The Cost of Civic Space: Toronto's Union Station and the Politics of Transit Megaprojects

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A Major Paper submitted to the Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master in Environmental Studies,
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July 31, 2026

Abstract

In the contemporary age, multi-modal transit hubs (MTHs) have assumed a prominent role within urban and regional landscapes. Moving hundreds of thousands of people each day to and from their destinations, these hubs exist as both sites of mobility and manifestations of public life, whereby the praxis of movement and the free exchange of ideas can occur. However, as cities increasingly pursue sustainable mobility strategies, the redevelopment of these infrastructures through large-scale megaprojects has introduced new pressures that complicate their role and meaning within society. Partly driven by these initiatives' close alignment with the private sector, understanding this underresearched dynamic can help identify how MTHs currently function as inclusive public environments, or lack thereof. The main objective of this research was to explore how users experience the conditions created through megaproject redevelopment, focusing specifically on Toronto's Union Station and the Union Station Revitalization Project (USRP). By triangulating data from direct observations, policy document reviews, and semi-structured interviews, this paper evaluates how the USRP altered the civicness of the station and consequently, created tensions between its original vision, commercial objectives, and the lived experiences of those who use the space. These findings demonstrate that the perceived success of the USRP varies considerably according to user type and patterns of interaction with the four spatial realms identified in this paper. It also points out the need for planning approaches that protect civic spaces from the private realm and that continue to center diverse user experiences.

Keywords: multi-modal transit hubs, civic space, transit megaprojects, spatial control, commercialization

Foreword

This Major Paper is the culmination of the knowledge and experience I gained while fulfilling the requirements of the Master of Environmental Studies (MES) Planning program, as well as the professional skills I developed to support my pursuit of Candidate membership with the Canadian Institute of Planners and the Ontario Professional Planners Institute. From the outset of this program, I was intrigued by the relationship between contemporary urban design and public space, particularly how the two can conflict in relation to user experiences and practices. While my initial focus was on parks, forecourts, plazas, and promenades, my perspective quickly evolved through taking the Transportation Planning and Policy course in my first term, which inspired me to expand my research interests to include transit-oriented environments. Consequently, this paper builds upon these themes and seeks to decipher their implications within a local context, focusing on Toronto's Union Station. In doing so, it establishes a structure in which the three core components of my Plan of Study —public space planning, urban design and spatial justice— are integrated and allowed to inform one another.

The central subject of this research, the Union Station Revitalization Project (USRP), also aligns closely with my concentration on hostile design and planning strategies, as the megaproject contributed to the creation of an exclusionary and hostile station environment for certain users. Contradicting the initiative's initial aim to preserve the station's civic qualities and enrich its public amenities, I believe it provides the perfect backdrop for this Major Paper, as it encapsulates my research interests, Plan of Study, and MES coursework within a single topic. It also fulfills several of my learning objectives, including:

- Learning Objective 1.1: To understand the role of public space in urban life, particularly in terms of accessibility and social interaction in order to assess how planning policies enable or restrict inclusive public environments;
- Learning Objective 1.2: To obtain the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the program requirements of the Canadian Institute of Planning and Ontario Professional Institute for Planners Candidate Membership;
- Learning Objective 1.3: To critically examine how private developers and corporate interests shape the planning, design, and accessibility of urban public space in order to reveal how neoliberal governance produces exclusionary environments;

- Learning Objective 2.1: To develop a clear understanding of how urban design produces exclusionary public spaces in order to evaluate the impacts of design choices on marginalized groups;
- Learning Objective 2.2: To critically analyze how private sector influence shapes exclusionary urban design practices under neoliberal governance in order to identify systemic barriers to inclusive city-making;
- Learning Objective 2.3: To investigate how urban design influences human interaction, practices, and movement within urban public spaces; and
- Learning Objective 3.2: To evaluate the tension between formal urban planning structures and the everyday movements of residents in public space in order to understand how informal practices can inform more equitable planning.

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the individuals who occupy and traverse Union Station every day. I am deeply appreciative of their presence, regardless of form or capacity, as it was invaluable in my understanding of the station as a lived and evolving civic space.

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Liette Gilbert. Her commitment to always support me and my grandiose ambitions, while providing me with the tools to do so effectively, does not go unnoticed. This work is as much a reflection of me as it is of her warmth and knack for pedagogy. I would also like to thank my advisor, Dr. Ute Lehrer, whose candid feedback throughout every stage of this process has been instrumental in my academic development.

Finally, my deepest appreciation goes to Dr. Teresa Abbruzzese, who is one of the main reasons I am in this program and able to undertake this research. Thank you for seeing potential in my 20-year-old self that I had not yet recognized and for encouraging me to pursue the 3+2 pathway. I truly mean it when I say that your guidance changed the trajectory of my life.

AI Disclaimer

With the agreement of my research supervisor, generative AI tools were used only to enhance my learning of the research material and not to produce or complete the work on my behalf. In the context of this Major Paper, this included using Grammarly for spelling and grammar checks and platforms such as Adobe Acrobat and ChatGPT to generate summaries of academic journal articles incorporated into the theoretical frameworks. My use of generative AI, thus, complies with York University's Senate Academic Conduct Policy and Guidelines for Graduate Students.

