

DREAMS OF THE AGORA, NIGHTMARES OF A MALL:

Critical Impressions of the World Trade
Center Transit Hub



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Blair Lorenzo

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The World Trade Center Transit Hub—New York's new, \$4.5 billion transit terminal—clearly has grand ambitions. It isn't merely self-consciously monumental; it also sets out to be a transformative public space—one that will bring the spark of urban life to a neighborhood that so desperately needs it. Crafting a deeply functional public space, however, is a difficult task even in the best of times, and building a node for urban life—an agora for the modern city—is a taller task, still. Can the Hub actually fulfill its architect's grandiose promises and craft a truly urban environment from scratch?

A critical examination of the station reveals a space that is maddeningly ambivalent. On the one hand, it is a place that consciously echoes the designs of other successful, urban stations—a space which not only possesses an awe-inspiring center, but which could act as an urban refuge from the commodified, tourist-centric memorial above. On the other hand, however, it is also a complex riddled with troublesome decisions, led by problematic management, and plagued by unanswered questions—a space not only dominated by omnipresent security, but seemingly on the fast track towards becoming a shopping mall in the guise of a privatized "public" space. In other words, the Transit Hub has a lot of potential. It also has the potential to be a monumental disaster.

The Stage

It was only with a great deal of trepidation that I made my way to lower Manhattan to visit the newly opened World Trade Center Transit Hub—the \$4.5 billion station that now serves as the southern Manhattan terminus for PATH trains. Some of my reticence undoubtedly stemmed from the cloud of negative buzz that currently envelopes the project. After all, the station is already arguably more famous for its slipped schedules, ballooned budgets, and astronomical price tag than it is for any of its own architectural or urban merits. That makes it a challenging space to analyze without preconception, particularly for those of us in the New York region. At the same time, for better or for worse, the Transit Hub will be one of the largest single investments in public space infrastructure that New York City will see for some time. It will also undoubtedly be one of the most expensive.

And yet, for all of that, I knew that my trepidation was actually rooted in something far deeper than the structure itself, or the controversies surrounding it. It stemmed instead from the proverbial elephant in the room: to engage with the Transit Hub, one must confront the reality of its location.

For many New Yorkers, the World Trade Center site is still emotionally fraught ground. This isn't solely due to the trauma of sixteen years ago—although that certainly plays a major role. It is also because of what we fear—and see—the site fast becoming: a sort of memorial cum tourist-trap; a tragic, Disneyland-esque landmark that all visitors feel constitutionally required to visit during their time in town.

Of course, an effective memorial to a painful tragedy will always be incredibly difficult to weave into a living city. When that memorial is simultaneously expected to be a multiuse public place, the challenge increases dramatically. And when the tragedy was as large, as culture-defining, and as spatially-rooted as September 11th, it explodes exponentially.

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The task set out for the World Trade Center site is gargantuan. It must mix the somber reflectiveness of a cemetery with the bustle and vitality of urban life, and it must do so while supporting the everyday needs of the human beings who will hopefully be using it. Making matters worse, it must also do so whilst encapsulated within an archetypical American downtown. While lower Manhattan may quickly be becoming more residential, more mixed-use, and more deeply urban, the site's immediate environs still primarily consist of a monoculture of office buildings, peppered with the occasional high-end or tourist-focused shop. When now faced with an additional onslaught of sightseers and all the ephemera they bring with them, it is perhaps no surprise that the site has become as unpleasant and uncomfortable as it has.

Yet this is the environment that Santiago Calatrava's Transit Hub—and though I am usually aghast at the lone-artist persona falsely ascribed to architects, there can be no doubt that this project carries his name with a little TM at the end—must overcome if it is to succeed as a public space. Calatrava's station overtly seeks to emulate the successes of places like Washington, DC's Union

Station or New York's own Grand Central Terminal. It aspires to be a train station that can leverage its passengers and its grand spaces to create a public space of far greater import than mere transportation alone. It seeks to become a vital and significant component of the public realm, not only for the neighborhood where it is located, but for the entire metropolitan region as well.

There is some precedent for this. Busy transportation nodes—that is, places where people transfer from one mode of transit to another, such as from train-to-train, train-to-bus, or train-to-foot—often have an inbuilt potential to become intense, important, and urban places¹. After all, they already contain the most important ingredient, people—a variety of people, from all walks of life, all doing different things, at different times of the day—in droves. If leveraged skillfully—if people and urban life are treated with care, and given room to flourish—a busy transit node can be magnified into a special type of place: a social and psychological center, a node for urban life. Such urban nodes are agora-like places—spaces that support a multiplicity of uses, and become nexuses of human activity for many different groups of people doing many different types of things.



Transit nodes, like Washington, DC's Union Station have the potential to become intense, important urban spaces².

Possessing the potential to become such a space, however, does not mean success is guaranteed. Crafting and operating an urban node is no easy feat, and as we shall see, Calatrava's station faces immense challenges, far above and beyond the usual difficulties involved in building entirely new urban space. Worse still, the Hub embarks on its quest without many of the advantages that have graced other, similar stations. Fundamentally, its templates—places like Grand Central and Washington's Union Station—not only serve more transportation users, but also cater to a fundamentally different type of passenger. Even the station's name is symptomatic of its difficulties. "Transit Hub" is an ungainly and unnatural moniker, especially when used in conversation, and is only slightly more palatable than its proper name, PATH's World Trade Center Station. It is hard enough to feel personal and political ownership over a public space that is, for all intents and purposes, privately controlled. It is harder still when you cannot even refer to it without resorting to linguistic gymnastics.

Can the final complex live up to Calatrava's soaring rhetoric and become a true urban node—or even simply a true, multifunction public space? In many ways, the Hub is an architect's dream and an urbanist's nightmare: a place that invests almost all of its energy into the power of pure, unbridled architecture, with only the most basic examination of how it fits into city life. Urban places require more than pretty environments. Their success or failure is ultimately a function of

myriad, often subtle details, many of which focus as much on the operation of a space as on its physical structure. The Transit Hub is thus a kind of test case: a chance not only to examine the difficult architectural reality of attempting to construct an urban place out of whole cloth, but also to explore the elusive nature of the often unrecognized urban node.

At the time work on this piece began, the Transit Hub was still significantly unfinished, and detailed information and plans were hard to come by. While this has sometimes made the station hard to critique, the incompleteness also allowed the Hub's potential to thrive. In the intervening months, that potential has dimmed: construction has continued and much new information has come to light—almost all of which does not bode well for the station's future. However, the Transit Hub is still young, and even though there are strong reasons not to have much faith in those in charge, the station's ultimate success or failure will still depend on its finishing details, on its management, and on the mindsets of its political, commercial, and civic overseers.

The Transit Hub has the potential to be an important, urban space. It also has the potential to be a monumental disaster. In the long run, only time, civic pressure, and the skill and commitment of greater New York's decision makers will spell the station's fate.

The Exterior

I wasn't quite sure what to expect as I navigated the still confusingly-worded signs to the surface at the Chambers St.-World Trade Center subway station. With so much handwringing, so much criticism surrounding its price, and so many predicting its failure, it is hard to approach the Transit Hub without overwhelming preconceptions. I walked down Church Street prepared to be underwhelmed, perhaps even disgusted. To get a better view—and to try to enhance the dramatic effect—I crossed the street to stand beside the old, wrought-iron fence behind St. Paul's Chapel. As I did, the building finally came into view, suddenly and startlingly.

To anyone who has followed the saga of the station's design and construction, even in passing, the building's silhouette is already incredibly familiar. Before seeing it, I worried that repeated exposure had sapped the excitement of the structure, dampening its impact through overfamiliarity. And yet, to stand across the street from the Transit Hub—to see it in person—is to see the structure anew. The building is immense,



Calatrava claimed his station's wings would "soar", and he wasn't exaggerating³.

possessing a magnitude hard to truly apprehend from photos or renderings. The shocking proportions only amplify the structure's form: it stands out like an exclamation mark. When Calatrava claimed the station's "wings" would soar into the air, he wasn't exaggerating. Of course, the station's forceful and distinctive design would be eye-catching anywhere, but it is impressive beyond simply appearing unique and dynamic. It has an immensity which, instead of overwhelming its delicacy, instead intensifies it, elevating the structure in ways hard to appreciate without experiencing it in person.

But at the same time as the façade began to undermine some of my preconceptions, others were being immediately, and unfortunately, confirmed. It is impossible to pause and study anything at the World Trade Center site without looking like a tourist—something doubly true if you dare to wield a camera. I had not been stopped but ten seconds before being accosted by a man with a fistful of pamphlets, selling or promoting who knows what. He asked patronizingly if I knew what the building in front of me was, and tried to wedge in a rather unconvincing-sounding story of how he had been in one of the towers on that fateful day. His shock that a stationary person in this place might not be a tourist was palpable in his stunned persistence: he continued long into verbal dismissals and a gruff, dismissive New York face and tone of voice.

In many ways, this hawker's immediate and unwanted presence is emblematic of the World Trade Center site's alienating unreality. Right now, it feels that the site has been completely given over to boorish tourism. If this station and this site are to become true urban fixtures—if they are ever to regain (or, given the architecture and design of the original World Trade Center, simply gain) a deeply multiuse flair—this sense of everyone being a visitor and everything being a cultural commodity has to be circumvented. Otherwise, the site will remain the sole preserve of tourists, of hawkers, and of the occasional disgruntled office worker or commuter, walking with their head down quickly as they can, trying to remain in this uncomfortable place for as brief a time as possible.

As I left the east side of the structure and began looking for a way inside, something else became abundantly clear: open or not, the Transit Hub is still very much a construction site, and very much a work in progress. Now, let me be explicit at the outset: I am not an architecture critic, *per se*. For any particular building, I am far more interested in how it enables or inhibits urban life than in its artistic qualities. While buildings that are attractive on a grand scale can boost a city's aesthetics, their real import lies in their interface with the street, the functionality of their ground presence, the human scale of their ground façades, and most importantly of all, their usefulness and importance to the community.

Right now, however, it is impossible to judge the street interface of Calatrava's station. Not only is there no way to reach its base—it is hard to even catch glimpses of it—neither are there visible ways inside. Instead, the station is surrounded by jersey barriers topped with chain-link fences—fences which themselves are plastered with opaque vinyl printing. When you finally do catch a glimpse through the walls, you realize the station's footprint is still a mess of mud and vehicles, with no clear hints yet as to how it will eventually tie into its environs. In fact, between the narrow and crowded pedestrian corridors, the austere concrete barricades, the omnipresent security guards and police officers, and the alien discomfort of being made to feel a visitor in what is



The friendly concrete barricades, barbed-wire, and opaque printing surrounding the Transit Hub.

supposed to be a preeminent public space in my own home town, the site brought to mind images of East Germany and the Berlin Wall—not exactly the imagery of urban success.

Obviously it is not entirely fair to critique the Transit Hub for not yet being completely open—although given its slipped schedules and extreme budget, I'm sure some would be willing to try. But as of this writing, it is nigh impossible to get a sense of how the station will interact with the surface and the surrounding cityscape.

