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ENTER HERE: The Gold Line extension's Soto Station has art that evokes birds above the underground track.

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

L.A. on track

Eight new Metro Gold Line stations roll toward an exciting future.

CHRISTOPHER HAWTHORNE ARCHITECTURE CRITIC >>> It would be tough to overstate the level of cynicism that exists in certain corners of the Los Angeles establishment about the future of mass transit in Southern California. For many power brokers and longtime observers of the political scene, disparaging the chances of the region ever putting together a comprehensive transit system is some combination of rhetorical tic and parlor game.

In fact, the progress we've already made on a subway and light-rail network — full of delays and misjudgments as it has been — is remaking the physical and psychological terrain of Los Angeles in some profound ways. As more neighborhoods and landmarks are brought into transit's orbit, their relationship to the rest of the city and region shifts, giving us a powerful means of seeing the built environment with fresh eyes.

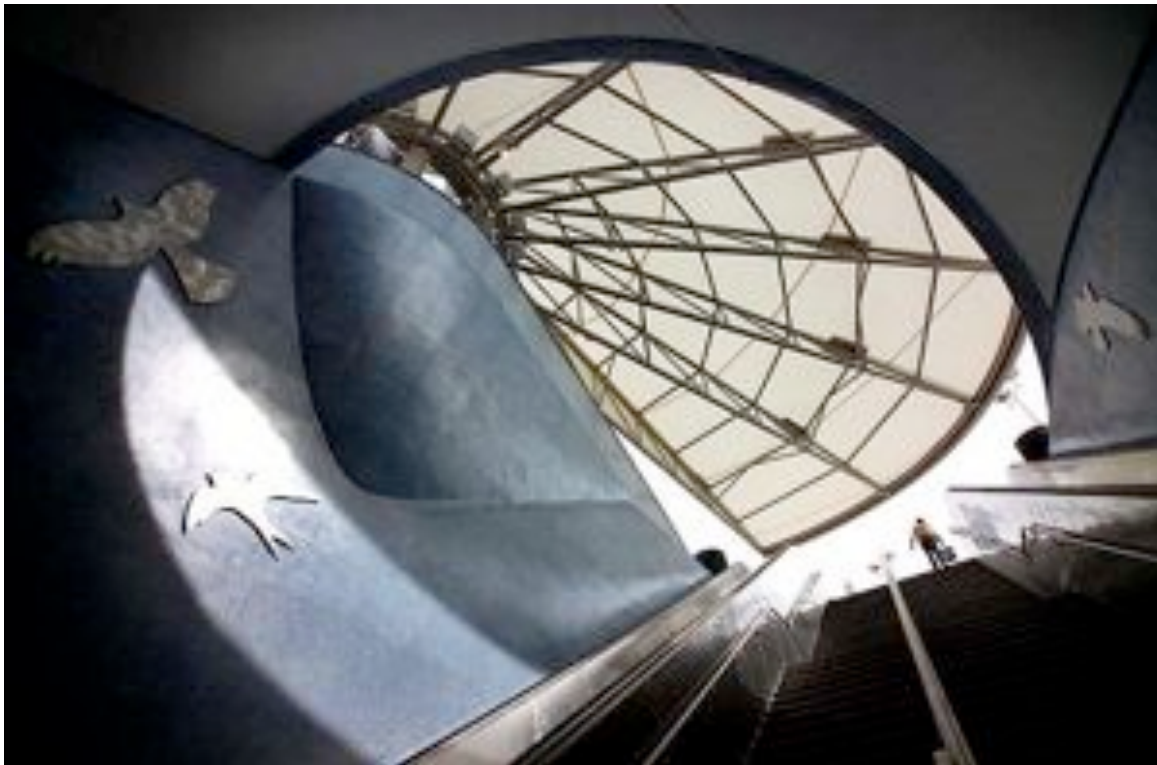
From that point of view, the opening on Sunday of the eight [See *Gold Line*, Page D10]

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Sunday's opening of eight new Metro stations on a path from downtown to East L.A. lays down tracks toward an exciting future.



