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The Ephemeral City

A student project creates wanderlust for an imaginary destination.

By Karen E. Steen

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New York residents weary of wintery conditions had their interest piqued by Amanda Spielman's travel pamphlet.

On the gusty day before winter's first snow, New York commuters could be forgiven for dreaming of vacations to warmer climes. If they happened to pick up one of 300 travel brochures distributed on the Manhattan-bound F train that morning, these Brooklyn residents might have been tempted by a destination boasting average winter temperatures of 84 degrees. They would no doubt have been further intrigued to learn that this island city's leading industries are winemaking and bookbinding, and that it features a Vegetation Museum, the world's largest flea market, "Pools of Certitude," and a natural feature known as the Subterranean Honey Baths.

Sadly for F-train commuters and other lovers of books, wine, and vegetation, the city of New Ephemera does not exist outside the imagination of Amanda Spielman, a 29-year-old graduate design student at the School of Visual Arts. One of her classes--"Can Design Touch Someone's Heart?" taught by the graphic designer Stefan Sagmeister--assigned students to touch a community of people using design. While other students created murals and public-service posters, Spielman decided to bring a moment of levity to beleaguered morning commuters and hit on the idea of a spoof travel brochure. "It was one of those projects where everybody was sort of holding their breath," Sagmeister says. "With [other projects], it was fairly clear that they were going to go over well. The New Ephemera brochure was more risky."

The brochure--an aesthetic cross between McSweeney's and Edward Tufte--evokes a fantasy culture where poetry and bicycle riding are exalted pastimes, and geographic features have names like Sea of Enumeration and Untold Islands. "I wanted it to seem rich and detailed, like a fairy tale too good to be true," says Spielman, who has worked as a graphic designer for *Food and Wine*, *Martha Stewart Living*, and Time Inc. Her tongue-in-cheek dream city features free ATM machines, a ban on plastic foliage, and an official motto of "people who don't read can't be trusted."

Part of the assignment was to show a reaction from the community, "some sort of mechanism built in that allows students to figure out if they touched somebody or not," Sagmeister explains. So Spielman's brochure included a phone number for the New Ephemera Visitor's Bureau. She received about two dozen calls, many from people who thought the "City of Fleeting Fulfillment" was a real place. "I honestly did not think anyone would call, but oh my God, people want to know where it is, they want to know what airlines service the airport," she says. "The best call was from this woman who said her husband is a big game hunter and he's looking for the largest moose he can find and does our island offer anything like that?"



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"In many senses it was an experiment," Sagmeister says, "but there were a number of people that cared enough about it to give a response or whose day was ever so slightly improved by it." That audience includes enthusiasts on the blog hanasiana.com and Sagmeister himself, who gave Spielman an A. But Spielman's favorite response was as fleeting as New Ephemera itself. On the morning she distributed the brochures, she recalls, "One girl, she must have been seventeen or so, ran after me. She had purple hair and funky glasses and she was like, 'This is awesome and I want you to know that I appreciate it and I think it's great!' And then she just got back on the train and ran back to her seat."

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