This situation is made all the worse by the fact that there are no publically accessible plans, only vague architectural renderings. Even the environmental impact statement—the federally-required document that outlines a project's scope, projected impacts, and initial design—is not readily

available online. Instead, the Port Authority has decided to sequester it, providing access only by way of written response to an obscurely published notification—something almost unheard of in the modern age⁴. For an agency tasked with creating public space in an ostensibly democratic society, this is a worrisome sign, to say the very least.

All these things combine to make the Transit Hub of today confounding. You walk around the soaring station, knowing it is open, and yet find no discernable way inside. From a distance, the building impresses, but up close, there is nothing to see. Fundamentally, successful urban design relies on innumerable small details and delicate subtleties. Today, there is simply not enough information to predict how well the project, whenever it is finally completed, will function as a piece of the urban streetscape.

Instead, all we have at present is the cold, alienating maze that surrounds the Hub. The site's unpleasant hostility is so strong that it even begins to tinge the structure itself, transforming what minutes before had seemed so gleaming into a blank expanse of concrete and glass. It begins to amplify every little imperfection—highlighting, for example, clunky, metallic joints that are wildly out of place amongst the building's organic lines.

Undoubtedly the final landscape will differ from the one that exists today. But between disquieting environs, worrying political opaqueness, and a massive security apparatus, initial impressions of the Transit Hub were not off to a good start.

The West Concourse

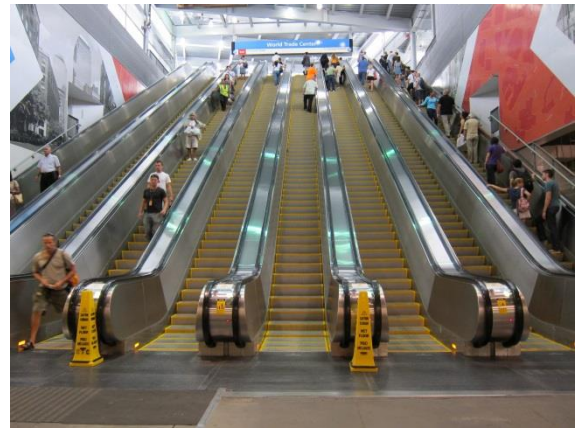
All of the signs at the World Trade Center site still point towards the entrance of the temporary PATH station. Seeing nowhere else to go—and hoping it would connect to the new terminal—I made my way in that direction.

Though nothing to write home about, PATH's temporary station is somewhat impressive in its own, machinelike way. The entrance is dominated by a giant, utilitarian bank of stainless-steel escalators, clearly indicating the magnitude of passengers the station is meant to handle. That being said, the affective qualities of engineering efficiency wear off quickly, and this station is fundamentally a barebones affair. It exists simply as another subway station, one which provides nothing for its passengers beyond an entrance to or exit from PATH trains. It neither attempts to leverage this mass of humanity for any greater purpose, nor strives to be an architectural landmark. In that regard, its modest goals (and unremarkable results) play a kind of foil to its replacement's grand ambitions.

Reaching the bottom of the escalators, I started to become concerned: was I on the right track? In front of me lay a wall of turnstiles, behind which were stairs to the PATH platforms. The only other visible outlet was a ramshackle corridor, oriented away from Calatrava's building, simply labeled, "West Concourse." Seeing no other way to go, however—and not looking to travel to New Jersey that day—I entered the twisting, boxy hallway. It was immediately apparent that this was a makeshift connector, constructed of bare concrete and wooden, white-painted construction walls—one built cheaply and sandwiched in where space could be found. The rough-hewn plywood doors at its end gave no hint as to what lay beyond.

The shock of entering the (somewhat infamous) West Concourse from that connector cannot be overstated. One minute, you are walking along on bare concrete, through what is clearly an active construction site; the next, you are enveloped by an almost impossibly white light, and surrounded by sumptuous, opulent materials. The effect, like the hallway itself, is disconcerting.

The West Concourse presents a study in contrasts. On the one hand, it is airy, delicate, and gorgeous. Its white marble floor and wall are luxurious, almost extravagant—suddenly it becomes clear where at least some of the money spent on this station went. The ceiling appears to float on rib-like supports, and while you don't quite forget that you are underground, it is hard not to be impressed by the vertical breathing room of such a horizontal space. Halfway down its length, the Concourse is broken by a slight turn and a hanging bridge, reducing the dehumanizing visual impact that long, straight passageways can often bring. The bridge itself entices, creating a vantage point one feels compelled to explore, and in the process draws people up to the Concourse's second level.



The utilitarian, stainless-steel reality of the temporary PATH station⁵.



A vast expanse of white marble: the West Concourse.

Topping it all off, the passage possesses a wall of what will presumably be retail, potentially giving the passage a depth of life and urban function.

On the other hand, however, the West Concourse can feel equally as cold and sterile as it can graceful. In many ways, it feels like it was ripped from the set of a dystopian science fiction film: it would be right at home as a backdrop in *Minority Report* or *A Clockwork Orange*. The most notable feature is the solid, white wall. While made of exquisite marble, it is fundamentally still a long, blank expanse of stone—not exactly the world's most human-friendly design element.

Meanwhile, the storefronts opposite the wall currently stare out blank and empty. For all of its visual allure, the Concourse will ultimately be defined by what is chosen to fill these spaces. A skillful curation of shops and public nooks could humanize the space, making it feel more like a street and less like an overbuilt hallway. At the very least, well-chosen shops might make it a more friendly and inviting place. But if these spaces are filled carelessly—for example, with a spate of common, uninteresting luxury stores—the cold sterility of the Concourse would only be amplified. In the worst case, the passage would, in effect, become nothing but an expensive and exclusionary shopping mall—a risk, as we shall see, that permeates the entire Transit Hub.

Stepping back to the big picture, a strong argument can be made that the West Concourse's opulent sterility is a major source for the Transit Hub's infamy. The corridor was the first part of the station to open, almost three years prior to the rest of the complex. For observers watching the station's soaring costs and slipping schedules, this space—which, while pretty, wears its extravagance on its sleeve—offered (and offers) an easy symbol of the project's excesses. In this view, the Transit

Hub had fast become a somewhat literal white elephant, with the West Concourse representing nothing but the, "world's most expensive hallway⁶."



The West Concourse, from the hanging bridge, showing spaces for retail and the long, white wall.

Wherever one's position on the Hub comes down, though, the space as it stands offers precious little to analyze as to how it will function or fail as urban place. Its current isolation, for example, makes it hard to divine who will use it or why. The Concourse currently runs from what seems a massively overbuilt escalator bank to the World Financial Center at one end to a temporary wooden wall at the other. There, one presumes, it will continue into the station proper. The only other entrance to the West Concourse, other than the temporary one through which I came, is via the lower level of One World Trade Center—specifically, from the entrance lines for the tourist-centric observation deck. Given these paltry connections, the hallway is currently filled with what you might expect: a flow of leery office workers and commuters escaping the plaza above, mixed with a trickle of bewildered and seemingly-lost tourists.

If the West Concourse seamlessly connects to the bulk of Calatrava' station, and if it is filled with the right balance of shops, seating, and other human facilities, it could become a busy, pleasant, and useful public space. Just as easily, it could remain emotionally cold and barren—a place some pass through as a shortcut, but nothing more; a place with so few people it might well have to be shuttered outside of working hours out of safety concerns. Worse still, it could also potentially end up as an extension of the plaza above, becoming yet another sightseeing stop for tourists to check off their lists, while providing little for regular denizens but discomfort. Given its current unfinished state and the paucity of public information, there is simply no way to tell for sure.

There is one thing, however, which seems very unlikely to change, but which will significantly affect both the station's usage and perception: security. By this point in my exploration, the omnipresent security guards and police officers had begun to feel increasingly overbearing, even oppressive. One cannot walk through any part of the station without noticing them. There is one around every bend, and one for every section of hallway; it is impossible to go more than one or two hundred feet before encountering yet another guard or police officer.

Given the history of the World Trade Center and the current politics of America—not to mention the management style of the Port Authority—this security presence isn't necessarily a surprise. Nor is it unheard of: in the same city, Grand Central Terminal contains a huge circulating staff for security, cleaning, and outreach. This even includes a handful of young, overwhelmed, and out-of-place looking National Guardspeople in thankfully ridiculous-seeming camouflage flak jackets. Yet in Grand Central, the staff—with the notable exception of these soldiers—is almost always moving, almost always overwhelmed by the presence of other people doing other things, almost always in the background. They tend to disappear—you do not feel watched every single second—and so it remains a comfortable place.

In contrast, walking around the Transit Hub feels analogous to being in the panopticon: at every moment, you know you are more than likely being watched. At best, this is incredibly uncomfortable, like being constantly eyed-over by the guards of an overzealous art museum. At its worst, however—as you keep encountering guards and officers watching your every move—you begin to feel like a trespasser in a public place, to feel as if one wrong move will have you ejected—or worse. This is not a space where anyone would feel comfortable staging a political protest, that's for sure. But the discomfort cuts even deeper than that. Any urban space—especially one in a place already so desperate for urban life—has to allow denizens to feel comfortable, at a minimum. To be truly urban, places must encourage personal political ownership over space and place. This is what allows the agora to become a public extension of home, a place where people feel comfortable to express themselves and to live their everyday lives.

"In contrast, walking around the Transit Hub feels analogous to being in the panopticon: at every moment, you know you are more than likely being watched."

Even with its high-end shops and its superfluous soldiers, Grand Central engenders this sensation in spades. It does so—at least in part, as we will discuss later—by existing as a train station first and foremost. You are always free to wait, and by extension, to work, to browse, to talk, and to simply exist in space. In contrast, the World Trade Center Transit Hub, at least in its current state, only amplifies the affect of the memorial above. It pushes regular urbanites to keep their heads down and rush to and from their offices and trains, lest they be treated not merely as a stranger, but as a criminal—a criminal in a space which should be welcoming and familiar.

The Hub is, of course, unfinished, and this situation could change. A flood of passengers and other denizens could make security less palpable. Institutions and affordances that encourage intensive use of the space could be cultivated. The Port Authority could even take up a more tolerant and urbane approach to security, instead of one driven by reactive fear. None of these, however, seem particularly likely—particularly in the short term.

By this point, things were not looking auspicious for the Transit Hub. In its best moments, the complex could dispel preconceptions with visual awe. The more time one spends in its halls, however—the more deeply one analyzes its spaces—the more cracks begin to appear. And most pressing of all—at least for me in that moment—I could still find no way into the station's center.

The World Trade Center Memorial and its Discontents

I exited the West Concourse through the basement of One World Trade Center even more concerned than when I first stepped foot underground. Had I made a mistake? Was the Transit Hub, regardless of media coverage, really open yet? On the ground, there was no way to tell.

My anxiety was not helped by traversing the tower's nether regions. It is hard to feel any level of comfort in the fortress that is One World Trade Center. One false step feels like it would end with a night in the Tombs—or worse. Beyond the fear of ever-present security, there was also almost no clear demarcation between public and private space. Was the doorway I picked actually an exit, or would I be forced onto the chintzy—and empty—lines for the tower's observation deck? Or worse, was this an entrance for the office building, a place that clearly communicates its lack of time or patience for interlopers?



