

Rethinking Bus Stops

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Bus stops are ubiquitous elements of the American urban landscape and are a critical link between the bus system and the built environment. They therefore provide a great opportunity for rethinking how we examine, use, and design communal urban space in the city. However, bus stops are frequently ignored, underutilized, and overlooked as a possible tool for improving public space for the transit-dependent people who depend on buses for their transportation needs.

Working for a transportation agency in Los Angeles, I have developed views and ideas of why bus stops are in their terrible state and how they could be improved. I believe that the bad condition of bus stops results from a lack of interest in them by the government and the general public combined with the complicated political nature of who owns and operates the bus stops and amenities.

The notion of a bus system being part of a community, and therefore having some responsibility to enhance that community, both socially and aesthetically, is not recognized as a valid part of the transit agency's "mission." For the transit operators, bus riders are mere on-and-off boarding per stop. While most transportation planners are concerned with reducing congestion through a systemic analysis, they often fail to understand or recognize the intimate relationship between bus riders and the places where they wait for, and get off, the bus. This condition reinforces the disconnect between land use and transportation policy, two spheres which ideally should be integrated. The "hand-off" from the transit agencies' jurisdictions to the cities' jurisdictions concerning bus stops is clearly disjointed. Transit riders are ultimately penalized, suffering from poor bus stops as a result of this policy. City officials and policymakers rarely understand these concerns because they are unlikely to ride the bus and are not "experts" in the transit business (Loui 1999).¹

The lack of coordination between the city, transit operators, and contractors has resulted in a failure to locate bus stops in safe places. Transit operators are more concerned about bus stops meeting the place-

ment requirements for loading and unloading of passengers, getting through the intersection, and other similar criteria. Since the quality of the built form is never a critical issue, bus stops are often placed in not-so-comfortable and not-so-safe locations. According to Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, a professor of urban planning at UCLA, who has done extensive research on the environmental factors of bus stop crime in Los Angeles, there is a direct correlation between environmental factors and bus stop crime. Her study concludes that bus stops that have shelters are likely to experience less crime than ones without shelters (Loukaitou-Sideris 1998). Environmental factors, such as the condition of the surrounding buildings (occupied or vacant), land uses, amenities of the streetscape, circulation density, and street scale, can encourage or discourage public safety, yet they are generally not considered when bus stops locations are planned.

The Issues of Bus Stops

Many issues explain the lack of attention and resources directed toward improving the bus stop in Los Angeles.

Lack of Funding. Government and private investors have been reluctant to adequately fund bus systems, especially bus stops, in comparison to other modes of transportation. Bus systems traditionally do not generate the same amount of economic return as other transportation-related infrastructure projects like railways and highways. This return on investment approach to the allocation of funds between the different transportation modes creates a sort of "transit apartheid" since bus riders are not

getting their fair share of transit funding. While much money is spent on the design and construction of subway and light rail stations, bus stops are generally limited to a post and a sign. This is often the case because most transit agencies do not have the same jurisdiction over streets as they do over fixed rail, limiting their ability to make bus stop improvements. While the temporal nature of a bus stop compared to a rail stop might be a reason why bus stops attract little investment, this is no excuse not to provide a comfortable and secure place to wait for the bus.

Lack of Commitment Pressure: Elected officials listen to the voices of their constituents, few of which are advocating for bus stop improvements, making this a low political priority. Since most trips of the urban and suburban middle-classes are by car, they may not see the necessity for bus stop improvements. According to 1990 census data, eighty percent of daily transit trips of Los Angeles County residents were made using single-occupancy vehicles, while only six percent of all trips were made using public transit. Clearly, people who use cars for their various trips have greater political power than do bus riders. Of the six percent who do use public transit, a 1996-97 survey by the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) revealed that eighty-seven percent of the bus riders surveyed were “minorities,” and of that eighty-seven, fifty-two percent were “Hispanic.” Additionally, eighty percent of all the bus riders surveyed were below the federal and LA County poverty line.² In many cases, minorities and the urban underclass do not have

access to, or strong voices in, the political process to demand for the improvements of bus stops. Also, the improvement of bus shelters may not be a top priority for the urban underclass, given the other financial and social problems they are often faced with.