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Introduction

As contemporary cities move towards more sustainable forms of mobility, public transportation has become an increasingly significant focus of urban policy and investment. Supported through planning strategies of transit-oriented development (TOD), congestion pricing, and pedestrian-only precincts, a concerted effort has been made by public actors to promote greater use of subways, buses, passenger rail and other alternatives to automobile travel (Roukouni et al., 2023). In terms of the stations that house one or more of these services, also known as multi-modal transit hubs (MTHs), this trend warrants further examination of their influence not only on municipal and regional transportation networks, but also on the lived experiences of their users. Beyond the simple fact that individuals spend considerable amounts of time within their bounds (Fan et al., 2016), these mobility infrastructures consistently act as the bridge between home and work and serve as valuable civic spaces for the people who occupy and navigate them. Largely attributed to their public ownership and relative accessibility, the social and cultural significance of MTHs, along with their inherent political function, positions them as integral components of the public realm. In turn, they support core transportation functions while facilitating "the interactions of difference [needed] to create the possibility for democratic transformation" (Paget-Seekins & Tironi, 2016, p. 177; Mitchell, 2005).

With these hubs assuming a prominent role in public life, the growing strain placed on their infrastructure has prompted their redevelopment, or the creation of entirely new facilities, through large-scale megaprojects. While generally intended to expand the frequency and efficiency of existing transit services, it is through these interventions that MTHs have become starkly privatized, sterilized and commercialized places (Wicki et al., 2024). This, in many cases, stems from their immense financial costs and the limited capacity of publicly operated transit agencies and municipal governments to fund them without private-sector involvement. The reliance on megaproject-led redevelopment within these station environments has, therefore, become associated with the erosion of their civicness and their ability to function as places for diverse groups of people (Low, 2006; Turvikene et al., 2023). By becoming arenas in which corporations and developers can stake claims to governance, these initiatives have revised the role of such hubs toward the pursuit of retail revenue and real estate appreciation, rather than the provision of inclusive public environments. To maintain these priorities, a new managerial regime associated

with heightened electronic surveillance and private security enforcement has been formed, which, in turn, supports their transition to exclusionary sites in "which those whose presence is unwelcome or considered inappropriate find themselves barred" (Johnstone, 2017, p.2). Having serious implications on the social-political dynamics of user movement, the shift of these key mobility infrastructures into the private sphere indisputably distorts their meaning and function in society.

My Major Research Paper explores this loss of civic space through the lens of Union Station in Toronto, Canada. As the city's busiest intermodal transfer facility (Hoy et al., 2016), Union Station constitutes a critical node for the movement of people and goods across municipal, regional, and even national scales. Serving more than 300,000 commuters each day through subway, passenger rail, streetcar, and bus services (Daair, 2022), and soon-to-be expanded to include light rail and high-speed rail connections, the MTH undoubtedly exists as the "lifeblood" of its broader sustainable mobility system (City of Toronto, 2004, p.xi). Since the station lacks a comparable alternative in terms of scale or connectivity, "continued population and employment growth in the Greater Toronto Area and limited network expansion" have necessitated its modernization and expansion through a large-scale redevelopment process (Hoy et al., 2016, p.1). The Union Station Revitalization Project (USRP), which forms the subject of this research, offers an instructive case on how such redevelopment processes, albeit framed in terms of capacity enhancements and improved passenger experience, implant public-private governance models, commercialization and spatial control within the station environment. It also elucidates megaprojects' fixed position within the "political sublime" and the various institutional forces and dynamics they must navigate across their lifecycle (Flyvbjerg, 2014, p.8).

In a similar vein, I argue that the USRP ultimately contradicts its stated objective of preserving the "civic prominence of Union Station" (City of Toronto, 2004, p.vii). By creating almost 160,000 ft^2 of rentable retail space and prioritizing consumption-related activities (City of Toronto, 2021), the $824 million (CAD) megaproject has diminished the civic qualities of the station in an attempt to buttress commercial activity. Although closely related, publicness and civicness are treated as distinct concepts and will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections. Additionally, I posit that this affinity for revenue-generating imperatives has contributed to the proliferation of pervasive surveillance, hostile architecture, and private security practices. By regulating movement and patterns of use to ensure the continuous flow of capital, Union Station

is discussed as an "atmosphere of rejection" (Jensen, 2020, p.396), for its subtle but persistent forms of control dictate who may occupy the space and how they may use it. This is unveiled in the observational findings presented in Section IV, which document how such measures introduced through the USRP actively impede some users from interacting with the very amenities and improvements the project originally marketed for their benefit. Consequently, this analysis exposes the stark disconnect between the project's stated goals and the embodied experiences of exclusion and constrained publicness within the transit hub.

This research seeks to contribute to academic discussions while informing relevant audiences, including urban policymakers and community organizations, by examining how transit megaprojects reshape civic space and broader understandings of civicness and publicness in cities. To do so effectively, this paper is guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent did the outcomes of the USRP align with the goals and vision articulated in the Master Plan?

2. How do different spaces within the present-day Union Station produce distinct experiences of movement, waiting, social interaction and publicness? In what ways has the USRP supported this variance?

3. What do the changes at Union Station reveal about the evolving relationship between civic space, mobility infrastructure and commercialization in contemporary cities?

