In the Second Avenue Subway, art and architecture are at odds

When the MTA subway extension opened January 1, it was only the beginning

BY ALEXANDRA LANGE | FEBRUARY 28, 2017
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAX TOUHEY


Architect Harry Weese’s first Metro design presentation to the Washington, D.C., Commission of Fine Arts in April 1967 did not go well. Commission member Eero
Saarinen called the exposed granite sidewalls of Weese’s design for the system’s deepest stations—rumpled and craggy, inspired by several in Stockholm—“Hansel and Gretel.” Commission member Gordon Bunshaft described them as “folk art” and the overall look as “a refined coal mine shaft.”

At subsequent meetings, the commission pushed back on Weese’s desire to express the different station configurations (exposed, tunnel, cut-and-cover) through varied interior design. Rather than fairy tales, they wanted something in the “spirit of the classical style,” as Saarinen put it. According to historian Kathleen Murphy Skolnik:

> Halfway through the two-hour meeting, Bunshaft, attempting to illustrate what the commission wanted, turned over one of Weese’s presentation boards and sketched a vaulted design similar to one initially submitted by Weese… Weese refrained from pointing out the similarity between the two and instead praised Bunshaft’s concept as “a pretty exciting thing.” Former Weese employees involved in the project credit Bunshaft with saving Weese’s vision for the grand vaulted spaces that are the dominant feature of the Washington Metro system.

I had cause to reflect on the D.C. Metro—and look up its origin story—after two visits to the first four stations of the Second Avenue Subway, which opened January 1, 2017. The extension of the Q line is already popular, the stations are spacious and clean, and the MTA is justifiably proud of public art installations by Jean Shin, Vik Muniz, Chuck Close, and Sarah Sze in each of the new stations. But I could tell, just by looking at it, that the process had been very different from that of the Metro, just as the photos one takes in the Metro are very different from the snippets of Second Avenue showing up on Instagram.
C R I S T I N  T I E R N E Y

D.C.’s fine arts commission wanted the Metro system to be all of a piece, with a singular design, specific to the nation’s capitol, that would be both inspiring and utilitarian, repetitive but not dull. Somewhat unbelievably, Weese succeeded, creating what remains one of the most beautiful subways in the world (actual train service aside).

Rectangular concrete coffers recall the grand vaulted ceiling at Washington’s Union Station, as well as many of the government’s neoclassical buildings, while also reducing the weight of the column-free stations’ vast vaults and providing a flat surface for acoustic panels. The hexagonal quarry tile floors, the stumpy way finding columns, and the Helvetica labels are always the same, and yet riding the Metro as an architectural experience is never boring.

In the Second Avenue Subway stations, there is art, and a clean, well-lighted architecture, and yet the Second Avenue Subway is not a work of art. I wish (and not for the first time) that Gordon Bunshaft were still around.

For the Metro, Weese’s office worked with lighting designer William Lam and graphic designer Massimo Vignelli to create equally regular schemes for illumination and signage. It’s always a shock to me, native to the motley New York City subway, when the recessed lights along the edge of the Metro platforms begin to blink to signal an incoming train. That detail suggests that the brief of the subway designer is closer to that of the industrial designer than the architect, molding an experience around movement and understanding.

New York’s “system” is more readily characterized as a long series of annexations and hacks. Vignelli and Bob Noorda’s 1970 graphic standards for New York’s MTA, designed during the years when Vignelli was also working on the D.C. Metro, were designed to be applied over the varied decor of the IND and the BMT, which merged in 1967.
The MTA’s iconic, banner-like metal signs provided a foreground impression of regularity, allowing the terra-cotta swirls and enameled ceramic tiles, not to mention the steel columns painted every color of the rainbow, to recede into the background. When Michael Bierut and his team at Pentagram were asked to make an addendum to the MTA manual for the Second Avenue Subway, they tried to play it as close to Noorda and Vignelli’s as possible.

“The MTA had already installed a quote-unquote solution for this at the Lexington Avenue and 63rd Street station, which was kind of expressive and creative,” Bierut says, referring to the much-maligned squished “Lex63” installed in that station several years ago. “We were being asked to provide an antidote to willful personal expression, really behaving like judicial originalists, I would say.”

