

POINTS OF VIEW

Take a bite of Birmingham, the 'better apple'

As New York drivers on the FDR Drive in Manhattan approach a 60th Street, they are greeted by a "giant, looping aluminum spiral weaving gracefully through the sky," wrote reporter Carol Vogel in Monday's New York Times.

"East River Roundabout" by internationally-known sculptor Alice Aycock is Manhattan's newest work of public art, and the centerpiece of a \$2.5 million pavilion on the site of a former Sanitation Department garage.

According to Vogel, it transforms the city's waterfront.

Sometime next year, Oakland County drivers along Woodward Avenue as it veers off to become Hunter also will be greeted by an Alice Aycock sculpture.

Aycock, a New Yorker, recently was awarded the commission to create a "gateway sculpture" for the city of Birmingham by the gateway committee of the Cultural Council of Birmingham/Bloomfield.

Seed money was put up by the city's Principal Shopping District. The rest — \$300,000 total — is expected to be raised through contributions, with donors' names listed at the site.

Hopes are that "the Birmingham Aycock" will transform the city's southern entrance on the grassy triangle just south of the city's tallest structure, the 555 Building.

"We don't know what it's going to be," said Maureen Van Dine, the transplanted New Yorker who spearheads the gateway committee. They'll know more in a couple of months.

"We just told her we want the best Alice Aycock there ever was," Van Dine says.

Some may think it presumptuous to use world class art as the signature for Birmingham. After all, most suburbs have signs.

But others fancy Birmingham, the downtown for many of our communities, as Manhattan on a tidier scale.

Ten years ago, the Bloomfield Hills office of D'Arcy Masius Burnton & Bowles graciously outlined a sample campaign to promote Birmingham's downtown for a special Eccentric series.

The creative minds at D'Arcy came up with the slogan "Birmingham - The Better Apple." They were drawing, of course, on New York City's promotion as "The Big Apple."



JUDITH DONER BERNE

One of the ads they produced showed a couple eating at an outdoor cafe with the "Birmingham - The Better Apple" headline across the top. It was accompanied by the statement, "Think of it as Manhattan without the taxi bars."

Another version was a young mother and daughter on the sidewalk, shopping bags in hand. The tagline: "Think of it as Fifth Avenue without the taxi fumes."

In art circles, Birmingham's well-regarded assemblage of galleries is often mentioned alongside New York. That's as in "Birmingham has more world-class galleries than any city between Chicago and New York."

In fact, failure to bring Broadway quality to Birmingham probably doomed live productions at the Birmingham Theatre. The Nederlander Organization, which goes first-class in New York and at the Fisher Theatre in Detroit, skimped on Birmingham. Sophisticated area residents responded by not attending.

New theater owners, Brian and Carole Litch Trepeck, know better. And metro area film buffs can hardly wait for the theater's restoration this spring as a top-rated movie house — just down the street from "the Birmingham Aycock."

The ingredients are there. What if Birmingham really turned out to be the better Apple?

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is former managing editor of the Eccentric Newspapers. You can leave her a voice mail message at (313)953-2047, ext. 1997 or write or fax a letter to the editor of this newspaper. To find out more or make a contribution toward "the Birmingham Aycock," call (810) 988-7278 (988-7ART).

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Names of public job applicants can't be secret

Suppose your local town council voted in October to set the property tax rate, but then refused to reveal it to you. The November election passes. "Wait 'til you get your tax bill Dec. 1," they tell you.

"Zounds! Something's amiss," you are likely to say. It's your wallet. You think you ought to know the tax rate ahead of time so you can plan your finances and how you'll vote in the election. Your local council violated the law and political good sense.

That example is fictional.

Suppose your school board is considering discipline of six students for drug activity on school grounds. The students request a closed hearing — permissible under the Open Meetings Act.

Afterwards, the board votes in open meeting to suspend them, but refers to them only by number, not name. And the board doesn't name them in the minutes, its official record. Your officials give you a cock-and-bull story about "unwarranted invasion of an individual's privacy."

individual's privacy."

"Odds bodkins!" you say. "I want to know who those bad kids are so I can keep my youngsters away from them."

That example is true. It's in a 1982 state Court of Appeals case called *Palladium vs. River Valley School District*. The *Herald-Palladium*, a Berrien County paper, had the honor to work for prior to this case, sued to have the names revealed in the minutes.

"Boards of education act only through their minutes," said the Court of Appeals. "The minutes cannot be altered or supplemented. . . . (The) minutes must contain the student's name. The facts cannot be hidden by using the student's number."