I ground such research within several key theoretical lenses: critical urban theory offers the framework for assessing Union Station as a socially produced space; urban political economy concepts are used to evaluate the commercialization of large-scale transportation infrastructure; and theories of disciplinary surveillance and architecture, specifically Foucault's (1977) understanding of panopticism and Newman's (1972) idea of defensible space, are included to inform the impacts of security-oriented design on spatial practices. The rationale for selecting this theoretical framework is to ensure that the analysis considers the many dimensions through which the station is produced, without privileging one over another.

Methodology

In examining the conviviality and civicness of MTHs, this research employs a qualitative research design using the USRP as a case study. The qualitative design of this study incorporates a combination of direct observations, policy document reviews, and semi-structured interviews to reduce reliance on any single method of inquiry. Ensuring data triangulation and the validity of the findings, this use of data is intended to evince the shared perspectives and realities within Union Station (Campbell et al., 2020).

Policy document reviews

To situate this study within the planning processes that informed the conceptualization of the USRP, a large share of data collection consisted of the textual analysis of applicable policy documents, such as the Union Station Master Plan (2004). Providing context to the theoretical framework presented in this research, the data obtained in this method proved crucial in understanding the design rationales and public-private governance structures that directed the initiative's development. It would also provide a reference point for how far the USRP would waver from its original priorities of preserving Union as a civic space. To do so effectively, I reviewed publicly accessible documents, such as municipal reports and plans, to identify key policy objectives and vision statements that informed the revitalization. For non–publicly accessible materials, such as the Master Plan, I contacted the City of Toronto directly to obtain the necessary documents. Once collected, I placed all materials into a dedicated folder on Google Drive for ease of access. Notes were then recorded in a separate Google Doc, where materials were organized chronologically by date and coded thematically according to their relevance to key concepts.

Direct observations

At the core of this design sits empirical research, specifically direct observations, which provide a comprehensive account of these interactions within the spatial and temporal conditions of the station. Unobstructive by nature, this fieldwork was conducted between February 9 and March 10, 2026, and took place throughout Union Station as well as at Royal Bank Plaza and Scotiabank Arena PATH entrances. To capture patterns of use and interaction within the area, site

visits were undertaken at varying times of day to dissect the different conditions of pedestrian flow and station activity. These include morning rush hour (7:30–9:30 a.m.), midday (12:00–3:00 p.m.) and evening rush hour (4:30–6:30 p.m.) on both weekdays and weekends. Each visit consisted of at least an hour-long observation with the intention of observing user experience with both pre- and post-USRP infrastructure. In total, 14 hours and 47 minutes of observation were completed. Given this breadth of collected material, only observations most relevant to the paper's analysis are presented.

While in the field, I conducted observations by positioning myself near users, typically on benches or other seating areas, and deconstructing their behaviours and interactions within the station environment. Occasionally, in an attempt to locate congestion, I would walk with large crowds to understand where the majority of individuals were heading. Notes were recorded either on my phone or in a notebook and later transferred into a Google document for organization and analysis. Additionally, I took photographs of the spatial conditions, congestion, architectural features and moments of interaction observed. Since I would be unable to receive informed consent from every person included in these photos, I have blurred their faces for the sake of confidentiality.

Semi-structured individuals

I conducted one semi-structured interview with two participants on March 24, 2026. These participants offered insights into subsequent construction projects at Union Station following the USRP. Participants are referred to throughout my analysis as Interviewee A and Interviewee B to ensure anonymity, although their relevance to the Union Station Enhancement Project (UESP) is disclosed in the analysis. I was introduced to Interviewee A through a mutual party, who subsequently facilitated the involvement of Interviewee B to provide additional perspectives pertinent to the research objectives.

The interview was conducted via Zoom, recorded with participants' consent and lasted approximately forty-five minutes. Semi-structured questions provided flexibility for both participants and me to ask follow-up questions where necessary. As this was a joint interview, participants interacted with one another throughout the conversation and frequently deferred to each other when questions aligned more closely with their respective areas of expertise. The

interview was subsequently transcribed and reviewed to identify themes and patterns pertinent to the research objectives.

Limitations

There are a few methodological limitations of this research that warrant acknowledgment and consideration. First, as a single-case study, the findings are inherently tied to the unique historical, political, social, architectural and spatial context of Toronto's Union Station. While this bestows a worthwhile foundation in examining the intersection of public space, transportation infrastructure, and urban renewal strategies, the conclusions drawn from this research may not be directly transferable to all other MTHs or transit megaprojects. Next, and perhaps the most salient, the observational component of the study was conducted over a limited period and should be understood as representative of the station during the period of observation, not a definitive account of all user experiences. However, even within the chosen observational period, I could not capture all activity at all locations simultaneously and cannot know the intentions of all individuals observed. Similarly, the interview component, albeit useful in understanding initiatives such as the Union Station Enhancement Project (USEP) and the complexities of construction work, was limited in scope and involved only two professional participants. Their perspectives, hence, cannot wholly represent stakeholders involved in the station's redevelopment, especially other professionals working on the aforesaid initiatives.