So Pentagram treated each off-white ceramic wall tile as if it were one of the black signs, placing the station number flush left, in the top corner, in the same manner. It’s legible, and yet in the context of the vast off-whiteness of the new platforms, Mr. 72 and Ms. 86 look a little lost. The Vignelli and Noorda sign standards were meant to contrast with the undisciplined panoply of stations built over many decades. The platforms of the new stations offer no contrast. They just are. This is not the subway as a work of art, but a subway saved from dullness by works of art.

Maybe it had to be this way: Sandra Bloodworth, director of MTA Arts & Design, says that it would have been impossible to have the level of artist-architect integration here that the MTA achieved at the Fulton Street Transit Hub, where artist Jamie Carpenter’s small-o oculus tops a layer cake of balconies, stairs, and escalators executed in the same silvery materials. And yet the overall effect at the Fulton Transit Hub is of a kind of stainless steel soup in which the advertising dominates.

For Second Avenue, the architects and engineers at AECOM and Arup developed locations for art as part of their initial designs, setting aside areas with the best sight lines and trying to protect the installations from competing with advertising and screens. (AECOM and Arup formed a joint venture to provide engineering and architectural services for the line’s Phase 1.) The artists selected were able to choose street-level walls visible through the glass enclosures of the storefront entrances as part of their canvas—a first for the MTA.

Kenneth Griffin, who was chief architect of the Second Avenue Subway and the manager of the Transportation Architecture Group at AECOM, describes the overall aesthetic goal as “strong, timeless architecture that is going to stand up over the decades. It was a decision I made early to have this light color, a sharp crisp space, and the natural concrete overhead.”

Unprovoked, he brings up a station that I know, from past experience, is highly divisive. “I intentionally avoided strong bold colors because they date you. The existing 63rd Street station has that 1970s orange tile. The nice white fabric allows the art to sing.”
And yet, photographer after photographer has gotten sucked in to the stations in Munich, a line also initiated in the early 1970s, and the images that I find most appealing are those that change just one thing each time: strong, bold, and possibly dated colors. Munich’s Marienplatz station is encased in tangerine metallic panels, presumably lighter and cheaper than Washington’s concrete coffers; the Brudermuehlstrasse station in midnight blue; the Garching station in citrus hues. Rolf Schirmer, of the subway’s planning council, said the stations should “radiate a positive mood.”

The Munich stations illustrate a streamlined version of the idea of the flame-orange tiles selected by Philip Johnson for the 49th Street station in the early 1970s, and repeated at Bowling Green. I know my love of the 1970s has blinded me to the terrors of flame orange, but handsome tile has long been a hallmark of New York City subways, back to the Guastavino grandeur of the abandoned City Hall station. Monumentality isn’t the only way to achieve an integrated effect.

Of the Second Avenue artworks, Vik Muniz’s “Perfect Strangers” at 72nd Street is the clear winner on social media. The life-size tile portraits of real New Yorkers—a gay couple, a mother with toddler and stroller, a businessman (Muniz himself) in a scatter of papers, a sari-wearing woman with cellphone—have provoked waves of me-too portraiture as people find their best match.

My son posed with the little boy in a Superman cape at the base of one escalator; my daughter next to the grown man in the tiger suit. What you don’t realize when you see the portraits isolated on Instagram is that the tiled strangers are not waiting with you for the train, ranged along the outer wall of a station with a center track. They are upstairs on the station’s grand mezzanine and in the entrance vestibules, so to admire them you have to stop what you are doing—taking the subway—and look at the art.

Bloodworth says that this, too, was a carefully considered choice. “We decided the opportunity was on those mezzanines, and the biggest impact would be on the mezzanine and entries,” she explains. “We have to think about maintenance; it becomes a different level of maintenance if you are going to be experiencing it along the tracks.”
Griffin points out, too, that while you may have time to gaze while waiting for the train, you don’t want people lingering as they exit.

