

CRISTIN TIERNEY

**theguardian**

## Second Avenue subway gives New York reason to cheer – and fear – the new year

Governor Cuomo heralds Q line extension, new artwork and clean stations but some passengers sense possible gentrification of their slice of the Upper East Side



The Second Avenue subway extension was first proposed in 1929 and first attempted in 1972.  
Photograph: Alba Vigaray/EPA

Edward Helmore in New York  
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New Yorkers got their first chance to ride a new subway extension on Sunday, after almost 100 years of planning and construction.

To loud cheers, the first Q train to run from 96th Street in Manhattan to Coney Island set off soon after noon. New York governor [Andrew Cuomo](#) was aboard to celebrate an engineering project his administration has made a matter of state and city pride.

“It’s the inaugural ride,” Cuomo told a large crowd who pushed their way into the subway cars. “It’s exciting, and it’s a great way to start the new year here in [New York](#).”

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The completion of the \$4.4bn Second Avenue line – technically a four-stop extension of the Q – is a substantial achievement for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. The line was conceived in 1929, at the height of the Jazz Age, and its construction started 45 years ago, in 1972. It stopped soon after when the city ran out of money. The project restarted in 2007 and was completed on time.

The nearly two-mile segment adds stations along Second Avenue in the Upper East Side, at 96th, 86th and 72nd streets, and a new connection to an existing line at 63rd. City planners have long considered the extension critical to easing congestion on a system that carries 5.6 million riders on an average weekday.

On Sunday, Second Avenue residents expressed excitement over their new mobility but also anxiety over whether the line would hasten gentrification in an area widely regarded as one of the last comparatively affordable spots in Manhattan, a borough where the [average apartment price hit \\$2m last year](#).

“The rents might go up and bit but it’ll bring way more customers to the restaurants on Second Avenue,” said Pam Miller, who was riding the Q with her son, Ben. Make-up artist Toby Klinger, 36, said the extension would make the area more liveable.

“I’ve been living on Second Avenue almost my whole life and we’re already seeing rapid gentrification,” she said.

Klinger rejected the notion that with the help of the new line and the planned closure and renovation of the L train to Brooklyn, the Upper East Side might become a new Williamsburg – home, like the neighbourhood over the East river, to a surging population of millennials in hipster uniform.

“I like being the only hipster,” said Klinger. “It used to be a very diverse neighbourhood with a mixture of white, black, Latino and Arab families, and it’s becoming a place for young professionals to dock their iPhones. The character of the neighbourhood is changing completely.”

Alan Behr, a lawyer, said the opening would allow a far easier commute to Midtown. The construction of the line had already changed the neighbourhood, he said, with local stores losing business as a result of the disruption.

Behr, 62, doubted the new line would lead to a rapid transformation. “The Upper East Side is a much quieter neighborhood than downtown,” he said. “When a woman was killed in a hit and run at 10.30 at night, nobody saw it because everyone was asleep.

“But in New York, when you can get from here to there, it’s always a pro. Anything that gets mass transit running faster is a good. The prices may go up but at least we’re going faster. This is our first new foray into mass transit, and that’s important for us.”

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Amid the positivity, there were some dissenting voices. Bienvenida Rodriguez, who said she had lived in the neighbourhood for 37 years, said the construction had been “noisy and scary”.

“We’ve had explosions,” she said, “sometimes we had no water. It’s been rough for the people living here. I hope now it won’t be dangerous but I’m afraid the homeless will come here now. So we’re praying for the best.”

Other passengers, however, noted that the new stations were a vast improvement on the city’s existing stations, many of which date to the early 20th century.

The new stations feature striking artwork. At 96th Street, the transportation authority commissioned Sarah Sze, who represented the US at the Venice Biennale in 2013. Her new works use the intense blue of Spanish pottery.

At 86th Street, Chuck Close has created 12 large-scale portraits of subjects including composer Philip Glass, the late Lou Reed and three other painters, Cecily Brown, Alex Katz and Kara Walker.

Elsewhere, there is work by Vik Muniz, Kara Walker, Jean Shin, Zhang Huan and Sienna Shields.

“It’s fabulous,” said another passenger, Lauren Michaels. “The trains are bright, the concourse is clean and I’ve been reading about the artwork, which looks pretty interesting.”

“I like the way they chose a different artist for each station, and actually doing art. Let’s see how it wears.”

More than two thousand people worked on the extension, tunnelling through granite and digging through sand and mud.

The line is also meant to run north through Harlem and ultimately into the Bronx but no date has been set for that phase of construction.

“This was a long time coming,” noted Cuomo as the first train pulled out. Disembarking at 86th Street, the governor offered a jovial assessment of his trip.

“There’s no steering wheel and no brakes so it was a good thing they wouldn’t let me drive,” said Cuomo, who is reported to be [eyeing a 2020 presidential run](#) against another prominent New Yorker, Donald Trump.

“I was along for the ride. It was the first ride and it was a great one.”