Mapping of the Major Paper

My Major Research Paper is organized into five sections. The next section expands on the theoretical frameworks through which this work conceptualizes and analyzes the topic, which heavily engages with scholarship on transit megaprojects, public space management, hostile architecture and the commercialization of public space. The following section provides context on contemporary Union Station by explaining its history and identifying why revitalization was needed to begin with. It also touches on how public–private partnerships were introduced to the station as a result of this need. The subsequent section focuses mainly on the megaproject that is USRP and the challenges it encountered throughout implementation, as well as the social, spatial and cultural implications these processes have produced within the station environment. The penultimate section, conversely, elucidates the empirical component of this research by presenting

findings derived from fieldwork observations during February and March of 2026. It also contains my core analysis of the USRP's effectiveness in preserving Union as a civic space and its performance in relation to user design and programming. The final section examines subsequent construction projects and assesses the extent to which they have either advanced or conflicted with the agenda of the USRP. The research concludes by restating key findings and outlining directions for future research.

I. Theoretical Frameworks

This Major Paper recruits theoretical frameworks capable of evaluating the USRP and its success, or lack thereof, in transforming the transit hub into a *meaningful civic destination*. Drawing from scholarship on transit megaprojects (Delatte, 2017; Patricia & Bandara, 2026; Salling & Leleur, 2015), the managerial nature of contemporary public space (Davis, 1990, Mitchell, 1995), and the salient role design plays in shaping social behaviour (Banerjee, 2025; Martin, 2023; Piemani & Kamalipour, 2020), this section situates sustainable mobility infrastructure within the discourses of neoliberal urbanism, zero-risk governance, hostile architecture and the growing securitization and regulation of public space. Vital in understanding an effort as expansive as the USRP, this collection of theories operates through an interdisciplinary paradigm to discern the ways in which transit environments, such as Canada's busiest MTH, are organized and experienced. In the process, it frames such environments as socially produced spaces that continually structure movement and patterns of use (Franck & Stevens, 2007), often in an effort to "make it more palatable and attendant to the needs of capital" (Smith & Walters, 2017, p. 2980). This collective framework, therefore, serves to critique the nexus between public transportation, architectural design, station governance and user experience to better understand the contemporary ills of Toronto's Union Station.

Transit Megaprojects and the Production of Civic Space

With the growing urgency of the climate crisis, urban issues such as increased air pollution, escalating congestion, inequitable resource distribution and fragmentation have become increasingly prevalent (Xu et al., 2025). In an attempt to mitigate these impacts, cities across the world have begun investigating ways to enhance operational efficiency and strengthen their sustainable mobility systems. Through this shift, various scholars highlight that multi-modal transit hubs (MTHs) have emerged as vital infrastructures (e.g., Blad et al., 2022; Roukouni et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2025). Unlike conventional rail or subway stations, Anton et al. (2025) note that an MTH is an "important part of urban space with unique characteristics, as it not only plays a role in a city's transportation system (as a Node), but also incorporates other urban functions… which can create the conditions for MTHs to become a catalyst for urban transformation" (p.328). Within this framework, I identify such hubs as financialized instruments tied to capital accumulation as

much as mobility interventions aimed at enhancing sustainability. This duality is especially apparent in their integration within transit-oriented development (TOD) strategies, which focus on mixed-use and higher-density development around MTHs and include benefits such as reduced home-to-work distances and enhanced street life (Fan et al., 2022; Soliz et al., 2024). Despite these perks, however, such strategies often "disproportionately benefit a coalition of urban developers, credit institutions, local and central state actors and the politically and economically stronger inhabitants of these areas, whose interests lie in the institutionalisation of a neo-liberal urban regime" (Kuyucu & Ünsal, 2010, p.1480). Thus, the pursuit of sustainable mobility in contemporary cities should be regarded as a contested process, as interventions aimed at addressing the climate crisis are now entangled with private agendas of urban redevelopment.

To establish MTHs as viable alternatives to less sustainable modes of travel, such as private vehicle use, megaprojects are often required to support their creation or revitalization (Moore et al., 2025). Megaprojects, as described by Flyvbjerg (2014), are "large-scale, complex ventures that typically cost US$1 billion or more, take many years to develop and build, involve multiple public and private stakeholders, are transformational, and impact millions of people" (p.6). Such projects are distinct and "trait-making" (Hirschman, 1995, p. vii-xi), with the latter signifying their transformative effect on the structure of society itself (Flyvbjerg, 2014). Many scholars argue that they are inherently complex and face challenges across all phases of their lifecycle (e.g., Ashkanani & Franzoi, 2022; Boateng et al., 2015; Delatte, 2017; Flyvbjerg, 2014; Renuka et al., 2014). From subcontractor delays (Eizakshiri et al., 2015; Zhai et al., 2025) and inadequate production planning (Belayutham et al., 2021) to unforeseen site conditions (Boateng et al., 2012), a range of factors can significantly disrupt project delivery and performance. Patricia & Bandara (2026) emphasize that these disruptions have serious implications, noting that "extended timelines can inflate construction costs… increase reliance on alternative transport modes, leading to higher carbon emissions… and can exacerbate inequalities… by limiting access to public transport for disadvantaged communities during the prolonged construction period" (p.12). Long criticized as "money pits" that fail to deliver satisfactory returns, megaprojects, specifically in the context of transportation infrastructure, hold an extremely subpar track record and are associated with persistent credibility issues (Boateng et al., 2015, p.1795; Poole, 2004; Shenhar & Holzmann, 2018). This pattern of underperformance is shown in their rate of success, as "roughly two-thirds

of all megaprojects fail, which means either going over budget, past deadlines or failing to meet the desired objectives" (Ashkanani & Franzoi, 2022, p.133).