The Transit-Dependent: In many cities across the country, bus service is the only form of public transportation for the transit-dependent. In Los Angeles County, of the six percent of people who use public transit, fifty-eight percent have no alternative transportation options. Therefore, bus stops in these transit-dependent neighborhoods could assume a critical role in the creation and use of public space.

Based on my previous research examining the Latino use of public space in transit-dependent East Los Angeles, I found that bus stops are an integral part of communal public space (Rojas 1991; 1993). At many bus stops in eastside neighborhoods, bus stop locations become social centers of the community, a place where vendors will greet many people who board and exit the bus. Therefore, a bus shelter in a transit-dependent neighborhood like East Los Angeles has a greater use value than a bus shelter in a middle-class suburb.

Improving Bus Stops: The improvement of bus stops is a challenging process because it is difficult to define roles and differentiate responsibilities between the transit agency and municipalities. From my investigation, I find that most transit operators lack discretionary funding for the construction, maintenance, and improvements of bus stops and shelters. The transit agency is only responsible for bus stop loca-

tion and post and sign placement, while the local municipality has jurisdiction over the land where the bus stops are located. Municipalities are not in the transit business and generally do not have bus stop policies, though there are serendipitous occasions when the municipality serves as the transit operator, which can actually create a comprehensive approach to bus stop improvement. Normally, however, most cities lack funds to allocate for the construction and maintenance of bus stop amenities, leading many municipalities to contract out the construction, installation, and maintenance of bus shelters to private advertising companies.

A few large advertising companies have taken over bus shelter contracts for major cities. The company sells advertising space that pays for the installation and upkeep of the bus shelters and gives the city a percentage of the profits (Leovy 1998). Ironically, these bus shelters are placed according to where automobile traffic volume and income levels are high, and not according to bus patron needs or ridership levels. As a result, bus stops are often absent from where they are most needed—in lower income transit-dependent neighborhoods, which are generally communities of color.

In 1987 this problem first surfaced in a *Los Angeles Times* article illustrating this inequity (Connell 1987).³ According to a more recent article in the *LA Times*, of the 9,010 bus stops in the city, only 994 have bus shelters (Leovy 1998). More affluent, busier locales such as Sunset, Santa Monica, Wilshire, and Ventura Boulevards are dotted with shelters because they are considered more likely to attract advertisers due to

their heavy traffic volumes. Thus, Leovy argues that bus stops are not always placed where they are needed. Meanwhile, transit-dependent areas such as East and South Central LA get very few bus shelters. To complicate the matter, many of the older inner city locations have narrow sidewalks that make it difficult to accommodate bus shelters.

Token Amenities: Not only is there a scarcity of bus shelters in certain areas, when bus shelters and benches are provided at bus stops, they can sometimes create a worse condition for the bus rider. Therefore, a bench located at the edge of the curb to increase its visibility to passing cars represents a precarious location for the users, whose feet are left dangling in the street and whose lungs are breathing in the carbon monoxide generated at street intersections along busy arteries. Many benches contain advertisements to exclusively attract cars. Moreover, when a rider sits on the bench, the bench is no longer “effective” as advertising. This ambiguity results in bus benches becoming token amenities to the user. These benches are often positioned far from the bus stop, in front of where people enter and exit the bus, or too close to a curb for a passenger to sit on the bench comfortably, thus promoting advertising of the bench and only the pseudo-comfort of the passenger (Loui 1999). When bus shelters are provided, they often fail to improve the rider comfort level because most are glorified billboards ultimately designed for passing cars. In many cases, people will stand and wait behind or on the sides of the shelter rather than inside it. The interior space created by the bus shelter is not very comfortable and sometimes does not provide adequate shade from the sun.