The friendly facade of One World Trade Center⁷.

Much of the space at the new World Trade Center site is composed of such privately-owned public spaces, a strange class of property that has a fraught history. In exchange for zoning bonuses and other benefits, developers promise municipalities the provision of public spaces. While this sounds like a tremendous bargain on paper, in practice, they often fail spectacularly. In our property-venerating culture, clear, visual distinctions between public and private spaces are vital—after all, most denizens rightly feel uncomfortable entering private-looking property without business there. At the same time, property owners, regardless of their promises, have little incentive to make their spaces either inviting to strangers or attractive for unsanctioned activities. People thus avoid such places, and they often remain dead and unused⁸. This was a trap the original World Trade Center fell into—the Port Authority, though a public agency, tended to act exactly like a traditional landlord—and is a precedent the current site seems sadly to be following.

The more I traveled, in fact, the more I was eerily reminded of the first World Trade Center, and of one memory in particular: my first independent exploration of it. My loosely-defined goal back then, as a fledgling, teenage student of urbanity and urban life, was to visit the central plaza that lay between the towers. Leaving the subway and circling the site, however, I could find no way inside—at least, no way that looked publicly accessible. Wherever I turned, I was met by nothing but wall after wall of nondescript and unwelcoming office building, with no obvious—or even less than obvious—paths inside. I circled the superblock for nearly an hour until, stymied by poor 1970s

architecture and urban design, I finally gave up, never reaching, nor even glimpsing, the plaza within. Perhaps *that* was why, in so many photos and recollections, it was always devoid of people—there was no straightforward way to access it! As I once again undertook a similar quest for an entrance, it was hard not to feel that, even in a much more urban-appreciative 21st Century America, history was repeating.

With no other way to go—and with no entrance in sight—I headed in the only direction left: through the World Trade Center Memorial. To walk across the Memorial is a strange and disquieting experience, one defined by deeply uncomfortable juxtapositions. On the one hand, the space wants to be an urban plaza, full of comfortable benches, warm trees, and human-scaled paths, all set against spacious, jaw dropping vistas. It strives to be a place where office workers rest, where nearby residents meet, and—while being a place where people mourn—also being a place where everyday life goes on.



The original World Trade Center Plaza, devoid of people⁹.



A view of the World Trade Center memorial¹⁰.

either task, and instead ends up as the worst of both worlds. It is a space almost exclusively designed to appeal to the lowest common denominator tourist, with some green space, some chairs, and some tables thrown in on the margins for good measure.

The World Trade Center Memorial is a sterile, pre-packaged experience. Lines of cheery, expectant tourists are everywhere. A snack bar sits jarringly adjacent to the deep-set reflecting pools, shattering the sense of quiet reflection they are meant to engender. The plaza bears a unified signage and is built with a unified style of kiosks and furniture, evoking, more than anything else, a theme park. The signage itself bears a logo displaying, "9/11" against stainless steel, with the towers of the 11 highlighted with uncomfortable pride. It is a unified branding for a culturally commodified place.

The Memorial exists as somewhere for tourists to take clichéd pictures, to check off their itinerary, and to visit the gift shop. It is not a place that is particularly comfortable or welcoming for

But the inescapable reality is that this is no ordinary public plaza, nor is it a memorial for any normal tragedy. The Memorial cannot pretend that nothing happened here, nor does it have the gravitas to commemorate the trauma of September 11th. Instead, it wants to have it both ways: to be a place for national mourning *and* to be a lively and open green space amongst the canyons of lower Manhattan. Such an alchemy may or may not be possible, but the plaza we have today is not up to

regular denizens—nor is it a place for those seeking solace or reflection. It is a space to be visited, consumed, and left, not a space to be lived in or a space to mourn in

In a strange and sad irony, this state of affairs may actually end up working in the Transit Hub's favor. Because the Hub is underground, it may possess enough distance to allow for a truly urban public space to form—a respite clearly

separate from the macabre tourist trap above. For that to be true, however, there would have to exist a way inside—something that was still very much not in evidence.

Well aware that my exploration was quickly (and worryingly) becoming less an impression of the Transit Hub than one of the site's redevelopment as a whole, my attention could not help but be drawn to the streetscape, such as it is. I crossed the newly restored-to-the-grid Greenwich Street and walked alongside Four World Trade Center. Like almost all the new buildings at the site, it is immensely disappointing at street level. There are but a few stores and little else of visual interest or practical use for urban denizens. Its footprint is constructed from dull, unrelatable expanses of glass and steel, which in turn mainly overlook imposing and austere corporate lobbies. Change some of the surface textures and finishing details and the architecture might as well have come from the 1960s. Indeed, as I came to the other side of the building—on Church Street—and saw in the distance the large, bright, multicolored signs of what is otherwise an unremarkable, chain-dominated shopping block along Broadway, I felt an immense relief: here was a piece of normal, if unspectacular, urbanity.

What is the purpose of restoring Greenwich Street if it was not going to be used as a place for urban life? It is supremely frustrating, as if real estate developers and architects have learned nothing in the decades since the scathing critiques of the likes of Jane Jacobs and Richard Sennett¹².

The South Concourse

Finally, after circling the site in its entirety—and much like years before, getting ready to give up in frustration—I finally came across a hopeful sign. At the southeastern corner of Four World Trade Center lay a set of doors which, at first, seemed exactly like all of the building's other entrances. A handful of small signs, however, labeled this portal simply as, "PATH." The entranceway's design and signage matched the rest of the building; once again it was hard to tell whether or not this was really a public space, really somewhere people could or should feel welcome to enter, small signs be damned. Still, following a flow of workers and what seemed to be commuters, I made my way inside, proceeding down a now familiar looking set of white stairs and escalators into another passageway. The marble, white-and-grey sci-fi reality left no doubt: I was back in Calatrava's Station.

I had stumbled into the South Concourse, a long L-shaped (or, if you include the stairwells, S-shaped) set of hallways. Unlike its sibling, the West Concourse, this space does not blow you



The World Trade Center Memorial logo¹¹.



The marble, white-and-grey sci-fi reality of the South Concourse.

away with aesthetic beauty; instead, it is a rather lonely, empty, and unpleasant place. Of course, any urban place can look sad and broken when it is empty. Devoid of people, a monopurpose central business district at night and the nigh-abandoned Main St. of a rust-belt town can feel equally lonely, despondent, and unsafe—even if one will take on a very different quality come morning. But whereas the West Concourse shows occasional glimmers of potential, this corridor does little to inspire optimism.

The South Concourse is numbingly white and stupefyingly linear. While it has vertical columns along its sides which could have visually broken up the corridor, they instead are repetitive, monotonous and unadorned. Meanwhile, the ceiling consists of sleek, unbroken lines that emphasize the horizontal distance of the space. When combined with its blind corners and serpentine shape, the result is a space that feels cramped and tunnel-like. The South Concourse does not feel like a place; it feels like a hallway you are funneled through. More than anything else, the Concourse reminded me of New York's current Penn Station. Although the ceilings are somewhat higher and the light undoubtedly brighter, being in it feels like being a rat trapped in an underground maze.

The South Concourse's aesthetic cues are similarly deadening, and only reinforce the Transit Hub's dystopian affect. To my mind, the architecture was most reminiscent of the 2008 video game *Mirror's Edge*. As a game, *Mirror's Edge* relies heavily on its visual style to tell its narrative. It takes place in a sparkingly clean, dense, and urban-looking city; a city which, while on the surface seeming to function for its residents, is actually the product of a corrupt, authoritarian government with no

tolerance for dissent. This fictional city is a visual allegory for the society that built it. Its architects and planners, for instance, have hidden the complex, potentially ugly infrastructure that makes the city work entirely from public view, in the exact same manner that the city's government has forced disorderly, iconoclastic, and dirty dissenters into a societal underground. This city is political repression made visible by way of impossible public order and unreal cleanliness.

Now, I do not expect Calatrava or the Hub's denizens to have had personal experience with this one piece of potentially obscure media, but at the same time, the visual language utilized in *Mirror's Edge* is a common cultural trope. Many a dystopian work utilizes sleek yet clinically cold and sterile environments for the same effects: to imply draconian control over space alongside the suppression of unauthorized, potentially messy public displays of individuality. Examples, like the films mentioned earlier, abound.

While it is sometimes visually impressive, I can't help but think that the visual grammar of dystopianism that Calatrava has tapped into is not a style to aspire towards. A cold and ordered space signals to denizens—sometimes subtly, sometimes forcefully—exactly how they are meant to act within it. Compare the affect created by the silent, white walls of an art gallery to the one generated by the colorful and cacophonous panoply of a busy shopping street. Each strongly impacts our usage and perception of those spaces.

Of course, I don't want to take this metaphorical reading too far. Not every building needs to emphasize its Corbusierian pilotis or brutalistically wear its function on its sleeve, nor does any space create an inevitable pattern of action for its users. But architecture does create an affect, one which in turn shapes the way people use and experience the spaces it creates. If the Transit Hub is going to be an urban node, it needs not only to be a place people want to spend time in, but also a place they feel comfortable and free in. A design with psychological roots in the cultural tropes of dystopianism and authoritarianism may ironically be politically apt, but it is fundamentally counterproductive to that end.

Having been primed by these cultural connections—or maybe it was the other way around—it was impossible to miss how the South Concourse also reinforced the omnipresence of security. The corridor is effectively divided into segments that bend tightly into one another. This makes the presence of a different guard in each and every section glaringly obvious. You are constantly reminded that you are never out of their line of sight, and it quickly becomes hard to escape the feeling that you are trespassing—that any small misstep will bring immediate retribution.



The clean, dystopian future of *Mirror's Edge*¹³.



The South Concourse can have a dystopian affect, but it also has a (quite literal) light at the end of the tunnel.

You do not feel at all free in this structure built immediately beneath a self-described memorial to freedom.

True, deeply-functional urban spaces not only allow, but encourage denizens to possess legitimate senses of political ownership and personal investment. This is nigh impossible to engender when you are made to feel uncomfortable and unwelcome; when, in a way akin to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, your more basic requirements for personal autonomy and reasonable freedom of action are not met. Far beyond the architectural idiom of its designer, the Port Authority's palpable paranoia may well cripple their signature space before it ever has a chance to succeed.

All of which raises a significant question: what does success for the South Concourse look like? Why is it laid out in such a strange way, and what purpose, beyond being a mere hallway, is it intended to serve?

At the time of my first visit, the spaces between the South Concourse's many columns were filled by temporary, grey-painted construction walls. These made the space feel very cold and very empty. While there was no confirmation at that time of exactly what would fill these voids, their size and spacing were clearly tailor-made for retail. Retail, of course, can be a very important part of urban life and of urban space. It can attract people, can be an important component of the local economy, can be practically useful and aesthetically pleasing, and most importantly, can give a depth of life and functionality to places that might otherwise be empty or sterile¹⁴.

