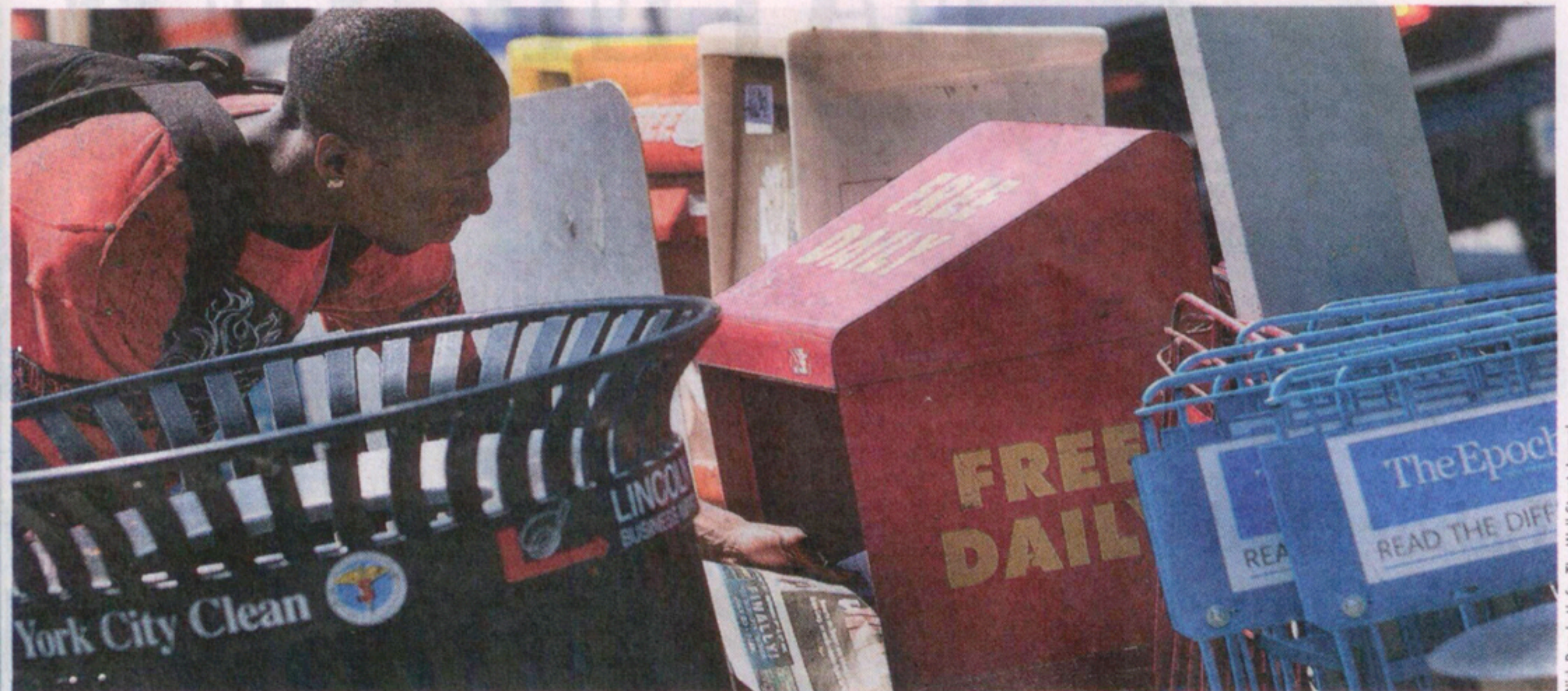


CITY NEWS



Mick Brandreth for The Wall Street Journal

Rule-breaking newspaper boxes include those that are within 15 feet of a fire hydrant or have a broken door or contain garbage.

URBAN GARDNER | By Ralph Gardner Jr.

Much Ado About Boxes



I thought I hated newspaper boxes, those receptacles that loiter on seemingly every corner and more often than not are empty or being used as garbage cans. That was until I met Hunter Armstrong and Rita Hirsch, the executive director and chairwoman of the streetscape committee of Civitas, an organization dedicated to quality-of-life and development issues on the Upper East Side and in East Harlem.

