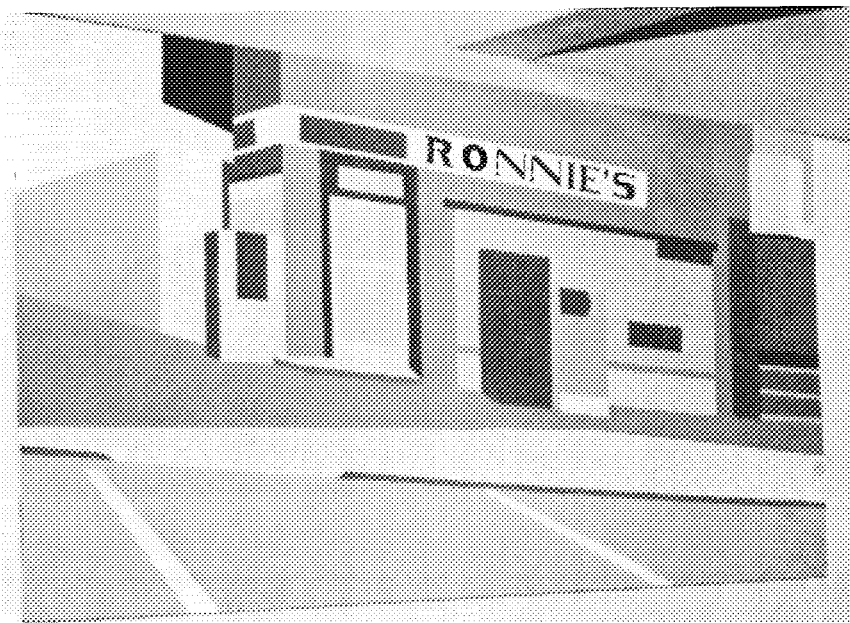
Figure 2: Several of the teenagers who painted the murals.



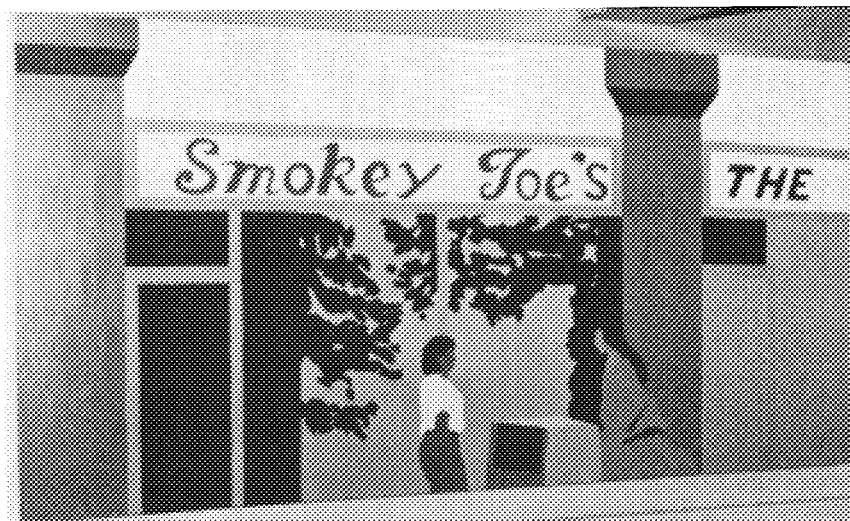
A night view of a West Philadelphia street

of Pennsylvania's statue of Benjamin Franklin, a SEPTA trolley, and a local restaurant. They are large, bright, and enjoyable to look at. Their creators are

understandably proud of their work. My own regret is that there aren't more of them located directly on the train platform.