Retail is not a panacea, however. First and foremost, as in the West Concourse the stores that eventually move into the South Concourse will face a herculean task: they will be forced to provide *all* of the color, the texture, and the functionality that the space will ever have. The Concourse simply does nothing to make itself personable: on its own, it is nothing but row after row of blank columns and white space. There are no places to lean against outside the flow of traffic, no alcoves to duck into for a quick conversation, no visual or textural affordances to ease the eyes. All that exists instead are spaces for floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows—not exactly a recipe for a relatable, human environment. The space even currently lacks the usual fixtures of an indoor retail environment—furniture like benches and planters. These would not only provide shelter and scale, they would create nucleation points for pauses, conversations, and other facets of urban life.

“Almost all malls, alas, instead turn out to be mere simulacra of streets: places built to the human scale as well as for human perception and physical needs, but without any of the other factors that drive urban life, ultimately ending up as sterile homages to bland consumerism. Retail alone does not an urban environment make.”

The best case scenario might see the South Concourse turn into a kind of indoor street or plaza. Unfortunately, however, achieving such a street-like atmosphere has been the unrealized dream of almost every shopping mall since Victor Gruen conceived of the concept¹⁵. Almost all malls, alas, instead turn out to be mere simulacra of streets: places built to the human scale as well as for human perception and physical needs, but without any of the other factors that drive urban life, ultimately ending up as sterile homages to bland consumerism. Retail alone does not an urban

environment make.

Since work on this piece began, it has become increasingly clear that the South Concourse is not only turning into a mall, but that being one was always its intent. The first evidence of this came as I left from that first visit, when I discovered that the South Concourse is actually made up of two nearly identical levels, stacked directly atop one another. Putting aside the fact that these serpentine mirror-images are a wayfinding disaster waiting to happen—there is no way to tell them apart from the inside—this doubling seems to have no purpose other than to maximize retail space. After all, it is hard to imagine that this particular concourse will generate enough foot traffic to justify two levels, and even if it did, one wider space would be a far preferable solution. A similar argument can be made for its serpentine shape: while a straighter line would have been more convenient, a sharp curve maximizes the amount of retail frontage available.

The coup de grace, however, has come from one part of the partnership in charge of the station. Rather than operate the Transit Hub's retail directly, the Port Authority outsourced its administration to the Westfield Corporation, a national operator of luxury shopping malls. Westfield properties are not public or urban places; they are consumer malls in the classical sense, and the company has given no indication that the Transit Hub will be any different. Indeed, their website proudly names the space the "Westfield World Trade Center," and boasts of the 350,000 square feet of retail space that they control in the heart of Lower Manhattan¹⁶. Now, arguments could be made both for and against utilizing such a private retail operator—and the Port Authority may not have had a choice, as we will discuss later—but it is clear that Westfield was given wide

latitude in the space's design, particularly to ensure enough retail space. True to form, the past few months have seen a host of standard luxury shops begin to fill its halls. Put simply, right now, the South Concourse—as well as large parts of the Transit Hub as a whole—are not on a course to become truly public spaces, but instead to become parts of a mall.

It need not have ended up like this. The Transit Hub—like almost all potential urban nodes—has one owner and was built in one architectural idiom; such is the nature of singular structures. As such, truly urban economics—

economics which revolve around different rental rates, lot sizes, building ages, and owners—cannot easily operate¹⁷. There is, however, a middle ground. If the shops and institutions that fill the space are carefully curated, an urban-like environment can be simulated, at least to a certain degree.

Consider Grand Central Terminal. While the station's management could have opted to simply maximize retail return, they have instead undertaken an ongoing project of curation, carefully mixing retail types, price ranges, tenant statures, and target markets. What's more, they have explicitly and directly sought to incorporate only local, New York-based tenants—not national chains. The result is a space not only with an urban feel, but one that is useful and comfortable for many different social groups. Moreover, not only are these smaller local shops far more spatially-rooted, and thus far more interested in the social nature of their environs than other retailers, they are also generally more intriguing for those who are looking to consume. Of course, this simulation of urban economics has limits—it will never generate the dynamic new businesses and industries that urban economies are known for—but that isn't necessarily the reason for its cultivation. Instead, the businesses of an urban node primarily exist to support the practical, social, and spatial needs of the people who use the space.

In the same vein, not all of the space in the South Concourse need have been set aside for retail. Large alcoves, a waiting room, restaurants, a dining concourse, or some other sort of public space could easily have been carved in amongst the stores. Such a space need not have been devoid of commerce—the food of Grand Central's dining concourse, for example, only strengthens its social utility—as long as it was space that was both open and open-feeling to non-consumers as well. Such spaces would treat the Concourse, and the Transit Hub as a whole, more as the public space it

“Put simply, right now, the South Concourse—as well as large parts of the Transit Hub as a whole—are not on a course to become truly public spaces, but instead to become parts of a mall.”



The Westfield Culver City, an example of a Westfield property

was supposed to be, instead of as the mere shopping center in a hallway that it seems to be becoming.

Instead, the South Concourse—and indeed much of the rest of the Hub—is quickly filling with bland, bog-standard luxury retail chains and not much else. As such, it is fast becoming an upscale shopping mall attached to a train station, not a truly public or truly urban space. In

this mode, the Hub's grand spaces and posh, curvilinear architecture—alongside its overbearing security—convey not a sense of monumentality as intended, but instead an affect of cold, consumerist exclusivity.

The last thing Lower Manhattan needs is another mall, another consumption-oriented, soulless place. What it needs is genuinely urban space—particularly of the type an urban node could provide. And while it is possible the unfinished remainder of the Hub will be managed and programmed deftly, so far Westfield has merely followed its usual retail game. The result is tragic: a useless, deadening playground for luxury shopping in the guise of a public place.

The South Concourse does, however, have one thing going for it: a quite literal light at the end of the tunnel. And once you are bathed in it, what a light it turns out to be.

The Oculus



To enter the Oculus—the name Calatrava has given the centerpiece of his station—from the South Concourse is to take a class in architectural capture-and-release. One minute, you are claustrophobic, buried, and lost; the next, you are bathed in light and air, the contrast only amplifying the grandeur of an already breathtaking space. Michael Kimmelman, the architecture critic of *The New York Times*, took the Hub to task for not taking advantage of this effect—and perhaps, from some ground-level entrances or from other locations that are neither finished nor open to the public, that may be true¹⁸. But from either the South Concourse or from the throat-like staircase that leads to the PATH mezzanine, the space of the Oculus explodes.

With all of the criticism surrounding the Transit Hub—its cost, its schedule slippages, its commercial nature—it is surprisingly easy to overlook the Oculus itself. After all, just like the station's exterior, it is already intensely familiar, having been firmly planted in the public consciousness through years of architectural renderings. Just as with the exterior however, the Oculus is a space to which pictures do not do justice—a space that can break preconceptions. Now, there are some dark clouds brewing in this gorgeous space's future; clouds which may threaten the monumental affect Calatrava has worked so hard to create. Still, particularly in its early days, the Oculus demonstrated a clear potential to be a truly transcendent space, one which, no matter the rest of the Hub's flaws, should not be overlooked.



At its best, the Oculus soars. It can be cynicism-busting: it is a space so large, so bright, and so airy that even as you stand in its center, it is hard to take it all in. It is awe-inspiring in the classical sense, and needs to be experienced to be fully appreciated. There is an old adage that all architects live to create amazing indoor spaces. If that is true, then *this* is precisely the sort of space that every architect dreams of one day having the opportunity to create.

It may seem odd given its grandiosity, but, particularly during my first visits, there was something of New York's High Line in the atmosphere of the Oculus. Instead of being raised above the city, here you are sunk two levels below it. You are still enmeshed within the city—the massive, enveloping windows which overlook the surrounding buildings make sure of that—but you are also one step removed. Inside, the city is framed for you, and you are able to view it in ways

that would be difficult or impossible at street level. In a clever bit of orientation, you are invited to look up at One World Trade Center, which rises almost exactly in line with the central skylight. This



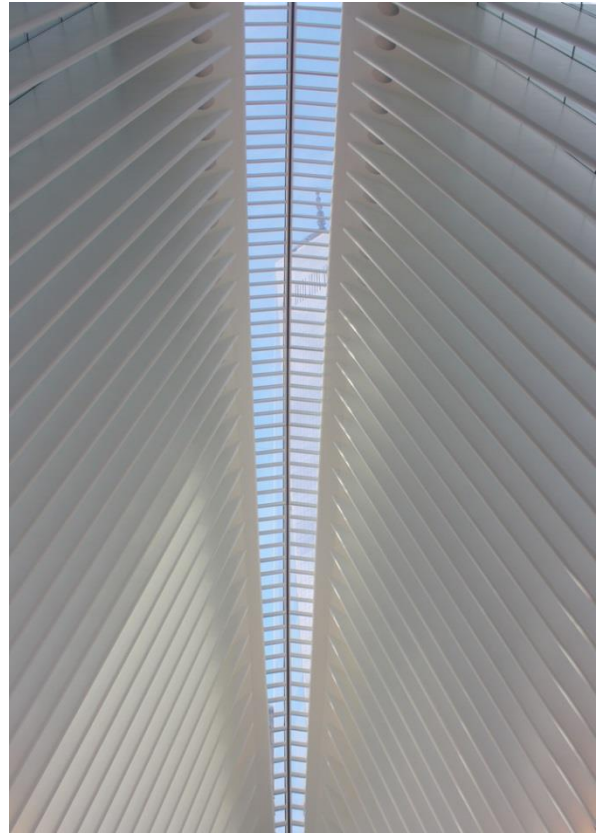
is one of the few places that makes the scale of this often unremarkable building clear, and is somewhere that, more than anywhere else at the World Trade Center site, makes it feel a proper piece of the city's texture.

The Oculus also has a cathedral-like quality to it. As in Grand Central's Main Concourse, sound dissipates into its immense vertical space, making it surprisingly quiet, almost reverent. In its early days, people—myself included—sat on the cool yet comfortable marble floor as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The environment drew you into a state of meditative appreciation, not only of this architectural space, but of the city as a whole.

Being removed from cacophony of the city whilst still subsumed within it invites you to pause, to take it all in. People of all stripes stop to take pictures, but they aren't nuisances, and don't stand out: this is a place that organically invites photography. The Oculus is somewhere you want to stop in, and somewhere you don't want to leave. During those early visits, the space was truly monumental, and could not have felt more antithetical to the uneasy and uncomfortable plaza above.

In terms of function and design, the obvious point of comparison for the Oculus—and indeed, for much of the Transit Hub as a whole—is Grand Central Terminal. In part this is because they are both iconic New York train stations—or at least are trying to be. But it is also clear that Calatrava has utilized the monumental American train station as a model for his work, and none more so than Grand Central. Both are centered on triumphant and ethereal main spaces. Neither of these central halls are normally entered directly; instead, they are usually accessed through enclosed hallways or from train platforms. This not only emphasizes their scale, but also demarcates them as distinct spaces, places that are at once an integral part of the city, but also distinctly their own. Other similarities exist all the way down to posh and finish, including the copious use of expensive and luxurious stone for walls and floor. Put simply, the Oculus is self-consciously monumental.