The thrilling art gallery on the escalators and mezzanines stops short of the platforms, making the core experience of the subway, and the place where you might spend the most time—the platform—the least inspiring place to be. The architecture of the Second Avenue Subway serves as a white-walled backdrop, and were the art to fall into disrepair or, in the line’s future expansion, found to be too expensive to commission, New Yorkers would be left with what I found to be a generic shell. The difference between art and the architecture becomes a chasm.

There are enough of the Muniz figures to hold your attention on a stroll up and back, but one can see at the 86th Street station, where tile versions of Chuck Close portraits hold court, that transportation bureaucracies abhor a vacuum. On the ceramic tile walls of the mezzanine, between vivid heads of Close, Kara Walker, and others, the MTA has pasted up its own wan signs advertising wifi access in all the stations. I read the posters’ presence as a form of design criticism—it feels as if something more is needed.

To properly consider Jean Shin’s metallic, partly transparent photographic murals of the old Second and Third Avenue elevated lines at the Lexington Avenue and 63rd Street station, you have to stand in a narrow hallway with your back against the elevator doors. (And it took me a long time to find those elevators.) Rushing for your train, you wouldn’t notice your own reflection in her golden tracks, or the muted movement of the trains running behind the image.

Shin’s installation, called “Elevated,” has three distinct parts, which relate thematically but not stylistically. If you’d told me they were by three different artists, I would believe you. I see the best subway art as dynamic rather than static, flowing rather than intended for a fixed viewing point.

At street level, bold, rust-colored tiles depict the criss-cross steel structure that once carried the tracks, creating a backdrop for a modest, in-building entrance. The visual strength of that scrapped steel also reads as architecture critique: how tough it looks in comparison to the fan-shaped glass canopies and stainless-steel connectors of the new subway entrances.

Transparency, slimness, and stainless have become the go-to transportation aesthetic. Griffin thinks they are timeless, but I disagree, particularly when the Apple aesthetic has become so pervasive.

The only artist to attempt an environmental work of art is Sarah Sze, with “Blueprint for a Landscape” at 96th Street. From under a large shell-like glass canopy, lit with blue LEDs (reportedly a late addition suggested by Governor Andrew Cuomo), you descend past a giant illustrated map, white lines against a brilliant blue background, baked onto nearly 4,300 ceramic tiles lining the station walls. Sze banishes off-white and fills the entrances with shades of blue, concentrating the maddest, most intense drawings at the topside beginning of the journey.
Down below, Sze’s lines become more abstract and simplified, scattering down the blue mezzanines like a flock of birds. Sze acknowledges the actual shape of the station, making her imaginary flights pool in the corners and rise toward the door, rather than treating it as a series of ordinary walls.

“I wanted to use tile as if it were one large piece of paper,” Sze told the *New York Times*. The blue alone makes me happy, and there are some great clashing moments when the Vignelli signs are simply mounted atop the drawing like a sticker. Boom. I wanted the birds to fly me all the way onto the train.

Sze’s “Blueprint” is a restrained version of the design approach taken, in the early 1990s, along Los Angeles Metro Rail’s Red Line, and is better for it. When *Los Angeles Times* architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne reviewed the Expo Line stations in 2012, he described them as “aggressively banal” but praised their relative restraint in comparison to the Red Line, where “every rail station [is] uniquely designed to reflect the demographics of the immediate neighborhood. That approach ... was a misstep architecturally and a disaster in terms of maintenance, since each station has to be cleaned differently, its materials aging and breaking down at a different pace.”

![Entrance to the 96th Street station.](image)

The Red Line stations offer an equal and opposite counterpoint to Weese’s designs for D.C. Metro: all art, no architecture; all narrative, no system. I prefer Lance Wyman’s signage for the Mexico City Metro, which, in many cases, transforms images of above-ground landmarks into a coordinated wayfinding system of icons and custom typography. It manages to introduce character and scenery into a high-modern system.

Weese made the D.C. system a continuous architectural monument (it won the AIA 25 Year Award in 2014). It doesn’t need art to fascinate, and it doesn’t need variety to be interesting. The combined instincts of Weese, Bunshaft, and Saarinen were correct (no surprise). I hope the powers that be will consider a bolder architecture, or a more environmental art, for Phase 2 of the Second Avenue Subway. Fear not flame orange—fear instead New York looking like anywhere else.