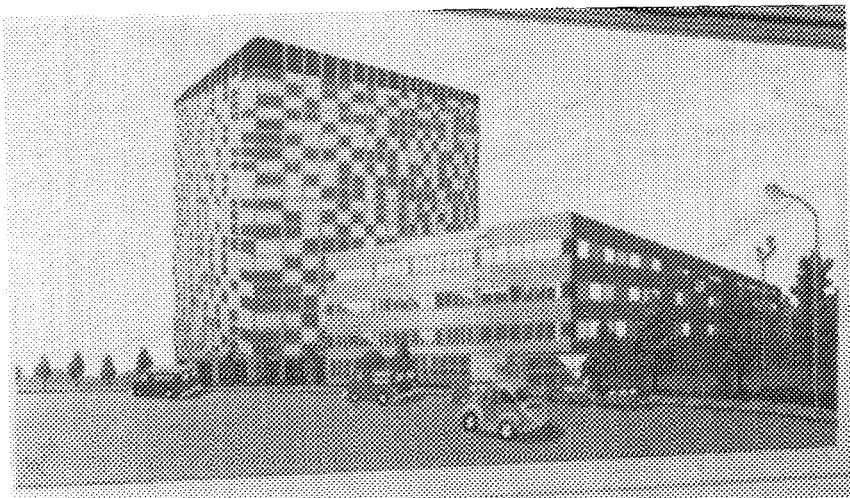
A local sandwich shop, Ronnie's, located near the University of Pennsylvania campus



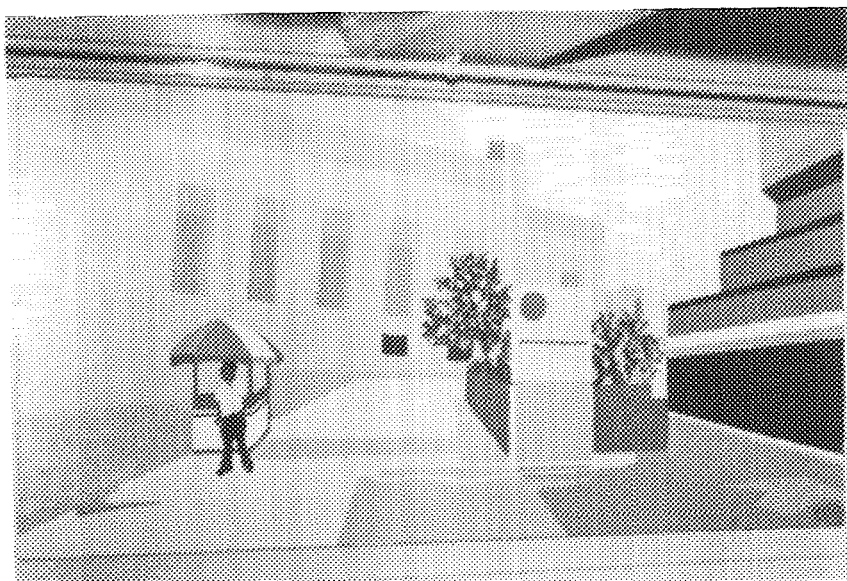
Smokey Joe's, a local bar and restaurant

That the paintings were a collaborative effort is easily apparent, yet each has a style uniquely its own. Ortsky, for

example, favored a very modern approach—her paintings consist of large, symmetrical blocks of bright colors.