Given these recurring issues, there has been a growing body of literature on the success factors in megaproject delivery (e.g., Jetu and Riedl, 2012; Kwak et al., 2014; He et al., 2019). These factors include "well-defined project objectives, efficient management tools and strategies, accurate estimations and forecasts… flexible and adaptive project management systems, reasonable organizational structure and project governance, proper planning… and clear procurement procedures" (Ashkanani & Franzoi, 2022, p.130). However, the public nature of these hubs demands an interdisciplinary lens that accounts for their performance both as integrated mobility systems and spaces within the civic realm (Bissell, 2010; Carmona & Wunderlich, 2012; Piemani et al., 2020). Particularly, these large-scale initiatives are increasingly packaged as opportunities to "create locations that meet the requirements for a high quality of stay and a wide range of services for public transport users and civilians alike" (Wicki et al., 2024, p.3). Playing far more multi-scalar and multi-dimensional roles than these metrics can capture (Otsuka & Reeve, 2024), the "shared and open to the public" nature of MTHs makes them public spaces that inherently engage with public concerns, which then pushes them into the "political sublime" (Martin, 2023; Flyvbjerg, 2014, p.8). This sublime, as Moore et al. (2025) observe, means that "politics frequently shifts between local and national political parties that have varying levels of support for these projects… which can cause great uncertainty… where new governments possess increased potential to cancel projects in response to political promises and agendas" (p. 596). Fueled by the visibility and significance associated with initiating megaprojects, political actors are routinely incentivized to align themselves with, or distance themselves from, these initiatives as demonstrations of leadership. Megaproject success, hence, can be understood in relation to their ability to withstand the fluctuating political conditions that both enable and destabilize their manifestation (Martin, 2023; Flyvbjerg, 2014).

The underlying tension of such projects also influences how MTHs are conceptualized and produced in the 21st century. Since these stations are now treated as "critical places with great potential for infrastructure development or the optimized functioning of urban centers" (Banerjee, 2025, p.2), city governments have adopted a "think-big" approach that focuses on outcomes of economic competitiveness and real estate intensification (Forouhar & van Lierop, 2021, p.950; Romanovich & Simankina, 2016). This paper argues that revenue-generating functions are

deliberately embedded in this approach to help justify their enormous cost, with commercial and retail amenities becoming central components of contemporary transit megaprojects (Otsuka & Reeve, 2024; Wicki et al., 2024). Krüger (2026) contends that this shift is "important from a governance theory perspective… as it makes it possible to overcome traditional departmental boundaries and to redefine services of general interest as a common area of design" (p.26). As a rebuttal, several scholars assert that this integrated model often depends on the continued involvement of private-sector actors, whose participation is viewed as a necessity to recoup the immense financial investments associated with project delivery (e.g., Belova et al., 2020; Dimitar, 2023; Książek-Nowak & Teixeira, 2025). Consequently, MTHs become situated "in the broader power relations operating in society, and hence they tend to be more sharply ideological than the other aspects of space" (Stevens, 2007, p.6). By being constructed under the guise of attracting capital, the ideology at play is often one that values private interests over those held by the public (Ashkanani & Franzoi, 2022; Flyvbjerg, 2014). Inextricably linked to the rise of neoliberalism in the planning domain (Otsuka & Reeve, 2024), the relentless inclusion of developers and corporations in the construction, financing and management of MTHs indisputably begins to complicate their very position and meaning in society.

Public Space as Managed and Conditional

While many scholars have formulated their own definitions of public space (e.g., Amin, 2008, Bergamaschi et al., 2014, Pineda, 2022), this framework centres Carr's (1992) conception of it as "the stage upon which the drama of communal life unfolds," where, in well-designed and managed environments, "the armor of daily life can be partially removed, allowing us to see others as whole people" (p.23). Playing a key role in the creation of inclusive communities and civic culture throughout history (Ravazzoli & Torricelli, 2017), such as the ancient Greek agora or Renaissance boulevards, public space has long been associated with ideals of collective life and the production of social capital (Amin, 2008; Carr, 1992; Pineda, 2022). It has also been regarded as an essential ingredient for sustainable urban mobility, with a report published by the European Union asserting that "a sustainable city must have attractive open public spaces and promote sustainable, inclusive and healthy mobility" (European Union Regional Policy, 2011, p.vii). Many scholars conceptualize MTHs as contemporary forms of public or quasi-public spaces that concentrate large and diverse populations within the urban and suburban environment (Paget-

Seekins & Tironi, 2016; Turvikene et al., 2023; Reyes-Schade et al., 2024; Otsuka & Reeve, 2024). Still, given their "pivotal transportation and radiating functions" (Xu et al., 2025, p.107510), both political and economic forces have supported their continued privatization, commercialization and sterilization (Franck & Stevens, 2007). Painting them as managed environments where access and patterns of use are regulated (Davis, 1990; Mitchell, 1995; Antos et al., 2017; Rahaman et al., 2016), such spaces are now governed by punitive measures deemed necessary for safety and efficiency (Antos et al., 2017). Fostering asymmetrical power relations throughout the process, this reconstitution of MTHs globally has indisputably distorted what a universally open public space means in the contemporary age.