No amount of architectural praise, however, can hide the fact that the Oculus's nature is changing from what it was in those earliest days.



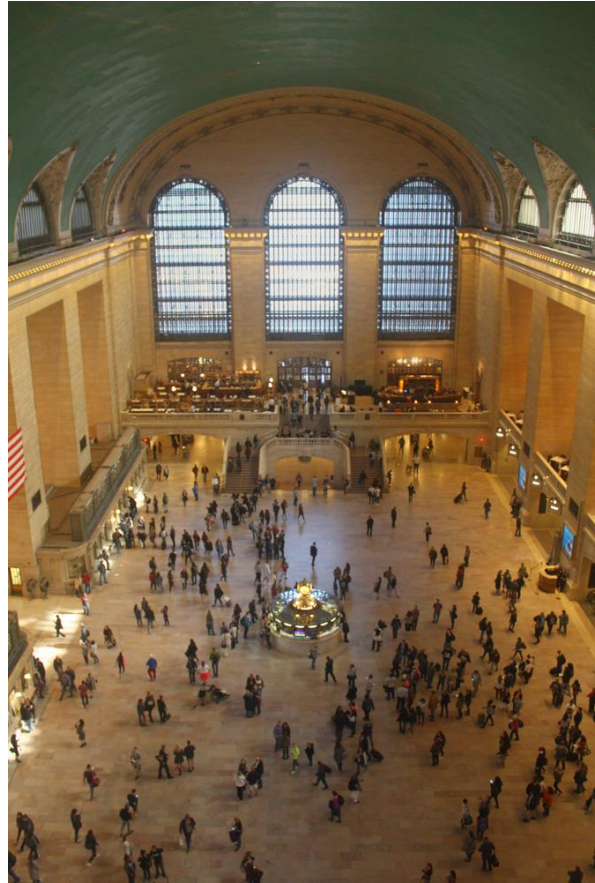
And while it is not yet entirely clear how dramatic these changes will be, dark, unsettling clouds are certainly rising over this sparkling space—clouds which I fear threaten to engulf it whole.

During my first visits, the Oculus existed primarily as a place for circulation, exactly like Grand Central's Main Concourse, only more so. Whereas Grand Central has (now mainly supplanted) ticket windows and its famous information booth in its central hall, at the time the Oculus's walls were blank and its floors empty. Surprisingly, this was not the immediate negative it might seem: both spaces instead work to focus their denizens on the points of ingress, of egress, and of vertical circulation—not to mention on the aesthetic quality of the space itself. This intensity of purpose obviates their lack of programmed activity: fundamentally, they are transitory spaces.

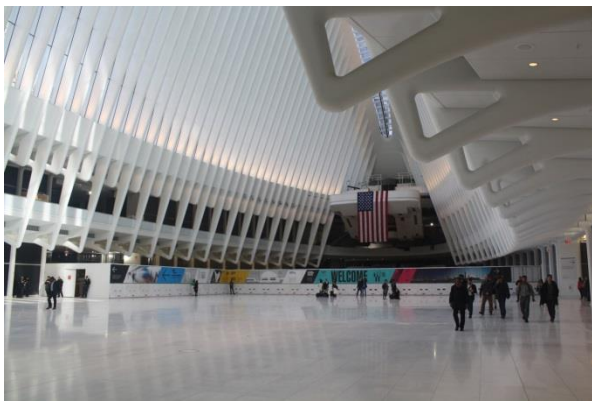
At the same time, much as at Grand Central, the Oculus's vertical space is utilized for balconies, here forming a continuous ring. To my eyes, this slightly removed space formed the perfect perch for retail and restaurants. The location would allow these more stationary activities to occur within the Oculus's dramatic confines, without cheapening the hall's monumental feel.

Over the last few months, however, it has become clear that the Hub's management had in mind a very different future for their central space. Many of the Oculus's ground-floor walls—which unlike their counterparts elsewhere, appeared permanent—have begun to come down. In their place, Westfield's signature luxury stores have begun to rise. In other words, the Hub's mall will not be confined to the awkward South Concourse or to the balconies; instead, it will spill out onto the Oculus's white floors. The effect, as an acquaintance of mine intimated, is like building shops inside of St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Of course, as in the South Concourse, retail need not be a detriment. If it is carefully curated and mixed with public amenities, the space would be able to maintain its resemblance to a public square, instead of simply becoming another private shopping center. But also as in the South



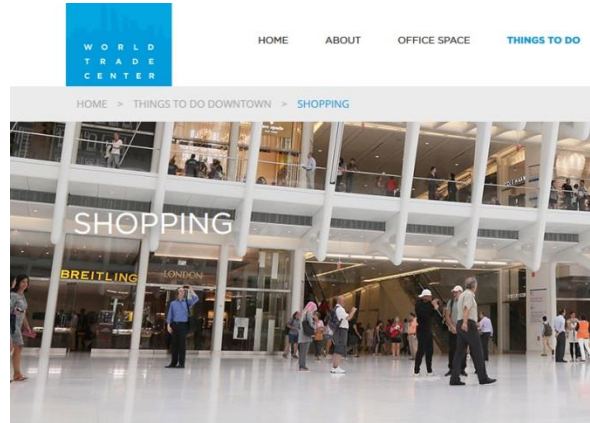
Grand Central Terminal's stunning Main Concourse



The Oculus The balconies in the Oculus would have been the perfect perch for retail.

Concourse, there has been no sign that this will be the case, and the stores which have opened or are planned to are the sort that will bring little, if anything, to the space. As mall designers of the past discovered, urbanity consists of more than form alone: it requires complex structures, social and economic, in addition to physical ones. If the Transit Hub maintains its current march towards generic malldom, the Oculus may well find itself transformed from a public landmark into an overbuilt atrium.

Calatrava clearly intended his station to be a monument. Channeling something similar to the ethos of the architects and planners of the City Beautiful movement, he sought to create a grand and beautiful piece of public infrastructure. And, as those early visits showed, he built a space with the potential to be just that. Whether or not that potential can be realized, however, or whether the Oculus's days of public grandeur were to be limited to a few months of limited accessibility, will depend entirely on what happens next. The futures of the Transit Hub and the Oculus alike depend upon the skill and orientation of its management, in particular how able—and how willing—they are to create space that is truly urban and truly public. Their decisions will ultimately determine how similar the Hub will be to Grand Central—and how similar it will be to the Mall of America.



The Oculus has been filling with standard, luxury stores¹⁹.

The Nature of a Node: a Difficult and Delicate Balance

Calatrava made no mistake in his choice of targets from which to draw inspiration. If one is looking for lessons on how to transform a transportation node into a well-functioning, multiuse public space, there are few better places to study than Grand Central. This is particularly true in its current incarnation, following the exquisitely performed late-1990s renovation—a renovation which itself was strongly influenced by Washington Union Station's earlier superb refurbishment. These stations have achieved what the Transit Hub sets out to do: create vibrant, multiuse public places using a busy train station as their foundation.

That does not mean, however, that if one were to plop down these station's successful facets into a new structure, a healthy public space would be guaranteed. In order to become what they are today, both Grand Central Terminal and Union Station required deft and delicate management—form and heavy usage alone were nowhere near enough. Constructing a space that is useful and attractive to many different groups of people and for many types of uses is a balancing act, one that requires a constant vigilance that no one use or one group comes to dominate the rest. Even keeping that in mind, the Transit Hub also finds itself confronted with circumstances, users, and a site vastly different from anything its forbearers ever had to confront. Given that, can the Hub—with its use of similar layouts and design cues, but with very different management—find ways to function as well as its older siblings?

Let's stay with the Oculus and begin by analyzing its primary role: as a transient, connecting space, one analogous to the other stations' great halls. There is nothing inherently wrong with grand spaces that exist primarily for circulation and orientation. Many crowded places have utilized them to great effect, from classical examples like Bernini's St. Peter's Square; to more modern ones, such as Richard Morris Hunt's Beaux-Arts lobby for the Metropolitan Museum of Art; to brand new ones, like Populus's Great Hall at the new Yankee Stadium.

Yes, these spaces both aim to impress as well as to visually define the places to which they belong, but they also serve practical purposes. Faced with large numbers of people passing through, they provide large spaces that allow travellers to orient themselves and to quickly find straight paths towards their visible destinations. At the same time, these transitional spaces also furnish for human physical, social, and psychological needs. Amongst other things, they provide a place to pause, a place for a moment's rest, a place to wait for or to meet someone, or a place to start or to finish a conversation.

These factors mean that these spaces are not defined as much by the things they contain as by what they are: their spatial effectiveness, what they connect to, and how well they connect to it. Because of this, such spaces do not necessarily need attractions in order to find success—beyond, perhaps, the aesthetic prowess that makes them somewhere people want to stop in or pass through.

That said, this type of central space does rely on more than keen design alone: it also needs both a central location and strong utilization. The Oculus, which sits directly adjacent to the Hub's sunken PATH concourse, would tenuously seem to fulfill the location prerequisite, albeit with a strong caveat we will attend to in a moment. Given the Hub's unfinished state, however, as well as the quality of the stores that are beginning to inhabit it, it is hard to know whether or not it will achieve a



Top to bottom:
St. Peter's Square, Metropolitan Museum of Art
Lobby, Yankee Stadium Great Hall²⁰.

utilization commensurate with its size. Corridors come and go at every cardinal point, and seem relatively visible and navigable. At the same time, it is not at all clear where most of these passages go, and hence whether they, and with them, the Oculus as a whole, will be well used—or even more tellingly, if they will be used by anyone other than tourists and visiting shoppers.

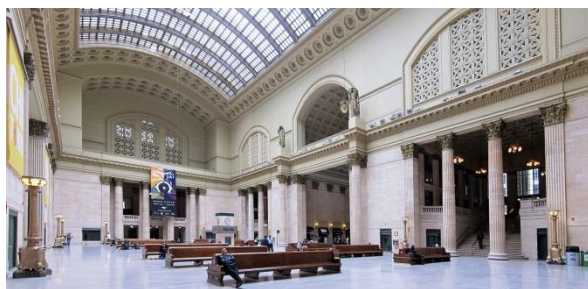


The PATH mezzanine and its turnstiles represent the different type of user in the Transit Hub.

The Transit Hub begins to deviate significantly from many other great stations with its sunken PATH mezzanine. Unlike at, for example, Grand Central, trains here do not deposit their passengers into the main space, but instead onto a separate concourse. This means that if your travels take you in another direction, say towards the World Financial Center, there is neither a reason nor an opportunity to pass through the Oculus, at least not without travelling out of one's way.

Of course, most large stations have multiple exits—even Grand Central has its North End Access—but central circulation spaces like the Oculus generally rely on large numbers of people passing through them to maintain their urban functionality. If they exist merely as glorified, dead-end anterooms, they can quickly turn dull and lifeless, regardless of their aesthetic merits. Chicago's Union Station, for example, has a gorgeous main concourse. Unfortunately, not only is it separate from the track-level mezzanine, but it is located to the west of the platforms—that is, on the opposite site of the station as the Loop, the direction that most travellers are headed. As such, the space is often lonely and empty—a far cry from places like Grand Central's busy heart.