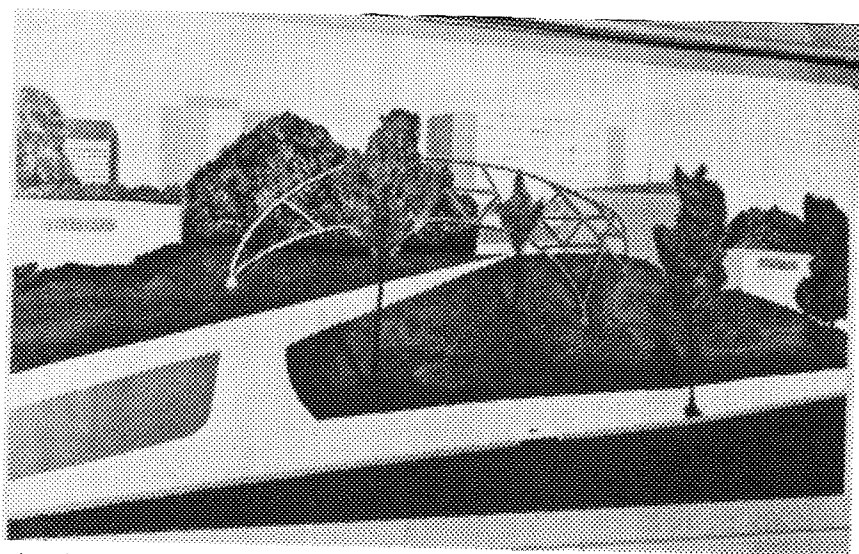
The ISI building*



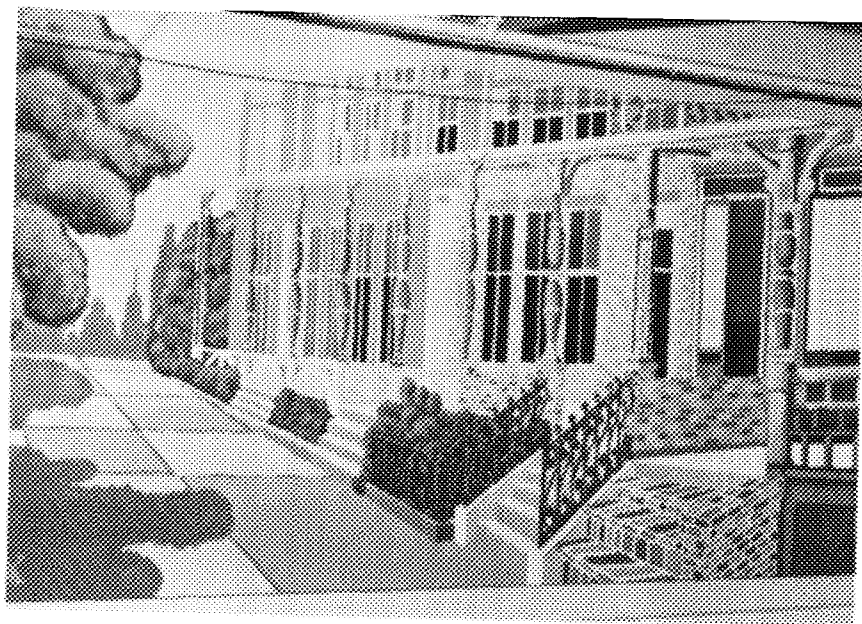
Drexel University's geodesic tri-span

Most of the other artists, such as Still, favored more traditional approaches. Their paintings employ more perspective and more sophisticated painting techniques.

Each painting is about three feet by six feet. A walk around the station to view them is a rewarding experience. Collectively, they demonstrate the community effort involved, but they are



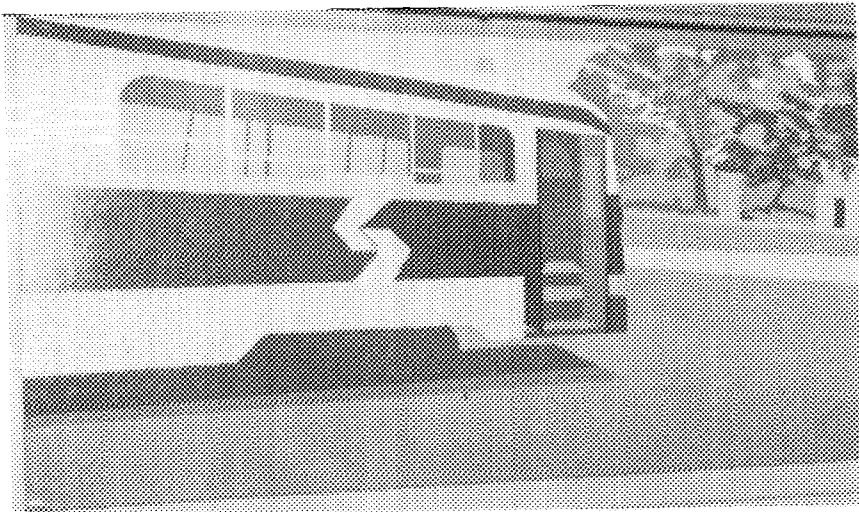
A typical West Philadelphia scene—the street vendor