We arranged to convene on the corner of 86th and Lexington Monday afternoon so that we could hate the boxes together. But they turned out to have way more hate than me. An hour later—by which time we were stuck in traffic in the vicinity of 42nd Street and 10th Avenue, waiting to turn the corner so that we could despise several boxes placed ostentatiously in the middle of a bus stop—I was starting to get bored and hungry while they were just gathering steam. And they apparently take such tours all the time, Ms. Hirsch, in particular, finding boxes that break the rules right and left and reporting them to 311. Rule-breakers include boxes that are within 15 feet of a fire hydrant, or the entrance of a subway station, or within a bus stop, or those that have a broken door or contain garbage.

She described her initiative as “my gift to New York,” but confessed: “It’s like pushing a rock.”

But why jump to the end of our tour when we had so much fun right from the start? It began with the good Samaritans pointing out a single box at

the bus stop on the northwest corner of 86th and Lexington. I didn’t immediately grasp its significance (partly because it looked like all the other boxes in the middle of bus stops, though I seem to recall it was blue). But herculean efforts had apparently gone into getting its predecessors, a veritable regiment of receptacles, removed. “It’s back,” she said with alarm reminiscent of the local residents when Godzilla emerges from Tokyo Bay.

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Mr. Armstrong had rented one of those Zip cars to drive us around so we could disparage boxes not only on the Upper East Side but also the Upper West Side, Columbus Circle and Times Square. Sadly, the press of business forced me to decline their generous offer to drive me all the way down to 14th Street and Second Avenue, where Ms. Hirsch said the newspaper boxes are “a horror.”

Nonetheless, it still took us a quarter hour to reach our Zip car, parked at a garage around the corner, because there were so many malefactor boxes along our route, the majority of them empty. According to Mr. Armstrong, they must be filled at least once a month or be removed. (But then, where would people stash their drugs and garbage?)

As some point we had to move aside so that a gentleman could avail himself of a

free newspaper from one of them. I asked what he thought of the boxes, hoping to gain some balance, to hear an alternate voice.

“I hate them; they’re ugly,” he snarled.

“But you use them,” I observed.

“Rarely,” he said, and stalked off.

The Village Voice boxes seemed to encapsulate my dilemma with newspaper boxes. On the one hand, I wish they didn’t exist. But on the other I hate to be without something to read on the bus or subway—because I’m self-conscious and think everybody is looking at me, and also because I’m afraid to make eye contact with fellow passengers for fear they may kill me.

“I’m offended by the ads in back for the Asian beauties,” Ms. Hirsch said.

“I like the Michael Musto column,” I confessed.

I can’t say the duo seemed eager to engage in a discussion about the editorial merits of any of the publications in question. And as Ms. Hirsch was quick to point out: What editorial content if they’re empty? “They’re using these boxes for advertising,” she claimed, and hence their often eye-popping primary colors. “They don’t care if you take the publications.”

We had one more stop to go before reaching the Zip car. There was a bevy of boxes in front of Papaya King on the northwest corner of 86th and Third. “The customers put their garbage into the boxes” when there isn’t any room left in the hot-dog stand’s receptacles, Ms. Hirsch claimed.

Somebody must be cleaning them out regularly because

they looked fresh as daisies to me, except for the shoebox in one of them. None of us had the courage to open it up.

Ah, finally the air-conditioned refuge of our Zip car! I was more than willing to spot the rest of the boxes we’d be vilifying from there, but Ms. Hirsch’s desire was that we disembark and see the violations up close. After weeks, months and in some cases years of reporting the miscreants, I suspect that she and Mr. Armstrong have a more practiced eye than I do, but to me all the boxes looked like straightforward eyesores.

Civitas has enjoyed some notable successes at getting the boxes removed, including in front of the Dakota. “We called it in and said there were 14 boxes,” Ms. Hirsch. Nonetheless, she refuses to rest on her laurels. “There’s no real answer how some get removed and some don’t.”

Our next stop, though hardly our last, was 15 Central Park West, the posh apartment tower whose residents include A-Rod and Sting. We went to the Broadway side, where I held open one of the boxes while Ms. Hirsch used her iPhone to document its syphilitic contents.

She suddenly had an idea! Maybe Robert A.M. Stern, the building’s estimable architect, could call the city and raise hell. “He could make one call,” she said.

But then, realizing that even the great Mr. Stern might have met his match when it came to newspaper boxes, Ms. Hirsch wondered dispiritedly, “Am I exaggerating his influence?”

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