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Down the drain, up the creek

By Melissa Dribben

INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Charles Brown, 34, a city sewer inspector, spends his days crawling in and out of Philadelphia's plumbing.

Winifred Lutz, 66, a distinguished sculptor and professor emeritus at Temple University's Tyler School of Art, spends her days creating high-concept art.

Adam Levine, 50, an environmental historian, spends his days thinking, writing and consulting on urban watersheds.

What on earth do these three people have in common?

The ghost creeks of Philadelphia.

Brown, Lutz and Levine have all contributed to a project designed to raise awareness and appreciation of the hundreds of waterways that run through the city.

Once above ground. Now below.

This project, which involves an evocative, landscaped art installation and a virtual sewer tour, was sponsored by the American Philosophical Society.

The society, founded by Benjamin Franklin, may have an abstractly intellectual sounding name. But that's deceptive, said Sue Ann Prince. "Our mission is to explore the intersections of history, art and science."

In pursuit of that mission, Prince, director of the society's museum, invited Lutz to become an artist in residence. Lutz then created the artwork *Drawing Dock Creek*. The creek burbled through the heart of colonial Philadelphia until the late 1700s, when, in the interests of public health and civic dignity, it was buried.

"Clean water was an issue in Dock Creek in the 18th century," Prince said, "and it's a huge issue around the world today."

Sewers: We really don't stop to appreciate them much. But those essential out-of-sight, out-of-mind arteries beneath the city's skin are worthy of recognition from time to time because, frankly, cholera can really put a crimp in your social life.

For the historical and scientific piece of this project, the society hired Levine to create a presentation that would help people understand how public health and civil engineering affected Dock Creek and the other city streams.

Lutz and Levine had to dig.

She went into archives and unearthed maps to trace Dock Creek's path.

He went to Franklin Field and took a trip down a manhole. And this was where Brown made his contribution.

A burly father of nine from Germantown, Brown has worked as a "sewer crawler" for three years. Last week, he stood beside an open manhole on the University of Pennsylvania campus and helped Levine get into his gear. Heavy cotton coveralls. A thick rubber suit - boots and overalls all in one. Rubber gloves that extended to Levine's armpits.

Before he put on the hard hat, he was already drenched in sweat.

Along the 3,000 miles of sewers beneath the city's most esteemed institutions as well as its slums, the underground is equally fragrant, Brown said.

"You never get used to the smell."

The two men climbed down a ladder, the rungs draped with soggy ornamentation that had floated by and gotten stuck during the last heavy rainstorm. They ducked under a yellow gas meter, which would (ostensibly) emit an alarm if the oxygen level dropped, and then sloshed into the middle of an ankle-high gray stream.

Brown ran his searchlight over the 15-foot-high concrete walls, searching for cracks. In the process, he rudely interrupted a massive multigenerational reunion of *Bigbrowncockroachiae disgustus* - the species destined to inherit the earth.

"When you see them, that's a good sign," Brown said, unconvincingly. "It means there's plenty of oxygen."

Another good sign, he noted, is when rodents appear. That often happens when he's on his hands and knees in claustrophobic tunnels, scraping across ancient brickwork.

"They move so fast when they go across your back, they're gone before you have time to get scared."

Unfortunately, Levine was not able to document this valuable element of the tour. It was a bad day for vermin spotting beneath 33d Street.

He did come away with a fine collection of photographs. "I'm going to use all of them in the presentation," he said. His 20-minute "Virtual Sewer Tour" is being offered hourly at the

American Philosphical Society Museum this weekend.

Across town, Lutz stood on the bank of a swale behind Carpenters Hall. She stooped to check the condition of one of thousands of blue bungee cords that she and her assistants had painstakingly measured, leveled and stretched across the banks of the phantom Dock Creek, to remain there through Sept. 27.

Where the elastic ended, Lutz represented the continuation of tributaries by allowing grasses and thistle to grow. Where the grass ended, she painted sinuous whitewash lines over brick steps and cobblestone paths.

"This is a memory of the creek's significance," said Lutz, "its presence and its beauty."

A tiny woman with piercing blue eyes, gnarled fingers, and a gray braid down to her waist, the artist took a moment to watch the wind ripple through the blue elastic the way a breeze ruffles water's surface.

A couple of teenagers came up to the edge, looking as if they were about to wade in. Lutz ran across the lawn, calling, "Wait! Please don't step on it!"

In Franklin's day, houses, tanneries and slaughterhouses grew up along Dock Creek and dumped their toxic waste into its currents.

Pestilence threatened, so eventually the city buried the waterway.

Lutz wants her art to make people think about where they are in space and time.

To stop taking their surroundings for granted.

"All good art is a concentrated form of paying attention in the world," Lutz said. "If there's anything I would like people to get out of my work, it's to recognize how perception changes, depending on where you stand."

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