This may be one reason Calatrava and the Hub's management elected to construct retail in the Oculus: to add another level of utilization to the space. As we have seen however, for such an approach to work, that retail must be carefully selected. Ideally, it should consist of businesses that



The often empty Great Hall of Chicago Union Station²¹.

enhance the space's social and psychological function. Preferably, at least some these businesses should serve the station's primary users, travellers. And most importantly of all, the presence of retailers must not push away the same regular users the space is seeking to attract. In other words, they should not turn what is supposed to be a public space into a mere private shopping center. In contrast, the focus of the Oculus's retail—high-end mall stores—risks pushing away the Hub's regular

users, making it clear that the space is not intended for them. It risks alienating potential users in the exact same manner the tourist focus of the memorial plaza above has done.

A central hall is only a small part of the equation, however, and the PATH mezzanine yet again points us towards perhaps the most fundamental difference between many successfully urban stations and Calatrava's Transit Hub: people, and how they spend their time in the space. As we discussed earlier, transit nodes exist where people get off of one form of transportation and onto another. As such, these spaces are often tailor-made for generating urban life: they are public places through which large numbers of diverse people—people from different social and economic groups, doing different things, and doing them at different times of the day—pass.

Many great train stations further this fact by means of an additional, in-built, and often uncelebrated advantage: the act of waiting. Whether it is for intercity rail, with its set schedules, or for commuter rail, which rarely operates more than one train per half-hour, riders at these stations often find themselves forced to wait. Such pauses, when leveraged skillfully, present tremendous opportunities to kick-start urban life.

On the basest level, passengers stuck waiting for a train provide a built-in customer base for the station's restaurants and shops—that is, as long as they are at least somewhat suited to their needs. This allows these retailers to thrive and grow, and, in turn, begin to attract other, non-travelling denizens.

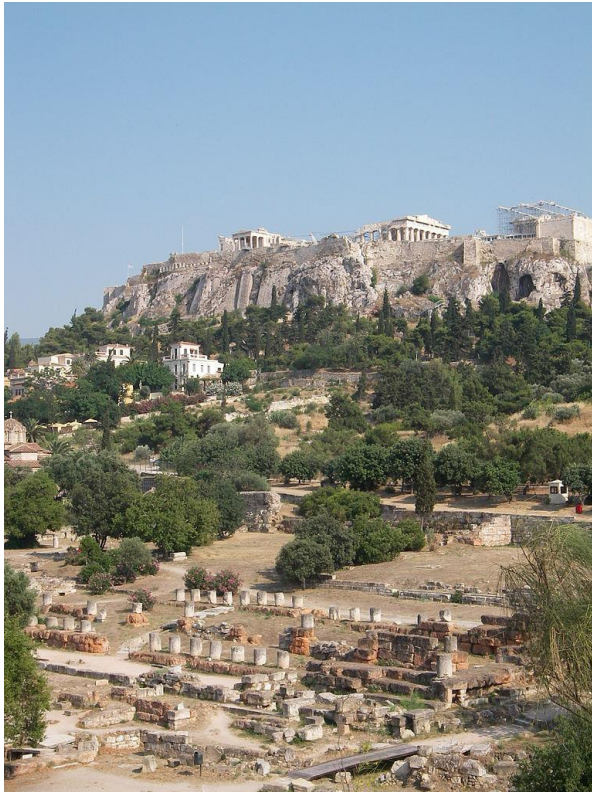
But waiting isn't only a boon for commercial life: it gives these stations a strong social power. The need to wait makes them natural locations to meet or part ways with others—a location so natural, in fact, that such interactions rarely need to be consciously planned. This capacity is only enhanced by seating areas and well-curated eateries and stores. These facilities not only allow, but encourage people to interact with one another within the station's halls—for example, to stop to catch a drink with an acquaintance, or to skip a train and catching the next one in order to finish a conversation. Such social moments are not solely a boon for the lives of travellers, either: their multitude helps begin to normalize everyday acts of human interaction in the public sphere. This in turn begins to make it easier and more natural for other denizens, whether they are travelling or not, to utilize the station as focal point for their own social interactions—that is, as a social node—in their own daily lives.

This is furthered by another fact of waiting: it often necessitates the act of simply existing in space. Because of this, busy train stations are one of the few places where people can feel free to simply pass time in the public sphere without the all-to-common cultural demand that they project an outward purpose for their presence. After all, if nothing else, it can always be assumed that they are waiting for a train. This rare freedom, when allowed to thrive, can transfigure a social node into a truly special—and, in the modern American landscape, truly rare—type of space: an indoor agora, a true urban node.



People use Grand Central Terminal in many different ways.

Although the Greek word agora is usually translated as marketplace, in the ancient world the agora represented much more: it was the center of social, cultural, and political life. The agora was not only where you bought your goods, but also where you met your friends and family, where you both discussed and engaged in politics, and where you listened, willingly or not, to an almost certainly annoying philosopher. It was the primary space in which the everyday public life of a city-state was carried out. It was, in many regards, the archetypical urban node that so many modern public spaces aspire to be.



The Agora of Ancient Athens sat dramatically below the Acropolis, above²².

Well-managed transit nodes have the potential to become something akin to the agora: to become places that relax us from some of the pressures created by our cultural expectations regarding public life and private space. There are food vendors for convenience, but it is not necessary to make a purchase in order to justify one's presence. There are shops, but no implied pressure to buy. There are trains and transit options, but because of everything else, no pressure to be travelling. By intermingling many uses and many users, these stations create a public space that invites in all, for almost any purpose—including for the simple act of existing in the public sphere. They are non-commercial and non-specialized third spaces—places that are neither home nor work—where urban life can take place²³. They are spaces that can become nodes for many types of human activity—potentially not only for a neighborhood, but for a region as well.

Unfortunately for Calatrava and for New York, the World Trade Center Transit Hub does not possess the advantage of waiting passengers. It serves neither a commuter railroad nor intercity trains; instead, it is primarily a home for PATH. As a system, PATH operates more akin to a metro than to commuter rail: trains come every few minutes, and thus few schedule their travel around a timetable. Moreover, PATH utilizes off-board fare collection—the platforms are located behind turnstyles. Given these parameters, it makes sense for passengers to wait for their trains on the platforms, rather than in the grand spaces of the station. To wait outside of fare control is to risk missing a train, and once past, there is no way back into the complex without being forced to pay another fare.

Making matters worse, the station is also not PATH's only Manhattan terminal. Passengers headed to the West Village, Chelsea, Midtown, or other points north can travel under 6th Avenue up to 33rd Street—they have no reason to use the grand southern terminus. This is one reason why the

Times' Kimmelman can declare that, "in effect, [the Transit Hub] is the 18th-busiest subway stop in New York City, tucked inside a shopping mall, down the block from another shopping center²⁴."

And while that analysis certainly looks more and more prescient every day, it is easy to forget that the station originally had grander goals, and need not have turned out the way that it has. First, in addition to PATH, the Hub was originally envisioned as the terminus of a Long Island Rail Road extension into lower Manhattan²⁵. That project—which was plagued by unrealistic, naive leadership (which, for example, sought to repurpose already crowded East River subway tunnels)—never came close to being funded, nor does it look likely to be anytime in the near future.

Moreover, 50,000 daily riders **is** a significant number—one that should not be ignored. A successful Transit Hub might have paved the way for other busy transit stations to embrace their potential as important, urban public spaces. At the end of the day, however, the Transit Hub simply will not have the same volume of passengers as its grand contemporaries. Thus, instead of being able to leverage large numbers of transit users to create an effective urban space, the Hub will have to rely on the reverse: its ability to draw in people from the attached office buildings and subway lines.

All of these factors, put together, make it far more difficult for Calatrava's Transit Hub to transform itself into the transcendent urban node—the modern-day agora—it so desperately wants to be. Most users don't have to plan their travels around a wait at the Hub, and even if they decide to pause or take a break, the complex is effectively bifurcated into paid and unpaid zones. The Hub's maze-like corridors sprawl out in all directions, further diluting a core constituency—PATH riders—that is already dwarfed by those of other, similarly-sized stations. Mall retail, not amenities for urbanites or travellers, dominates the space. The Hub is more akin to a subway station—or a mall—than a traditional railroad terminus. It simply does not include many of the elements that other, similar projects have been able to leverage to establish functional and welcoming public spaces.

Of course, lacking these components does not make it impossible for the Transit Hub to become the kind of space it was sold as—it only means that success will be far more difficult. The Hub possesses its own assets which, potentially, could enable it to become a successful urban space.

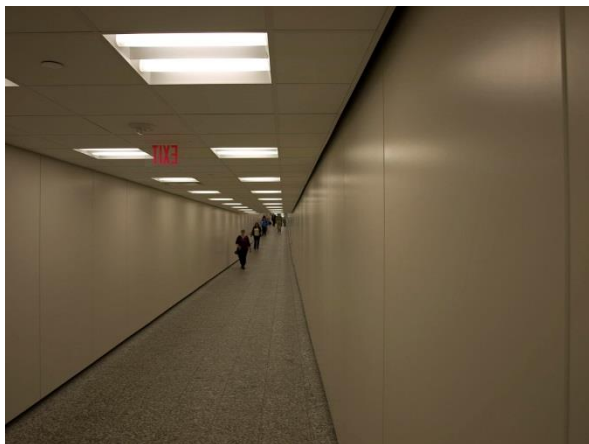
To start with the most obvious, there is the Oculus. It is a gorgeous space, and amazing places—like nearby Battery Park City's waterfront park, the High Line, or Central Park—often attract people because of their aesthetic merits. Second, the Hub will contain retailers and eateries, even if its management makes them a double-edged sword. If they could be well curated—if they could act as a palliative to the immediate neighborhood's otherwise anemic urban amenities, and not merely as a traditional mall—they

"The Hub's maze-like corridors sprawl out in all directions, further diluting a core constituency – PATH riders – that is already dwarfed by those of other, similarly-sized stations. Mall retail, not amenities for urbanites or travellers, dominates the space. The Hub is more akin to a subway station—or a mall—than a traditional railroad terminus. It simply does not include many of the elements that other, similar projects have been able to leverage to establish functional and welcoming public spaces."

could draw in those who work and live nearby. And perhaps most importantly of all, there is its location: the Transit Hub has the massive advantage of simply *not* being the unconformable, panoptic tourist trap that lies above. If it is simply made a more comfortable environment than the alternative, office workers, local residents, and commuters alike may well choose to flow through its halls simply to avoid the disquieting plaza above. The true city would then move underground, in effect forming a functional public realm below the street.

To leverage any of these assets, however, will be a long row to hoe. Doing so would necessitate trailblazing an entirely new path to public space, instead of following established templates. Worse still, as we have begun to see, there is little indication that the Hub's management has any deep commitment to, or understanding of, public space at all.