Franck and Stevens (2007) highlight these processes of regulation and management in their work, stating that they "do indeed prescribe and homogenize urban activities and identities, placing people in the role of passive consumer rather than active creator or participant… and pose serious threats to loose space… but have not eradicated it" (p.4). With 'loose space' acting as a synonym to public space and the activities within it that are "neither productive (like traveling to work) nor reproductive (like buying necessities)" (Franck and Stevens, 2007, p.3), a form of "zero-risk" governance has become standard within the confines of these hubs, in an effort to eliminate *informal* uses identified as unwelcome or inappropriate. To ensure their disappearance, a range of mechanisms have been established, including "zero tolerance policing, anti-social conduct by-laws… pervasive surveillance and exclusionary design" (Smith & Walters, 2018, p.2982). While some scholars argue that this management can help align planning and design outcomes with societal needs (Said and Tempels, 2023; Mattijssen et al., 2018; Spijker & Parra, 2017), these interventions raise important questions regarding whose needs are prioritized. In particular, it is those individuals whom Davis (1990) describes as "undesirable" and Tyler (2022) describes as "abject," more formally "the homeless… and marginalised youth, who find their rights within the public realm constrained by innovative mechanisms of preventive justice" (Johnstone, 2016, p.2). Entirely restricting their "right to the city" and thus, the "right to freedom, to individualization, to habitat and to inhabit" (Lefebvre, 1996, p.173), MTHs turn into selectively accessible and socially exclusionary environments (Mitchell, 2003). In doing so, they also produce and reinforce spatial inequalities, contributing to what Soja (2010) describes as "lasting structures of unevenly distributed advantage and disadvantage" (p.20).

The management of contemporary MTHs is also deeply intertwined with processes of commercialization and neoliberal urban governance. By being designed to "facilitate conditions for profitable capital accumulation on the part of both domestic and foreign capital" (Harvey, 2005, p.7), such spaces become "fixed, formulaic fantasies of space" that work to accommodate the wants and needs of the "state-capital authority" (Keul, 2015, p.51). In terms of sustainable mobility and development, these market-based strategies reframe environmental and ecological concerns to support, rather than challenge, ongoing patterns of economic growth (Angotti, 2011). Albeit addressing issues like the climate crisis, Lang and Rothenberg (2017) state these "concerns are overshadowed by an over reliance on market entrepreneurialism and an implicit faith that "green" economic development and growth will provide the necessary trickle-down effects for overcoming environmental and economic problems facing the city" (p.1745). This neoliberal ordering, in turn, envisions MTH users as "subject-citizens" who are expected to self-regulate and participate within market-oriented systems in ways that stimulate economic activity (De Coster & Zanoni, 2023, p.942; Foucault, 2008; McNay, 2009). Such 'subject-citizens' who are "unable to live up to this moral demand of self-sufficiency" are consequently "misrecognized and left to their fate" (De Coster & Zanoni, 2023, p.942-943), as neoliberal public spaces start to impose specific conditions under which subjects can legitimately exist (Butler, 2015). With consumerism central to this criterion, commercial developments within or adjacent to MTHs, such as retail shops and restaurants, modify their publicness to be "concurrently dominating and authoritative" (Keul, 2015, p.51). Implicitly linking visibility to economic engagement in the process, many of the everyday actions people perform within them are now perceived and prosecuted by an "underlying social order" that values consumption before all else (Franck & Stevens, 2007, p.22).

In relation to this neoliberal paradigm, the treatment of such hubs as capitalist spaces has prompted security agencies to become a key mechanism within them. Affirmed by Davis (1990), these "new megastructures… concentrated in the center [of the city]... [have] public activity sorted in strictly functional compartments, and circulation internalized in corridors under the gaze of private police" (p. 226). The rationale behind these paid-for, non-state actors, or "guardians" as Felson (1995) describes them, is multifaceted and contested, as some researchers elucidate their potential to reduce costs and mitigate crime amid growing pressures on police services and their partners (Ariel et al, 2017; Ariel et al., 2024; Hamerton & Hobbs, 2023). From this perspective, such interventions are often pictured as "situational approaches that focus on reducing opportunity

and increasing perceived risk… by stressing the importance of strengthened informal social control… to improve the physical environment and support greater investment" (Ariel et al, 2017, p.3; Clarke, 1995; Taylor and Gottfredson, 1986). As this justification gained traction, particularly in the post-9/11 security climate (Mitchell, 2003; Kim, 2025), responsibilities traditionally held by state policing agents have been increasingly delegated to large private security agencies overseeing spaces within the public realm. With MTHs being of clear significance in this context as "essential transport infrastructures" (Wicki et al., 2024), the presence of such security regimes becomes legitimized as both a necessary and effective intervention in protecting this quasi-public realm (Garland, 2001; Davis, 2012). Saarikkomäki and Lampela (2021 state that this "pluralisation of policing suggests that the distinctions between public and private policing have become blurred" (p.15). This growing association has severe implications, as the latter now appears to have equal power, despite "having lower educational levels, lower salaries and status… [while] also largely focusing on 'service work'… [like] giving directions and helping customers" (Saarikkomäki & Lampela, 2021, p. 19). Strikingly different from state policing agents in both capacity and mandate, these hybrid security arrangements fundamentally alter how these spaces are governed and experienced, specifically for non-financial participants that frequently have adverse encounters with them (Saarikkomäki and Lampela, 2021; Fine et al., 2003).