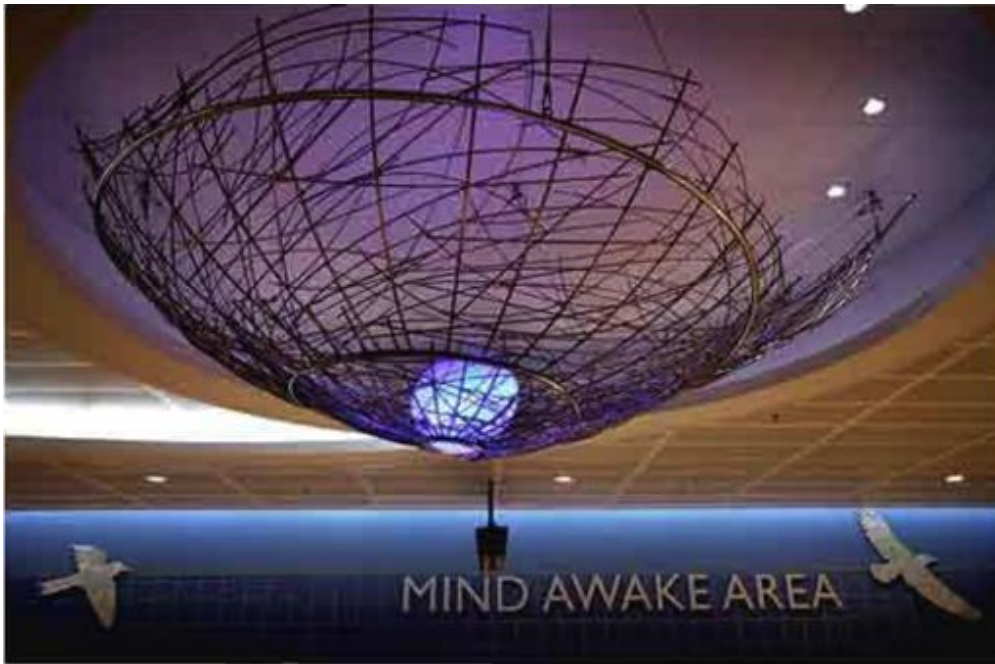
The Gold Line extension's opening gives the feeling that things are looking up for mass transit in L.A. Here's a look back up toward the street from the underground track at one of the two new subterranean stops. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

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PHOTOS: Gold Line extension artwork

[Return to story](#)



Soto Station

(Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

This station was designed by architect Aziz Kohan and artist Nobuho Nagasawa.



← Back to Original Article

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK : L.A. on track : Eight new Metro Gold Line stations roll toward an exciting future.

November 14, 2009 | Christopher Hawthorne ARCHITECTURE CRITIC

It would be tough to overstate the level of cynicism that exists in certain corners of the Los Angeles establishment about the future of mass transit in Southern California. For many power brokers and longtime observers of the political scene, disparaging the chances of the region ever putting together a comprehensive transit system is some combination of rhetorical tic and parlor game.

In fact, the progress we've already made on a subway and light-rail network -- full of delays and misjudgments as it has been -- is remaking the physical and psychological terrain of Los Angeles in some profound ways. As more neighborhoods and landmarks are brought into transit's orbit, their relationship to the rest of the city and region shifts, giving us a powerful means of seeing the built environment with fresh eyes.

From that point of view, the opening on Sunday of the eight new Metropolitan Transportation Authority stations that make up the Gold Line extension -- six above ground and two below, reaching south and then east from Union Station into Little Tokyo, Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles -- is among the most significant civic milestones the city has reached in several years.

Design effects

The design of the new stops, overseen by architect Frank Villalobos and the firm AECOM, is in general more refined than the first stretch of the Gold Line, which opened in 2003 and in some stations delivers commuters directly into a narrow corridor squeezed between howling lanes of the 210 Freeway. But none is world-beating or likely to become a landmark in its own right.

A few show the pitfalls of earnestness, not to mention the deadening effect of endless design-review meetings at the bureaucratic and neighborhood level. (Does every station need to be a consensus-tested expression of community pride? I confess I'm not convinced.)

Among the above-ground stops in particular, less is definitely more: The stations that work best tend to be the ones that promote a fluid, easy connection between sidewalk and platform.

The real significance of the stations' debut on Sunday flows, instead, from the fact that with every substantial extension of the rail and subway network -- and this is a major one, with a price tag of \$898 million, a large chunk of it to pay for 1.8 miles of underground tunneling -- another piece of the future Los Angeles comes startlingly into focus. More transit means more pedestrians, more people who pay attention to the shape and design of the city up close. That, in turn, means a growing constituency for shared space in Los Angeles and new interest in our long-neglected streetscapes and public sphere.