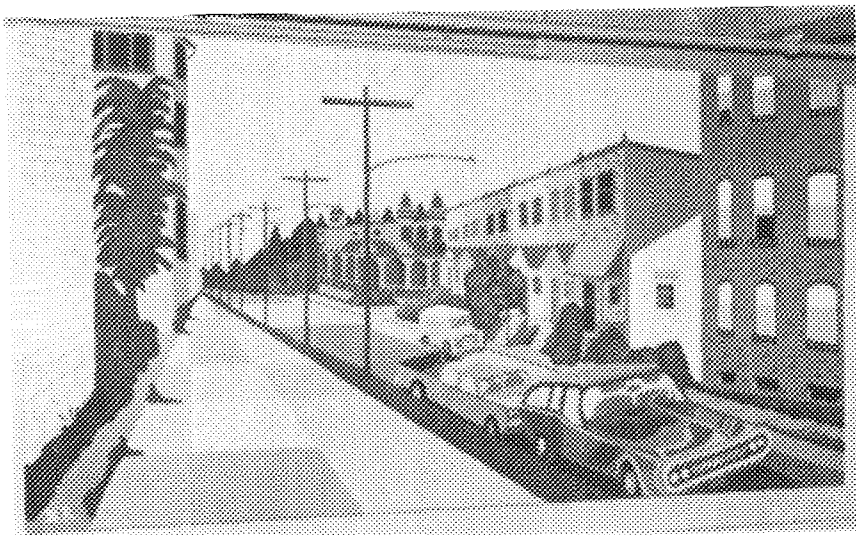
Student apartments near Drexel University

aesthetically pleasing as well. The fact that many of the paintings show streets leading off into the distance is ap-

propriate and symbolic of the subway's function. As mentioned earlier, the artists and painters behind the murals are



