

ABORTION BANNER FLAP

Michael Rosen is not your typical real estate developer. With a PhD from the Wharton School, this former NYU professor of "Power and Politics" and exponent of "radical sociology" now heads a construction firm devoted almost exclusively to subsidized housing for the poor and victims of AIDS. Rosen's first development, a middle-income apartment building situated on Manhattan's Lower East Side called Red Square, was recently the site of a political flap among residents of this ethnically mixed, traditionally low-income community.

The reason? Consistent with his notion that buildings are not merely habitats but texts or vehicles for social communication, Rosen commissioned members of a New York design studio called Bureau (Marlene McCarty, Donald Moffet, Yuko Uchikawa and Mike Mills) to create banners on a political issue of their choice. These

would hang outside the building on three flagpoles previously used to advertise rentals.

Bureau prefers working for social causes, and routinely infuses messages of import into assignments that are not inherently political. So this project was a perfect opportunity for straightforward communication. Although a fee was not offered, the designers were given a tabula rasa. "The problem," said Moffet, "was deciding on a single issue out of the many we're concerned with." Ultimately they focused on women's reproductive rights and decided to coincide hanging the banners with a major pro-choice demonstration planned for Fall 1990.

The banners were created as distinct parts of a larger message. Passersby walking west on Houston Street would read "No More Nice Girls," "Keep Them Barefoot And Pregnant" and "Whose Body? Whose Choice?" Walking east, they would read



Buildings as texts: Political banners by the design firm Bureau hung for five days outside the apartment house Red Square in New York City.

PROVOCATIVE OBJECT

Part speed freak's fantasy and part death wish, the Red Shark may prove to be the world's fastest motorcycle. The result of a collaboration between Fritz Egli (whose previous two-wheeled creation set speed records in 1986 that remain unbroken) and the Swiss firm i Design, the Red Shark represents the single-minded pursuit of performance taken to the extreme. Powered by a modified 300hp turbo-boosted Kawasaki in-line four engine, the Red Shark is expected to propel its operator, who must lie prone inside the cramped monocoque fairing, at speeds approaching 250 mph. Whether or not the Red Shark ever becomes a record-breaking bike, says i Design's Fritz Solenthaler, hinges on finding a sponsor to underwrite the event. Even with sponsorship secured, however, the team must still find someone foolish enough to drive the beast. "Someone in our office volunteered," Solenthaler says, "but we told him that this was no job for a designer." —Nicholas Backlund



"Where is RU-486?" (referring to the French abortion drug that has not been allowed into the U.S.), "It's A Man's World," and "Your Body Isn't Yours." Says Yuchikawa, "The banners were not simply a rallying call." They were designed to be what Moffet calls "viewer aggressive," to engage passersby and commuter traffic in a kind of dynamic questioning.

After some production snafus, the banners were finally raised in February 1991 to a mixed response. Some Red Square tenants objected to having a political message attached to their home, notes Rosen, who admits that his own competing emotions and business interests made him think carefully about the ramifications before hoisting his banners. Another complaint was that the banners made too much noise as they flapped in the wind. Meanwhile, priests at a local church

argued that the banners' message was inappropriate, and the principal from a neighboring school protested that the message shouldn't be read by impressionable students.

Bureau received urgent phone calls from Rosen, who said the banners were not going to last. But rather than community or anti-abortion groups conspiring against them, poor manufacturing (no vents) and nature (heavy winds) forced their ignominious removal after less than five days.

In light of the ongoing anti-abortion cases being litigated in Utah and in other states, Bureau members hope their banners will hang again. Meanwhile, Rosen promises that, once repaired, they will be returned to Red Square. After all, he says happily, "the tenant who complained about the noise has moved to a higher floor." —Steven Heller