We come to a more recent, statewide example that affects more people. The Natural Resources Commission is hunting for a new director to replace the suddenly departed Roland Harnes. Some candidates request confidentiality in the screening process — permissible.



TIM RICHARD

But then the NRC, meeting in Nov. Jan. 11, votes in open session to advance four candidates to the interview process — Rodney Stokes of MDNR, Tracey Mehan of the Great Lakes Office, Michael Carrier of the Iowa department and a "mystery candidate."

What? How can a public body vote in public on a public appointee and keep his name secret?

NRC made a mistake. Chairman Larry DeVuyt and the members may have meant well, but they made a mistake. "It stinks," said publisher Glen

Shepard at the North Woods Call.

"Troubling. . . . It should not be shrouded in secrecy," said George Weeks at The Detroit News.

Right. NRC and the DNR can ill afford to stir up public distrust.

I filed a Freedom of Information Act request with DNR on Jan. 12, citing the River Valley case. DNR turned it down. To its credit, the agency came through with the name on Jan. 17, after it had several days to call the mystery candidate (K.L. Cool of North Dakota) and warn him that he'd better get his house in order back home or plan to drop out.

It was never worth a lawsuit. But it's the kind of mistake that NRC, with a lawyer to advise it, never should have made for one day, let alone for nearly a week.

And the lesson is that a public body can't do public business and keep it a secret.

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state and regional events.

■ The Michigan Natural Resources Commission, meeting in Nov. Jan. 11, votes in open session to advance four candidates to the interview process — Rodney Stokes of MDNR, Tracey Mehan of the Great Lakes Office, Michael Carrier of the Iowa department and a "mystery candidate." Whoa! How can a public body vote in public on a public appointee and keep his name secret? NRC made a mistake. Chairman Larry DeVuyt and the members may have meant well, but they made a mistake.

Gov. Engler is partisan, but he's a man of ideas

Re-read Gov. John Engler's State of the State speech over the weekend.

Some may see this as an odd way to spend scarce leisure time. But I found it worthwhile to reflect a few days distant from all the Engler-for-vice-president hype and hotly partisan tone.

I reached three conclusions:

1. The governor is serious about welfare reform.

Project Zero, a pilot program to be tested in two urban and four small town and rural areas, will focus the Department of Social Services on surveying welfare recipients, identifying barriers to employment and subsidizing government services to ease the transition to work.

The administration is budgeting an extra \$40 million next year on transportation and child care, two factors which make it hard for young mothers on welfare to get a job, which DSS Director Gerald Miller argues is a good deal because each welfare recipient moved off the rolls saves the taxpayers around \$10,000 a year. Able-bodied adults enrolled in Project Zero would either accept a job or lose welfare benefits.

For a governor whose initial views on the subject consisted of saying that people on welfare are just a bunch of lazy bums, Project Zero is big-time movement. It risks alienating those folks who still think anybody on welfare is a lazy bum, but it has the virtue of realism in offering help for folks without skills or transport or child care.

2. In politics these days, ideas matter a lot. The recent Republican renaissance was fueled at heart by a whole bunch of new ideas challenging fixed Democratic orthodoxies that run back through the Great Society all the way to the New Deal.

Cutting taxes stimulates economic growth. The welfare state encourages a culture of dependency. Bureaucratic government is inherently inefficient and clumsy, so privatizing governmental services makes sense. Crime is bad; abortion is worse; unions stink; morality counts.

These ideas may be good or bad. Most likely, they will turn out to be a mixed bag. But they



PHILIP POWER

are new, and they challenge standard Democratic thinking that ran out of gas about 15 years ago.

Engler's State of the State speech makes the point. In addition to proposing Project Zero, he pushed for tax-free Renaissance Zones for run-down urban areas, suggested a centralized system for collecting child support and plans to consolidate the Departments of Labor and Commerce to form the Department of Consumer and Industry Services.

I cannot remember a Michigan governor as filled with new and far-reaching ideas.

3. The best way for a political minority to become a majority is to quit carping and come up with its own new ideas. Michigan Democrats, tentatively and at long last, are beginning to come to grips with this truth.

They are drafting bills to cut the Michigan income tax, create a state network of high-tech information links and fight crime by putting more cops on the beat.

It took the Republicans years in the political wilderness, but minority status does wonders to concentrate the mind. Democrats have a long way to go, but it might just be they are learning this important truth.

Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His Touch-Tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047, Ext. 1880.

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