Circulation, Use, and the Design of Urban Experience

At the core of this paper's examination of transit megaprojects as contested processes, design is approached as a partial and coercive mechanism through which space is socially produced, behaviour is structured and certain forms of use are favoured over others. In *Cities and Design*, Knox (2010) explains that design "plays an unambiguous role in facilitating the circulation and accumulation of capital… and the absorption and deflection of ideas and movements that are potentially antithetical to dominant values and interests" (p.3). Using this line of thought, contemporary MTHs and urban public space more broadly are mutually constitutive with the economic and political rationalities that helped inform their development. Habouring the values of such rationalities in their structure and organization, it is through these sites that "ideas and movements" are reproduced, as certain actors can successfully define "their particular norms and subjectivities as universal" through the medium of space (Iveson, 2003, p.217). Specifically for MTHs, which act as "political and diplomatic instruments" (Tetiranont et al., p.829), good

architectural design remains key in supporting both their contribution to sustainable mobility and the economic imperatives of profitability and competitiveness. Yet, Nielsen (2024) notes: "[e]verything we design has consequences; hence designers and decision-makers bear a significant responsibility, especially when exploring the negative, discriminatory, and exclusionary aspects of design" (p.2). This harmful dynamic is especially salient within such hubs, which face growing scrutiny for becoming "privatised zones of hyper-consumption" (Smets, 2013 p.27), that delimit acceptable forms of presence and behaviour.

In his book *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention Through Urban Design*, Oscar Newman (1972) wrote, that the titular concept is "a surrogate term for the range of mechanisms — real and symbolic barriers, strongly defined areas of influence, and improved opportunities for surveillance — that combine to bring an environment under the control of its residents" (p.3). With this theory placing design at the forefront in attacking the "root causes of crime" (Newman, 1972, p.4), physical elements of buildings and neighbourhoods were distinctly perceived as a form of corrective prevention. Scholars like Merry (1981), however, disagree that design can prevent crime entirely, stating "spaces may be defensible but not defended if the social apparatus for effective defence is lacking" (p. 419; Chellew, 2019). Nonetheless, these preventive strategies have become prominent within contemporary urban public spaces (Chellew, 2019). Functioning more as a mode of exclusion than a crime deterrent, it is through Newman's theory that newer coercive manifestations have formed, otherwise known as hostile architecture (Petty, 2016; Rosenberg, 2019; Licht, 2021). The formal definition of these materialities in this framework is given by McCreath (2024), who uses the term to "describe objects in public that discourage the presence of a particular group, often the homeless population" (p.495). Including segmented benches with armrests to discourage sleeping or the use of specialized lighting that produces uncomfortable sensory conditions (Nielsen, 2024), these types of designs help create an "atmosphere of rejection" (Jensen, 2020, p.396) and further restrict the right to the city of those deemed undesirable (Lefebvre, 1996; Davis, 1990). In transit-oriented environments like MTHs, Ghadiri et al. (2025) argue that this neglect of "user experience dimensions (e.g. safety, visual appeal and comfort) can also undermine overall user satisfaction, including that of travellers" (p.179).

Central to these strategies, surveillance emerges as a highly effective tool through which circulation and use are controlled. Drawing on Foucault's (1977) analysis of the panopticon, surveillance within public institutions, like penitentiaries and asylums, has long operated by

"inducing a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (p.201). In this paradigm, the individual "is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (Foucault, 1977, p.200). With the proliferation of surveillance technologies across contemporary cities, this disciplinary logic has now extended beyond institutional confines to influence the routines and practices of everyday urban life (Koskela, 2002). Transit infrastructure, as noted by De Cillis et al. (2017), is discussed as a site "to protect in the security field… [as] the high number of entry points and the heavy crowds, together with the inability to adopt airport-style security checks make such infrastructure definitively a soft target for potential assailants" (p.63-64). With initiatives such as "Safe City," and "City without Violence," (de Jong & Strikwerda, 2020; Ristvej et al., 2020), which seek to strengthen safety imperatives by monitoring individuals and tracking their movements, furthering this tactic, users within MTHs are hyper-visible under extensive surveillance via "closed-circuit television (CCTV), access control/intrusion detection and abnormal sound detection technologies" (De Cillis et al., 2017, p.64; Hatuka & Toch, 2016). Similar to hostile architecture, these approaches "come at the cost of excluding groups defined as dangerous or simply non-consumers, so access and safety can't clash" (Bodnar, 2015, p.2096). Within this framework, such exclusion is understood as a deliberate outcome of these surveillance strategies, whereby private actors and security agencies transform MTHs into panoptic environments aimed at maintaining social and aesthetic order (Bodnár, 2015; Hatuka & Toch, 2016).