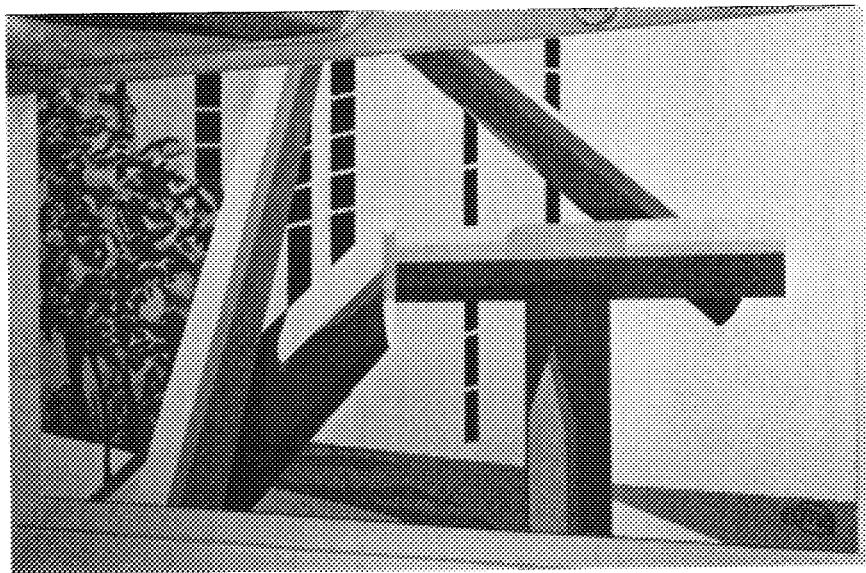
A SEPTA trolley



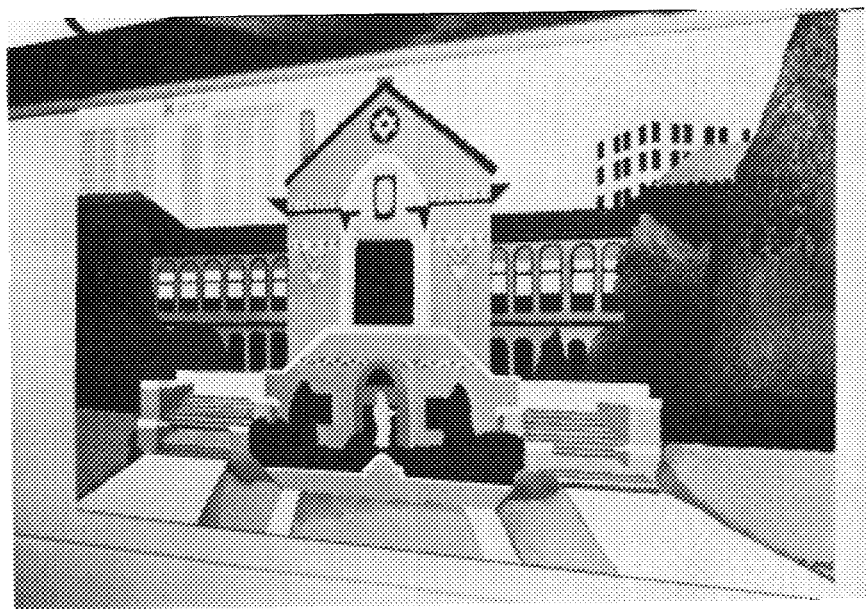
A West Philadelphia street

proud of their work. Those of us who initiated the program and saw it through are no less proud. Most of the work at

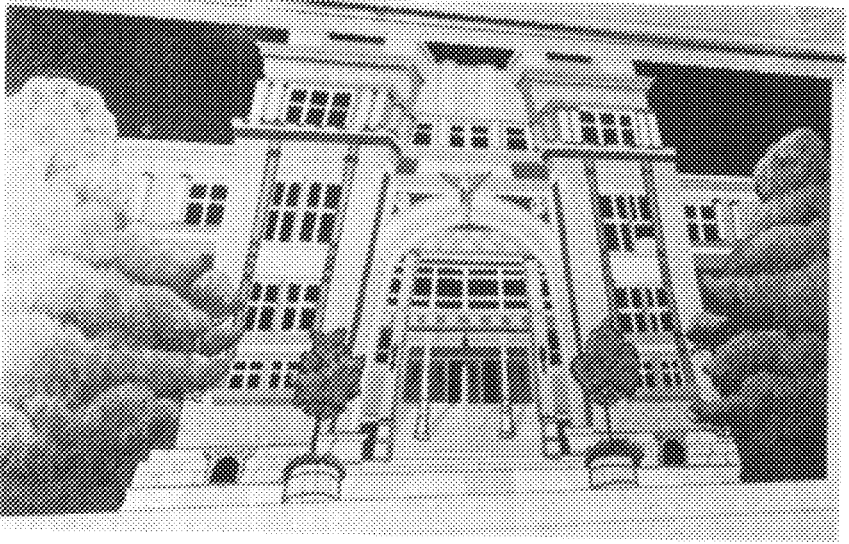
ISI was done by Peter Aborn, vice president of administrative services. I am certainly pleased to have been involved with



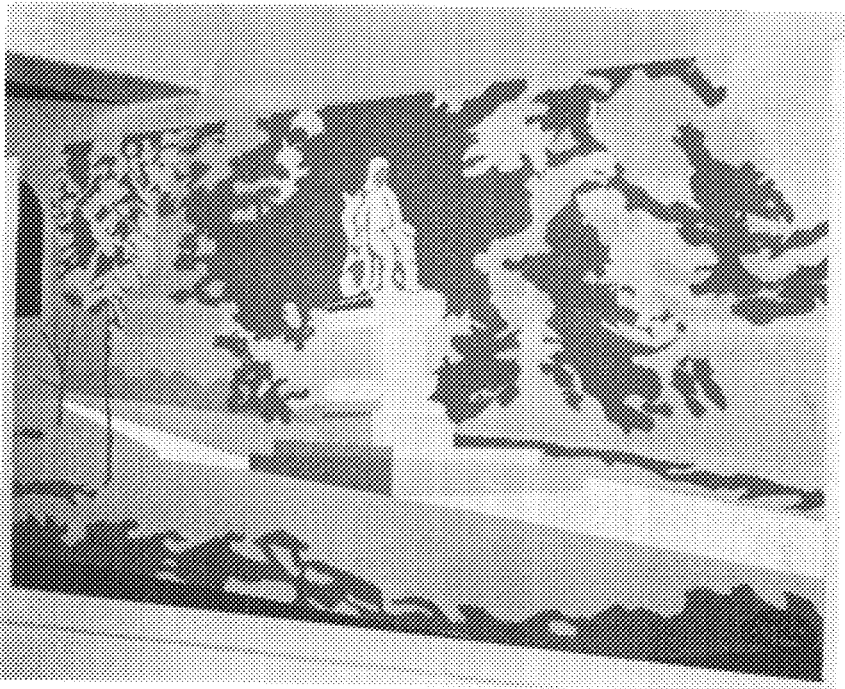
"Covenant," a sculpture by Alexander Liberman, on the University of Pennsylvania campus