It is telling that so many of the spaces that attract people primarily by virtue of their spatial and aesthetic qualities are parks and plazas. Americans have a long cultural tradition of spending time in such outdoor spaces, whether for strolling, exercising, picnicking, or even simply enjoying the open air. First and foremost, they provide access to open outdoor spaces, often a rarity in urban environments. At the same time, thanks to a few centuries of examples, America, like much of the Western world, has a good understanding of the park, the plaza, and the like as components



Neither the Minneapolis Skyway system (**above**) nor the Houston Tunnel System (**below**) are truly urban spaces—they are bare transit ways²⁶.

of the public realm. Conversely, there are very few good American examples of truly multipurpose, truly public spaces that are indoors. True, a few cities have skyways or underground passages for summer heat or winter cold, but most of these are bare transit ways, not urban spaces where life is led.

Instead, most of the time that we spend indoors while in public—and indeed, most of the non-travelling time we spend in public at all—is spent inside of private establishments. This is not a new phenomenon, of course. Most of our structures are privately owned, and thus generally speaking, when the public is invited in, there is the expectation that money will be exchanged—for example, as in a store or a restaurant. This deeply shapes the contours of our public life. It is no coincidence, for instance, that Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*—perhaps the most influential treatise on the social dynamics of modern public discourse—firmly locates the birthplace of the modern public sphere inside of a commercial concern: the coffeehouse²⁷.

In other words, while we have outdoor spaces that are publically owned, publically

accessible, and generally understood as part of the public realm, similar indoor spaces are astonishingly rare. The closest most American communities come to having such a place comes in the form of a shopping mall. Yet even in California—where malls are somewhat legally protected as public spaces—people's non-consumptive needs are at best tertiary concerns, especially when compared to the desires of property owners and the whims of consumerism²⁸. We simply have very few well-known and widely understood cultural reference points for true, indoor public spaces.

Even Grand Central Terminal and the other great train stations, here held up as paragon examples of indoor public agoras, have not always functioned as such, nor do they do so fully today. In their original forms, these stations were the private homes of major corporations, whose public accommodations ultimately existed only at the sufferance of their owners and managers. The situation remained much the same as they gradually fell into public hands. They were not treated as public places in the manner of a park or a plaza; instead, they continued to be operated as private, utilitarian domains.

Indeed, it was only thirty years ago that then New York City Mayor Ed Koch argued—both publically and in court—that Grand Central itself existed explicitly for transportation use alone²⁹. Rather than embrace the multidimensional capacity of such a valuable landmark, the administration sought to maintain the utilitarian status quo. Instead of investing in building a place, it placed blame for all the foibles of the pre-renovation Terminal onto the homeless and other 'undesirables', and put all its energy into forcing their removal. And though the presence of individuals who may deter other users is a real concern, this was at best a problematic strategy, one that not rankled legally and morally, but also did nothing to make the Terminal a more urban space.

It has only been through loving restoration, careful management, and judicious programming and policing that Grand Central Terminal—like Washington Union Station before it, and like those stations which have followed in their wakes—has been allowed to flourish. And yet, even now, for all their positive attributes, powerful arguments can be made that these stations aren't true agoras—that instead, they only appear as such for



Although Grand Central advertises its space as for shopping and dining, people use the space in many ways.

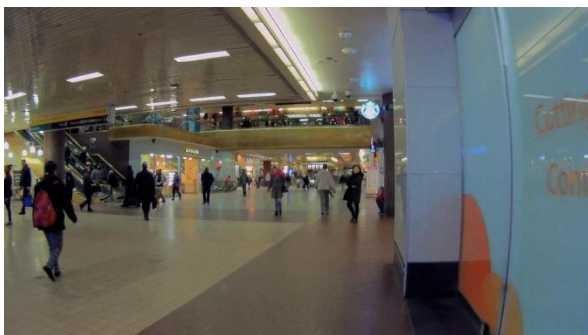
those of certain skin color, with a certain amount of money, and wearing a certain quality of clothing, and do so via an overreliance on consumerist consumption. After all, Grand Central explicitly markets its space as a place for shopping and dining, not as the public space it actually operates as. This should not entirely take away from what these stations *have* accomplished: they have crafted public spaces of far greater import than their occasionally bourgeois roots might have suggested. Instead, both their failures and their successes demonstrate clearly just how poorly such urban nodes are understood, and how rare they are in the American landscape.

This is why it is so easy to be cynical about the Transit Hub's future. It isn't just that its controlling actors have yet to demonstrate the ability to build and operate an urban node—it is that they often seem unable to grasp that they are in the business of public space at all.

Consider the ultimate owner and overseer of the Hub, the Port Authority—who are already distancing themselves from what should be their signature space. While the agency currently operates many of the New York region's busiest and most important transportation facilities, few if any of them play important urban roles beyond utilitarian transportation. Put simply, the Port Authority has never truly recognized the operation and stewardship of public space as part of its mandate, or as within its remit.

There is no better example of this than the Port Authority Bus Terminal. The Terminal is an astoundingly busy transportation node, not only nearly equal in importance to the likes of Grand Central or Union Station, but also situated in a prime location, adjacent to Times Square. And yet, even with its busy usage and tailor-made site, the Terminal has an infamous reputation. Abysmal design and misguided management led the station to become a hotbed for crime, drugs, and homelessness—so much so that the station remains a kind of sad punchline amongst those in New York and beyond.

Now, to the Port Authority's credit, it commissioned and largely implemented a plan that has made the Terminal much safer³⁰. This included some of the first explicit uses of holistic, urban-conscious design to create deliberately defensive architecture. Sightlines, for example, were opened, blind corners reduced or eliminated, and strong attempts were made to ensure all open areas of the Terminal were busy at all times—all in order to simulate a Jacobsian "eyes on the street"-like effect.



The Port Authority Bus Terminal today: notice the person squatting on the floor due to a lack of seating.

But all of these improvements were a means to a very limited end: making the Terminal safer and more efficient for passing travellers. Almost no attempt was made to placemake, to transform this highly valuable piece of public property into a public space. Like at Grand Central in its darkest years, the presence of security was visibly increased, seating and other public amenities were removed or ignored, and retail was left to the lowest common denominator—and indeed, often still lies fallow. The Port Authority Bus Terminal is not operated as a public place, and is not generally seen as one. There are few places

to sit and fewer invitations to pause, lest you be charged with trespass. Thus it remains a somewhat uncomfortable place to spend time, regardless of whether you are travelling or not. Instead, it exists like Koch's Grand Central—as a place for transportation use only, neither offering nor attempting to offer anything more—and barely succeeding at even that.

At the Transit Hub, the Port Authority is taking a somewhat different approach. The Authority appears to have an understanding that the Hub was intended as a public, urban space. If they have a commitment to urban space, however, it is hard to make out beyond the broadest strokes. Between the overbearing presence of security, the lack of public amenities, and the surrender of much of the space's operation to a mall operator, Westfield, instead of a group versed in public space, the management principles that led to the Bus Terminal seem not to have changed.

It should be noted that the seeds of this outcome were planted long ago, and there is plenty of culpability to spread around. Prior to 9/11, the Port Authority leased operation of the original World Trade Center's mall and office buildings to outside operators: respectively, to Westfield and to Silverstein Properties, the real estate group of Larry Silverstein (which continues to own and operate most of the site's new office buildings). Both companies were adamant that the site's retail space be replaced in-kind, and the Port Authority acquiesced, leaving us with the awkward station-mall combination that exists today. And true to form, neither company has indicated any intention other than to follow its usual template to extract the maximum rent per square foot, whether for retail or office space. Meanwhile, the public good has been largely left on the sideline.

In short, none of the primary actors involved in the Transit Hub have shown much capacity for creating or nurturing spaces that have any greater functionality or social import than a shopping mall, or that are any more welcoming than an airport security line.

This outcome is sad and unnecessary. Corporate and agency politics have followed the path of least resistance, with almost no checks to help bend the space towards the greater public good. There is still potential in the Transit Hub: if nothing else, the early days of the Oculus were proof of that. But even the world's most stunning architecture cannot bring a place to life. Doing that requires a deep understanding of the subtleties of urbanity as well as a commitment to encouraging urban life. Or, at the *very* least, it requires not *discouraging* it. For all of the Hub's strengths, for all its flaws, and for all the unanswered questions that remain, there is little sign that any such stewardship will be fast coming.

Final Thoughts: So where does the Transit Hub go from here?

To write about the Transit Hub—a name so awkward that I still seriously doubt will catch on—is itself a strange experience. Leaving lower Manhattan after that initial visit, my impressions were generally positive: the Hub had exceeded my (admittedly low) expectations. Yes, I had many major concerns and worrisome caveats. But at the same time, I departed with an appreciation for the potential the Hub possess—an ability to imagine it becoming the space it is so clearly striving to be.

And yet, the more I researched, the more I scoured my notes, and the more I wrote and refined my thoughts, the more I kept finding myself pulled to negative conclusions. It was as if the

deeper I delved into the space's nuances, the more cynical and pessimistic my thoughts became. Of course, it is always easier to be scathing—or even to be effusive—than it is to be nuanced. Yet I can't help but feel that this time-lagged ambivalence—an ambivalence that arose long before the Hub's mall-nature became clear—reveals something about the place itself. Perhaps a jaw-droppingly gorgeous space like the Oculus possesses a kind of reality-distortion field: the ability to allay all of one's misgivings whilst within its magical embrace. It is only once you are removed from it that rational thought can once again seep in, and that its flaws and shortcomings become apparent.

At the same time, if the Oculus does indeed have such a mind-altering capability, it could just as equally cut in the opposite direction. Perhaps the visceral and immediate affective nature of a place—our direct human experience of it—holds more importance than any piecemeal analysis ever could. Perhaps, like a great park or a great plaza, the spectacular physical reality of the Oculus will attract people and their lives like a magnet, allowing the Hub to function as an urban node in spite of all its foibles.

Either way, the Transit Hub that stands today is maddeningly ambivalent. There can be no doubt that it has many, many flaws. At the same time however, it also possesses a spark of potential, a potential that was particularly able to thrive in the station's incompleteness. Seeing the Hub when it was young and unfinished—which, in many ways, it still is—clearly communicated Calatrava's almost naive optimism, and suggested that, if the questions surrounding the Hub found satisfactory answers, it could be made a successful and important urban space.

Unfortunately, since work on this piece began, many of those questions have been answered, almost all in negative ways. In many regards, the Hub has come to embody the competing interests that produced it: it is one part no-holds-barred architecture, one part traditional American mall, and one part utilitarian transportation fortress. That is a recipe that leaves very little room for truly urban space. Still, the Hub's ultimate fate—whether it becomes a mere shopping mall, an agora, a tourist trap, an empty maze of corridors, or something else entirely—continues to rest squarely in the hands of its management, and on the civic pressure that can be brought upon them. For all of the station's warts, the space itself is—or at least can easily be made—amenable to its public role. But as we have seen, crafting transformative public places requires far more than space alone.

Will the Transit Hub be worth the cost? It seems to be the only question anyone wants to ask—and with a four and a half billion dollar price tag, it's understandable why. Even put into context, it is a difficult, if not impossible, number to wrap one's head around. By way of

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comparison, the first segment of the newly opened Second Avenue Subway—which included three new subterranean stations, the reconstruction of a fourth, and over two miles of underground tunnels, all built under busy streets—carried almost exactly the same price tag as the Hub: around \$4.5 billion³¹. And like the Hub, the Second Avenue Subway has seen more than its fair share of criticism over schedule slippages, budget overruns, and cost effectiveness.

