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Places

Title

Lion Street

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7h01672w>

Journal

Places, 5(2)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1988-04-01

Peer reviewed

Lion Street

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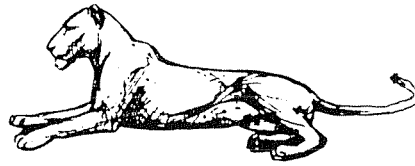
Four hundred lions have taken over the main street in Zürich, the Bahnhofstrasse. Famous for its luxury shops, its banks, and its avenue of lime trees, the Bahnhofstrasse, built 1867–1885, runs from the central railway station to the lake, is 1300 meters long, on average 25 meters wide. It is contained by five-story facades (with receding penthouses), nineteenth-century to postwar modern.

Early in June 1986, a visitor leaving the railway station by the southwest entrance is surprised to meet a lion coming in. The lion is the city's emblem, and there are stone lions on some of its buildings, but this one is life-size, grey, with white ribs; and he was not there last week.

Down in Shopville, a busy underground center beneath the taxis, trams, and cars that swirl around the south front of the station, two lions are romping around the popcorn stand. A few days later, they are replaced by a soft-ice queue.

Continuing up the escalator into the pedestrian street, the visitor meets lions strolling in patches of shade under the lime trees, sitting up, cat-like, on two-story telephone boxes, leaping through freestanding poster boards, posing on ledges over classical entrances.

Outside a department store that sets back one block from the Bahnhofstrasse behind a small park with pine trees, lion families are playing under potted palms. Others



leap through hoops, along the upper stories of business houses, balcony to balcony. A lion has adopted a family on a corner (sculptor EM'77; parents in dark angular metal, 1½ times life size; child with "12" on his backpack).

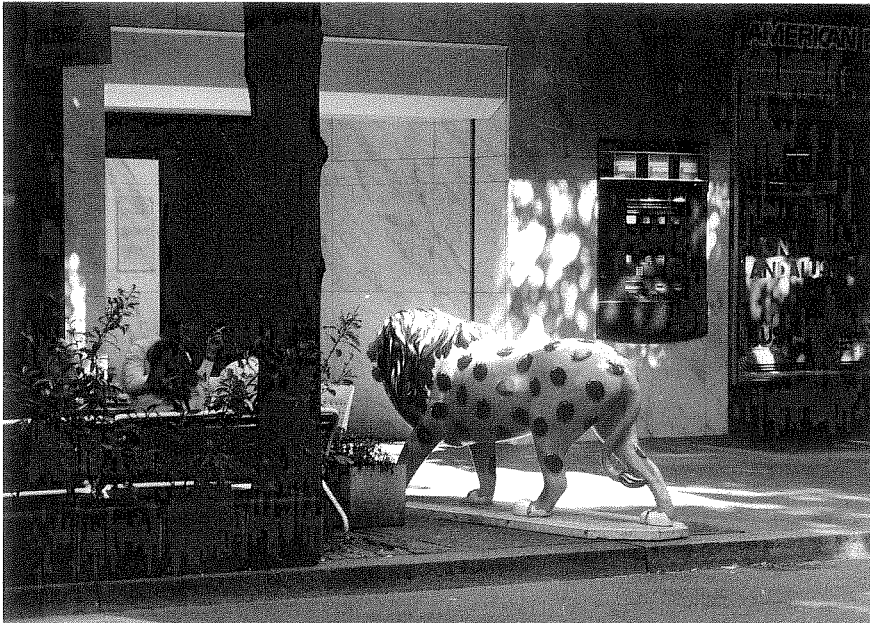
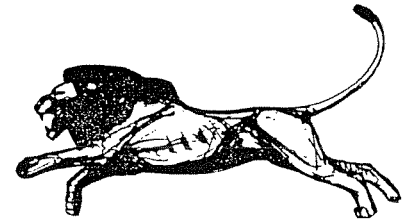
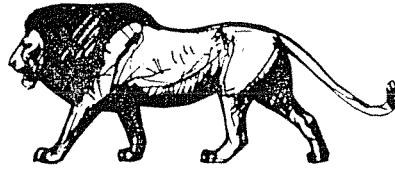
Four school children sit on the ground in the street with a teacher to draw lions, diverting the foot traffic. Patrolling in Max Bill's granite frames are three public lions—all red, all yellow, all blue, no logos. Small children are tentatively scratching and patting them; one boy sits underneath, growling through the front legs.