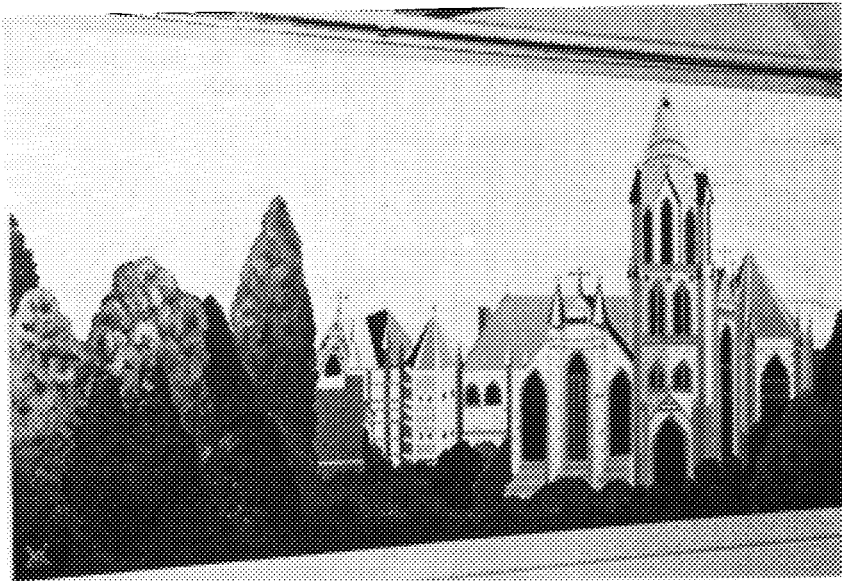
The University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania



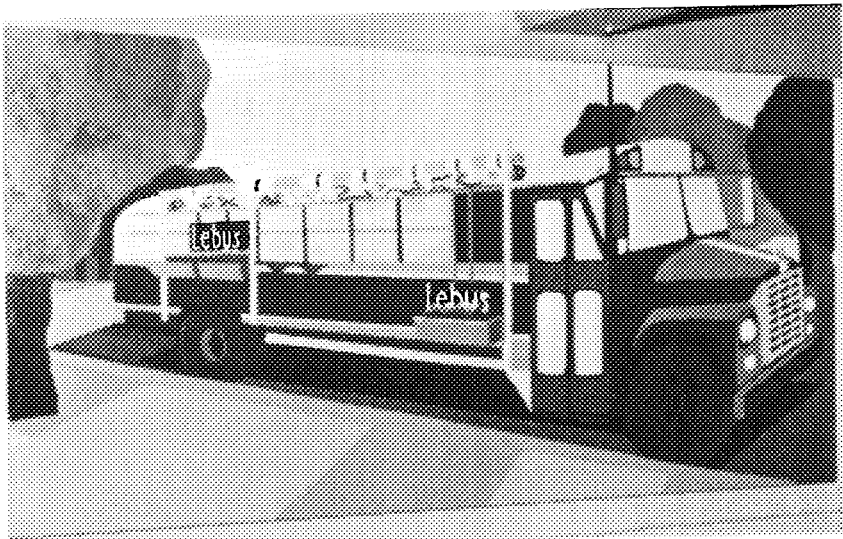
The administration building, known as Main Building, at Drexel University



The University of Pennsylvania's statue of Benjamin Franklin



Christ Memorial Church, 43rd and Chestnut Streets



The sidewalk restaurant Le Bus, which offers takeout food, and is completely housed in a bus

the project. In many ways, I consider it another attempt by ISI to bring art into the daily work environment, just as we did with the murals and paintings we installed in our building.³ I hope that in the future other communities will follow the example of this unique initiative and try similar projects of their own. There are certainly plenty of subway stations and other public places that could benefit from this treatment! But most of all,

it illustrates that something can be accomplished in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds.

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My thanks to Susan Fell Evans for her help in the preparation of this essay.

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