Across the country, probably the closest

analogue to the Transit Hub currently under construction is San Francisco's replacement Transbay Terminal. That project—which will not only replace the original Terminal's busy commuter bus station, but will also provide a new, centrally-located terminus for Caltrain commuter rail and for the California High-Speed Rail project—shares many characteristics with the Hub. It is an equally busy, if not busier transit node. It is being built in a city with very steep construction costs, and also whilst hemmed in on all sides by other construction projects. And it includes accommodations for the public realm: in this case, a rooftop park. With all of this, the new Terminal's cost has ballooned to over \$6 billion—a price which does not include the two or so miles of bored tunnel which will be required to allow trains to serve its otherwise stranded platforms³².



A rendering of the \$6B replacement Transbay Terminal, a project very similar to the Transit Hub.

All too often, an examination of a public expenditure instead devolves into each of us brining out our pet projects, and pontificating about which would create the most value per dollar spent. And whilst some of the discussions spurred by these prognostications can be important, they also all-too-often ignore the political and economic realities that led to the original decision in the first place. What's more, at this scale, money is a strange thing—and when the federal government is involved, is doubly so. National and regional economies simply cannot be analyzed as zero sum games.

While it is tempting to imagine all the things the money spent on the Transit Hub could have otherwise achieved, to do so is to ignore why that money was earmarked in the first place. The contemporary political reality was that this funding was never going to be made available for schools, for housing, for education, or even for other transportation projects. Instead, it was born of federal largesse, as both a deeply symbolic attempt to build physical grandeur at the site of a national catastrophe, as well as part of a project to inject money into a moribund economy.

We also have to acknowledge that a Transit Hub, in any guise, was never going to be an inexpensive endeavor. Any structure built above a busy, operational train station and below an active subway tunnel—neither PATH nor the MTA's 1 train, which passes directly through the station, were allowed to be interrupted during construction—was going to be pricey. We must also take into account the costly facts of building in a zone of ultra-high security, whilst simultaneously surrounded by multiple active construction sites. Put simply, as the Second Avenue Subway and Transbay Terminal demonstrate, large-scale infrastructure construction is incredibly expensive in large American cities today—and that remains true regardless of the institutions involved.

With all of that said, however, my intention here is not to defend the Transit Hub's final cost. Nor is it to deny that there are important questions to be asked—questions about what we build and why, about our distribution of economic resources, and about the realities of our political

processes—let alone about how and why the Transit Hub itself so overran its initial estimates. Responsibility for these schedule and budget slips should not go unanalyzed, unlearned-from, or without repercussion. They are and will remain another black mark on Santiago Calatrava's career, and are, at least to some extent, an indictment of the Hub's planning and leadership. In the big picture, repercussions from the station's cost may well end up jeopardizing the funding of more clearly worthy projects for decades to come.

Right now however, the most important question by far is whether or not the Transit Hub works—whether it can generate an urban node in a place that so desperately needs one. As with any large-scale urban investment, the Hub's long-term impact—or lack thereof—will end up mattering far more than its original price.

It is easy—and occasionally appropriate—to be shocked by astronomical sums, but we also cannot forget that much of what is worthwhile and important is also often expensive. We rarely ponder the costs of our great places—rarely spend our time examining the price tags of places like Grand Central, like the Boston Common and Public Garden, like the Washington Mall and the monuments that adorn it—we simply appreciate that they exist. If you visit Grand Central in a cynical mood, it is easy to be shocked by its opulence, and to wonder how we as a society can afford to build such a grandiose edifice. But if you visit in a more optimistic state of mind, it is hard not to be taken in by the Terminal's beauty, by how it functions as a space, and by its symbolic example of what investment in the public realm can look like.

If the Transit Hub becomes a true urban node—if it operates as a truly public space, one which becomes important in the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of people, regulars and visitors alike, and one which brings an agora-like spark of urban life to a neighborhood that so desperately needs one—the cost will be a minor footnote in a story of triumphant rebuilding.

Can the Hub possibly become such a place? As we have seen, the station has a lot going against it. There is its often dystopian and dehumanizing aesthetic, with an oppressive security presence to match. There is its location, underneath an unsettling, commoditized tourist trap—one that repels urban denizens like the plague. And there is what it contains: at the moment, nothing but more and more generic, ennui-inducing retailers—retailers that contribute little or nothing to the social or urban fabric.

At the same time, it is still easy to see Calatrava's grand civic ambitions in the final product. The station liberally borrows design elements that have been used to great effect in other successful, urban stations. It is still fundamentally a multipurpose, multiuse public place—at least in the broadest strokes—in a highly private city. And it has the Oculus, a space which, though currently serving as a mall atrium, can still be transcendent. It is somewhere you want to be, and a space you don't want to leave.

Such a space is ultimately useless, however, unless it is comfortable, welcoming, and useful to denizens—unless it is a place that people can invest themselves in, both personally and politically. The Hub could still be skillfully leveraged, creating a place flush with kaleidoscopic humanity, a truly urban place where paths intersect and lives are led. Conversely, it could remain on its current path, and continue to be filled with hollow stores, ultimately remaining empty and sterile—a monumental husk in the shape of a train station. The Hub's future will rely on its management, and on whether

"The Hub could still be skillfully leveraged, creating a place flush with kaleidoscopic humanity, a truly urban place where paths intersect and lives are led. Conversely, it could remain on its current path, and continue to be filled with hollow stores, ultimately remaining empty and sterile—a monumental husk in the shape of a train station.

or not they can be convinced—or compelled—to operate it in an urban fashion. Ultimately, the station's fate will lie on the quality of their responses to the many yet unanswered questions.

Will access to the Transit Hub remain cryptic and hidden, like the lonely corridors of the original World Trade Center? Or will it be made permeable, allowing people to pass through easily, and encouraging them to pause for a while? Will the Oculus maintain its sense of awe—will the delicate separation of being in the city while also being apart from it remain—or will the

affect be overwhelmed by luxury stores and security guards? Will some of the cloister-like atmosphere of the grand hall endure, or will it be swamped by tourists and their ephemera, like so much of the plaza above?

More importantly, can the Transit Hub's leadership recognize and repair the shortcomings of their space? Does the Port Authority, the station's ultimate operator, have the ability to accept its role as builder and steward of what should be important and public places? Can it find ways to reduce the footprint of security? If the agency maintains its current approach—and particularly if it clamps down on forms of public life that do not fit narrow conceptions of what commuting and shopping should look like—the space will remain alienating and cold, even to the very groups of people they are seeking to protect and encourage. Such an approach would drive away the very thing—everyday people living their everyday lives—that the Hub needs to survive.

And most importantly of all, what will become of the Hub's interior—the ultimate factor deciding how useful the space will be? Might Westfield be convinced that embracing the Hub's fundamentally public nature is not merely a civic good, but—as many other multipurpose train stations show—an economic boon as well? If not, are their ways to compel them to operate the space in a public manner, or to compel a transfer to a more amenable operator—perhaps even a governmental one—to realize the space's public potential? Can the Port Authority or Westfield effectively supply the affordances, the spaces, and the economies that encourage a public life that goes beyond just consuming and commuting?

At the end of the day, the exact means used to ensure that the Hub is a public and urban space matter far less than successfully achieving that goal. The station, even under its current management, could easily be filled not only with a true variety of retail outlets, but also with waiting areas, meeting points, clean and open restrooms, and the like. Or it could simply be another mall in a world where malls are dying—a cavalcade of national chain stores that offer little reason for anyone to shop, let alone to become personally or politically invested in the space surrounding them. The Transit Hub could be made a space *people*—New Yorkers, visitors, and everyone else—not only feel comfortable using, but want to use, in the emergent and sophisticated ways that urbanites use all effective public spaces. It could become a waypoint and a node in their daily lives. Or it could become a glorified hallway, populated solely by rushing office workers and gawking tourists. Successful urban nodes can be created in what otherwise might be unfriendly environments, as

Grand Central Terminal and Washington's Union Station show, but it is an incredibly difficult and delicate maneuver to pull off.

Because if any or all of the questions above are answered poorly, it could easily spell the worst possible fate for the Transit Hub: for it to become nothing more than what was there before—a sterile, underutilized mall attached to a human rat-trap of cramped spaces—a place that only those who have to bear will utilize, and even then, only for as brief a time as possible. If that happens, forget the cost, the delays, and the handwringing. We will all have lost, because a truly once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to craft a vital piece of public, urban infrastructure will have been squandered for nothing.

The Transit Hub, under whatever name eventually enters everyday parlance, has a real potential to be the type of place that can bring an otherwise bland, soulless downtown like lower Manhattan to life. It also has an equal—and sadly, perhaps an even greater—potential to be an unmitigated disaster.

To leverage the Hub for the greater urban good will require both civic commitment and skillful urban practice—qualities that have been sorely lacking in the project to date. There is nothing physically wrong with the Hub that minor modification could not repair and improve. With the right blend of ideas, passion, and yes, pressure, the Hub could be made into the modern-day agora—the urban node—it so clearly wants to be. Doing so, however, will require action: from local and state governments, from urbanists and planners, from civic activists and everyday citizens, and even from those inside of the Port Authority and Westfield. Else, the project will almost certainly continue following the path of least resistance, leading to a dysfunctional realm of bland retail, sterile spaces, and privatized "public" space.

Ultimately, only time, civic pressure, and the skill and commitment of greater New York's decision makers will determine if the Transit Hub is to become a functional and important piece of urban infrastructure, or yet another urban renewal scar of spectacular proportion.

End Notes

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²⁵ See also Eliot Brown, "The Tunnel From Nowhere," *Observer* (March 24, 2009. Accessed February 5, 2017, <http://observer.com/2009/03/the-tunnel-from-nowhere/>).

²⁶ Minneapolis photo by Wikimedia Commons user Hephaestos (June 28, 2003, Source: Wikimedia Commons, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Skyway2large.jpg>, accessed February 5, 2017).

Houston photo by Wikimedia Commons user Ymblanter (November 6, 2013, Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Houston_downtown_loop_tunnel.jpg, accessed February 5, 2017).

²⁷ Jürgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere," 1964, in: Seidman (Ed.), *Jürgen Habermas on Society and Politics: a Reader* (Beacon Press, 1989).

²⁸ See *Pruneyard Shopping Center v. Robins*, 447 US 74 (1980).

²⁹ Rosalyn Deutsche, "Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City," *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine arts; MIT Press, 1996), 51.

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³⁰ Marcus Felson et al., "Redesigning Hell: Preventing Crime and Disorder at the Port Authority Bus Terminal," *Preventing Mass Transit Crime. Crime Prevention Studies* (Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press, 6. Accessed February 5, 2017, http://www.popcenter.org/library/crimeprevention/volume_06/01_Felson.pdf).

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³² Transbay Joint Powers Authority, "The Program" (Accessed June 30th, 2016: <http://transbaycenter.org/project/program-overview>).