Some animals have their sponsor's name and reference number written inconspicuously on them, postage-stamp-size. One has "MAO." One has large brown spots, like coffee beans. Outside a photographer's shop, a lion has a cameraman up a tree; the man, head down under a cloth, is aiming an old movie camera for a close-up. Travel bureau cats are landscape-painted; a jeweller's cat is gold-plated; another has a gold watch and chain; a red lion is guarding Credit Suisse with a hammer and sickle.

Outside a famous café, proclaiming "hand-made chocolates," a dandy, vanilla-yellow coat with curly cream wig and a cherry on top, holds out his right paw (the Swiss are meticulous hand shakers). A woman alone, in a beige coat, stops and studies him, decides not, and walks seriously on.

The lions are changing the codes of the street. People are less restrained,

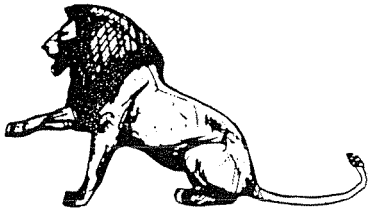




less guarded (which could be dangerous; there are trams running three-quarters of the street's length, in both directions, and a few cars easing out of underground lots or crossing at lights). The scale has changed. Instead of the usual streams of persons leading small dogs, there are streams of smaller persons. Lions jolt the imagination onto new tracks. Suppose, for instance, there were real lions and no humans in the street; all those carefully planned shop windows would be wasted. From everyone's point of view, it is the humans who make the street lively and successful.

A week later, the lions have been adopted. Absent-minded humans pat them in passing. The noise level has gone up. The higher pitch of young voices is noticeable, and there are many more children, not walking as usual with their parents, figuratively on leads, but riding, three at a time, on lions, lying along the manes, putting their hands into toothy mouths. (Some dental repairs have been required). Adults, patient, amused, standing around a five-lion carousel turned by child power; pushing your favorite animal is as popular as riding him.

At intervals along the street, many groups of three or four older children (numbers limited by request) are sitting on the ground, drawing. Some passers-by, men more often than women, stop to look at the drawings and exchange comments, delaying the work but adding to a general bonhomie.



At the street cafés, watching humans looking at lions seems to be as popular as watching humans looking at each other. Tourists line up to take photographs of their favorites from prime spots; the view of the ace in striped T-shirt and sunglasses is from the center of the tramlines.

The lions are the Bahnhofstrasse's contribution to Zürich's 2000th anniversary. The project was initiated and financed by the Zürich Bahnhofstrasse Association and its 157 members, representing owners and business interests in the street. Their chief display designers put forward the idea of using decorated lions.

Research, design, and execution of the lions was by Fabrik Atelier am Wasser, Zürich. They are made of Polystyrol, in six postures. After painting, each animal is unique, so that visitors in the street have a sense of expectation and are drawn along from one incident to the next. The most popular are those where the designer had accepted the lion as a creature and worked with his form and character. In contrast, the public tends to pass by with barely a glance those where the form has been used as a mere block for artwork. The small amount of damage done by the public to the lions is repaired immediately by FAW, on site or at its factory.

The lions add something for everyone. Small children especially enjoy short play experiments, with parents nearby. And as there are



so many lions, there are only a few children at each play area; the children add to the liveliness of the street without taking it over.

When the celebration is over, at the end of August, those lions not privately owned, or reserved for purchase, are to be auctioned. Then what?