To put it another way: Transit and the life of the street are inextricably intertwined, and a boost to one is almost always a boost to the other.

At the same time, as trains trace new paths across the city, some of the divisions that for generations have made Los Angeles a balkanized collection of neighborhoods may begin to wobble or fall away.

That's not to say that some homogenization of L.A.'s various parts is on its way or should be our goal. Quite the opposite: New transit lines tend to throw the vibrant differences among neighborhoods into high relief.

Connecting a city

And yet they also promote a new sense of connectivity and fluidity in how we put the city and region together in our minds. In this case, by extending the Gold Line a mere six miles, Metro has woven new urban connections among downtown, Little Tokyo, the banks of the L.A. River, Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles.

The arts district has a different, arguably closer relationship with Little Tokyo. Commuters will better understand, simply by seeing this landscape out the train window, how improvements to Boyle Heights relate to plans to remake the banks of the river.

A similar batch of interrelationships will be forged each time Metro expands further: as the Expo Line moves south and west into Culver City and then Santa Monica, and as the Gold Line's Foothill Extension stretches east through the San Gabriel Valley. The fact that the underground section of the Gold Line was built without incident or cost overruns may help tamp down lingering doubts about the logistics of building the Subway to the Sea extension west along Wilshire Boulevard.

After Villalobos and AECOM handled the preliminary architecture of the new stations, each one was then handed off for final design to a separate architect-artist team. The standout designs are the two at the eastern end of the extension.

The Atlantic Station, by AECOM architects Todd Osborne and Russell McCarley and the artist group Adobe L.A., pairs a series of sail-like canopies with colored-cement benches and a lacquered, floridly painted robot sculpture at its western entrance.

The East L.A. Civic Center station, by Villalobos with artist Clement Hanami, suggests a row of blooming poppies and adds a burst of bright color to its stretch of 3rd Street.

Each of the two underground stations, meanwhile -- the cerulean-blue Soto Station by architect Aziz Kohan and artist Nobuho Nagasawa, and Mariachi Plaza Station by architect William Villalobos and artist Alejandro de la Loza -- is a tri-level design that adds a sizable new public plaza at street level. The visible coordination between art, architecture and signage at the stations -- and even the perforated-metal bicycle lockers built at or near a number of the them -- is a direct result of Metro's decision several years ago to create its own design studio, which now has a staff of more than 20.

Economic force

The Gold Line extension has also produced a number of important urban ripple effects. Several transit-oriented commercial and residential developments, including some planned for land owned by Metro immediately adjacent to the new stations, remain stalled by the poor economy; but other important changes to the route served by the train have already been completed or are underway, including the repaving of 3rd Street, the widening of the First Street Bridge and the construction of a pair of public high schools.

The extension has also managed to reawaken the potential of the Museum of Contemporary Art's Geffen Contemporary building. Still among the most underrated art-world designs of Frank Gehry's career, the warehouse building has been closed for 10 months as the museum struggled with financial woes.

But now, as the Geffen reopens in time to hold one segment of a major new exhibition of MoCA's permanent collection, it does so with a new Metro stop directly across Alameda Street -- and to find itself as central, if not more so, to the cultural and geographical makeup of Los Angeles than the main MoCA building on Grand Avenue.

Sightseeing tour

In the broadest sense, particularly because most of the new route is above ground, the Gold Line extension provides a number of ways to consider anew the city's architecture.

Along with the Geffen and City Hall, the buildings visible from the train include Rafael Moneo's Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels; Coop Himmelblau's Central High School No. 9; Gilbert Stanley Underwood's twin-domed Terminal Annex Post Office; Dodger Stadium; Thom Mayne and Morphosis' Caltrans District 7 Headquarters; and along First and Third streets a horizontal panorama of vernacular architecture including pink-stucco bungalows, car-detailing shops, taco stands and signs for Jewish, Serbian, Catholic and Chinese cemeteries.

Perhaps the most dramatic architectural views are the changing vistas of the downtown skyline that come into view as you move west on the new route from Boyle Heights and across the river and then as the train navigates a tight S-curve over the Hollywood Freeway and its dense field of red brake lights.

Many of those same views have long been available by car or bus or on foot, of course. But there is something more memorable -- more liberating, even -- about seeing them from a train running along dedicated tracks, floating free of capricious traffic.

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