Design of Bus Stops and Amenities

By examining the bus stop environment and how people use space while waiting for the bus, we can understand how to improve the bus stop. The geographic location of the bus stop and the waiting time vary from place to place and must also be taken into consideration. Bus riders are a diverse group of people with different needs. For example, a mother with children and groceries waiting for a bus would be concerned about adequate seating and a safe place for her children, while a commuter on his/her way home from work may be satisfied with just a leaning bar. At bus stop locations where boarding rates are high, people temporarily retrofit the adjacent area around the stop. I noticed at a heavily used bus stop that failed to provide enough seats for people waiting for the bus that many of the young men sat on the gas pump platforms located a few feet behind the stop. Bus riders will retrofit the space and make themselves comfortable in their environment around them, sitting on low walls or under trees, or standing in front of a wall or business. Bus stop amenities should therefore be designed to provide patrons with sitting and leaning options in addition to protection from changing weather patterns throughout the day and season (Rojas 1991). In Los Angeles, shade is a big concern for riders. In addition to providing the creature comforts, the bus stop at minimum should be a clean, safe place to wait for the bus and provide riders with trash receptacles, bus schedules and routes, and neighborhood maps. While bus shelters and other amenities will not make the bus come any quicker, they can at least make the wait more pleasant.

Enhancing Urban Form

Transportation systems play an important role in the development of cities and their urban form. The urban development around transportation corridors integrates the transit system into the urban landscape and can ensure its use. In Los Angeles, urban development can be traced to trolley lines and the present-day freeways. Bus systems and bus stops have not been a crucial impetus for urban development. Some of the most heavily used bus lines in the city of Los Angeles today were previously fitted with streetcar lines, according to an MTA transportation planner, illustrating this integration (Brye 1999). Since bus lines and stops fail to create urban form, their integration into the city can sometimes be marginal and a missed opportunity to enhance communal public space. Careful planning and design of a transportation system into the urban form can create some of the most important public spaces in the city.

Like train stations and airports, bus stops are the “welcome mats” to the transit system and the communities they serve. The user is introduced to the transit system and the different communities and locations that the system serves through the bus stop. Bus stops can serve as landmarks for tourist and resident alike, providing the urban orientation needed to understand the urban form of a city. The bus stop should be designed and used as part of a comprehensive urban transportation system for understanding how to get around.

Bus stops and amenities can enhance the physical form of a city by creating an identity of place. The City of Hannover in Germany has successfully com-

missioned a team of architects to design different types of bus shelters throughout its territory (Webb 1995). The result has been bus shelters that enhance the public space and give the city civic pride and identity.

The ethnic and geographic diversity of US cities can provide a rich palette for the design and use of bus stops. No two bus shelters should be the same! By making the bus stop part of the community, people will have ultimate empowerment over the communal public space. The Los Angeles Neighborhood Initiative (LANI) organization attempts to empower twelve transit-dependent communities through transportation enhancements such as bus shelters, kiosks, landscaping, and urban design improvements. This program is successful in bringing together community members for a discussion of how to improve the public space.

Bus stops can offer a sense of well-being for the rider and can become social centers of communal public space by providing a place where people can come together and “speak to each other.” In my travels, I have met so many people when I was waiting for the bus. It’s a natural place for people to congregate and interact. Yet the present condition of bus stops makes people feel like, “I don’t want to be here and talk to anybody.”

People will come together and communicate if they have something to interact around. Public art, coffee machines, newsstands, vendors, and small kiosks can provide amenities people can use and communicate over while waiting for the bus. The posting of community events, local history, and works of local

artists can promote verbal exchange amongst bus riders. The ephemeral nature of people waiting for a bus provides a great audience for poetry-reading as experienced in Los Angeles through a “Poetry in Motion” reading project. (Pool 1999). As planners and architects, we should recognize and maximize the potential of bringing people together in communal public space.

The design of bus stops and amenities must be competitive in attracting people out of their cars and into the bus system. Besides the bus system in Curitiba, Brazil, which acts like a typical urban subway, very few bus stops or bus systems meet this challenge (Major 1997). The automobile has unquestionably raised our level of transportation comfort and convenience. As transportation planners and architects, we have to incorporate this level of comfort and convenience into public transportation in order to sustain ridership and attract new users. It is important that government, transportation agencies, and the public come together to rethink bus stops and amenities. Rethinking bus stops can be part of an overall strategy to attract new riders, enhance public space, and improve the environment for everyone by creating healthy, social, and usable spaces.