

Nicer Transit Stations Attract More Riders

ERIC JAFFE JAN 31, 2014 30 COMMENTS



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The PATH station being built at the World Trade Center for [about \\$4 billion](#) won't be finished until 2015, but its main hallway opened up last fall — at a reported cost of [\\$225 million](#). It is, at least, a nice hallway. Port Authority chief Pat Foye has called the station an "[unparalleled destination](#)." For an unparalleled price, it better be.

But are transit stations really "destinations" in the absolute sense? More to the point: Do riders really care how nice they are?

The question is pretty apt considering a renewed trend toward gorgeous train and transit stations. These include the [Arts et Metiers station](#) in Paris, the [Stadion station](#) in Stockholm, the [Expo station](#) in Singapore, among others. The new focus on aesthetics has been dubbed a "station renaissance," with many being designed by big name architects (Santiago Calatrava is behind the new PATH).

Recently a pair of civil engineers at the University of Naples, in Italy, [tried to estimate](#) what exactly this renaissance is worth to the average rider. They compared ridership of two lines of the Campania regional metro system: one traditional line, and the new "Rainbow" line that opened in 2009 at considerable cost. By service standards, the routes are remarkably alike — both serve a similar corridor with similar trains running similar travel times. But the Rainbow stations (left, below) are what you might call unparalleled. The traditional ones (right)? Very paralleled.



Using a series of rider surveys and statistical models, the Naples engineers concluded that station aesthetics did, in fact, influence rider decisions about which line to take. They found that commuters were willing to pay about 50 cents (Euro) more per one-way fare at the nicer stations, to wait up to 7 minutes more for a train, and to walk an extra 10 minutes to get there. The latter metric is the equivalent of extending the station "catchment area" (basically its service zone) by about a quarter mile.

The researchers conclude that a station's architectural quality should be an explicit design consideration and should even be compared against other service metrics, including frequency and accessibility, when determining transit improvements.

To some extent they do have a point. The perceptions people have toward transit matter, sometimes **over and above** objective service metrics, and striking the right balance is important. Scale aside, there's no reason the interior of a transit station shouldn't be as pleasant as the interior of a car.

But there are major problems with putting station aesthetics above all other factors, and they all come back to limited funding for public transportation. Devoting such an enormous amount of taxpayer money to a single station suggests that certain parts of a transit system are more important than others. Beyond that, when the size of the station investment grows into the many billions, it's reasonable to wonder whether that money could not only be used to improve service across an existing system but perhaps even be used to build a **whole new one**.

In a world with infinite resources, no doubt all riders would want all transit stations to be unparalleled destinations. In this actual world, at this particular time, let's not forget that even the nicest hallway is just another way to get from here to there.