With regard to all of the above, I offer the perspective of Kulynych (2001), who states: "what gets defined as public space, who legitimately occupies that space, and how the boundaries between public space and other spaces are maintained are all constituted by social processes" (p.251). In the face of the ongoing securitization and fortification of the public realm, however, I respond that these "spaces of encounter, politics, and inter-subjectivity" and the processes within them have become, paradoxically, anti-social in their effects (Blomley, 2010, p.336). With private infiltration and punitive mechanisms increasingly undermining the conviviality of these spaces, presence and interaction are substantiated solely when it is deemed economically productive (Hatuka & Toch, 2016; Petty, 2016; Rosenberger, 2019; Martin, 2023). Fueled by the "complex redistribution of public space rights and responsibilities along public and private lines" among other things (Fleury & Gomes, 2024, p.96), the shifting publicness of such hubs is indisputably changing what is acceptable within them and thus, their meaning to individuals and broader

society. This understanding of the social production of space supports the work of Massey (2009), who states “space is always in the process of being made” and fluctuates based on “changing relationships, networks and connections” (p.17; O’Keeffe, 2025). Thus, public space should be perceived as inherently malleable, particularly as the “erosion of such places (and their replacement by privately controlled spaces and means of communication)” persists (Mitchell, 2003, p.34). If public space can be reshaped in these ways, it also raises the question of whether a return to more democratic forms of spatial control remains possible.

II. Union Station: Past, Present, and Platform

> "The building is symbolic, conveying a proud and optimistic city and nation. It represents a rare craftsmanship and sense of value for our civic places. It demonstrates grand possibilities. Union Station is cherished as a part of our identity, but also because it compels and inspires" (City of Toronto, 2004, p.10).

Union Station is clearly seen as a vital civic space in Toronto's urban fabric. To situate the contemporary role of the station and the discourses surrounding its revitalization, this section follows its evolution and examines how it has emerged as both Canada's busiest multi-modal transit hub and a symbolic gateway that has influenced public life. It then delves into the station's physical decline in the late twentieth century and the growing influence of private-sector interests that prompted calls for revitalization. Finally, this section analyzes how the USRP was conceived in the early 2000s, alongside the policy framework developed to inform its implementation. Through this historical analysis, I highlight how the project's original civic objectives have wavered in response to development pressures, commercial intensification, and public-private governance structures. I also examine the tensions and discrepancies within its vision that eventually contributed to the conditions observed through my fieldwork.

The Third Station

As one of the fastest-growing cities in North America, Toronto has undergone a significant metamorphosis in both its form and culture. The former is most evident in its unparalleled pace of real estate development (Rosen, 2016), as rapid intensification and condominium growth dramatically reshape the urban landscape. With this transformation particularly salient along the city's waterfront, where an ambitious redevelopment agenda is underway to create "the most exciting people place in North America," recent projects like Quayside and Queen's Quay Terminal signify a trend of "major capital investment in the built environment" (Lehrer & Laidley, 2008, p.787). Yet, as condominiums rise, Business Improvement Areas expand, and the program of Waterfront TO adapts to a provincial "land grab" in its jurisdiction (Stober, 2026, para. 1), the historical addition of the railway corridor remains the most formative intervention in stimulating growth along the lake's edge and structuring patterns of land use across the downtown core. At the centre of this system sits Union Station.

The first Union Station was completed in May 1858 and marked the city's first dedicated passenger rail facility. It was positioned between Simcoe and York Streets, one block south of Front Street, and gave rise to Station Street, which still exists today. Conceived as a means of unifying multiple railway companies under a single terminal, hence its designation *Union*, its construction was an early attempt to consolidate an increasingly fragmented infrastructural network within the growing city (Marshall & Bow, 2019). By also being indicative of the railway expansion boom in North America and Britain at the time, the station was devised as a "major means of transport of goods and essentials" (Ali & Qi, 2023, p.877), specifically connecting Toronto residents and industries with smaller communities along Lake Ontario. This grand vision was, ironically, contrasted by a modest stature and relatively simple interiors. As for the aforesaid companies, this included Grand Trunk Railway, which led the work, and Great Western Railway and the Northern Railway, which were then asked to join as tenants. However, as demand for passenger rail service grew across Southern Ontario and these tenant companies pursued the construction of their own facilities, "the Grand Trunk Railway decided to demolish the first Union Station, and a temporary station served passengers until July 1, 1873, when Grand Trunk opened its own permanent station, the second Union, at the same site" (Marshall & Bow, 2019, para.7).

The subsequent Union Station was an absolutely stunning structure for the time and much larger than its predecessor. Designed by E.P. Hanneford, the new Union was inspired by English railway stations of the previous decade and incorporated three Victorian-style towers, with the tallest being in the centre (Marshall & Bow, 2019; Bradburn, 2018). Also featuring an enclosed train shed with three tracks, the rail facility was designed and deemed adequate for a city of 65,000 people. Soon after its inception, though, the station would be experiencing significant capacity constraints, which were further intensified by the addition of Canadian Pacific's passenger terminal to the facility in 1887 (Parks Canada, 2002). Sprawling industry and the relentless widening of the existing railway corridor would also assume all available land between the city and Lake Ontario's shoreline, resulting in the choice to infill Toronto's harbour. To mitigate this condition of unsustainable growth, the station underwent a major renovation in the early 1890s, reopening in 1896 with a new seven-storey office building on Front Street, expanded waiting areas and additional train sheds (Marshall & Bow, 2019). Yet this would prove to be obsolete as its woes were not alleviated, which *Railway and Shipping World* reported on in 1899, stating: "The general

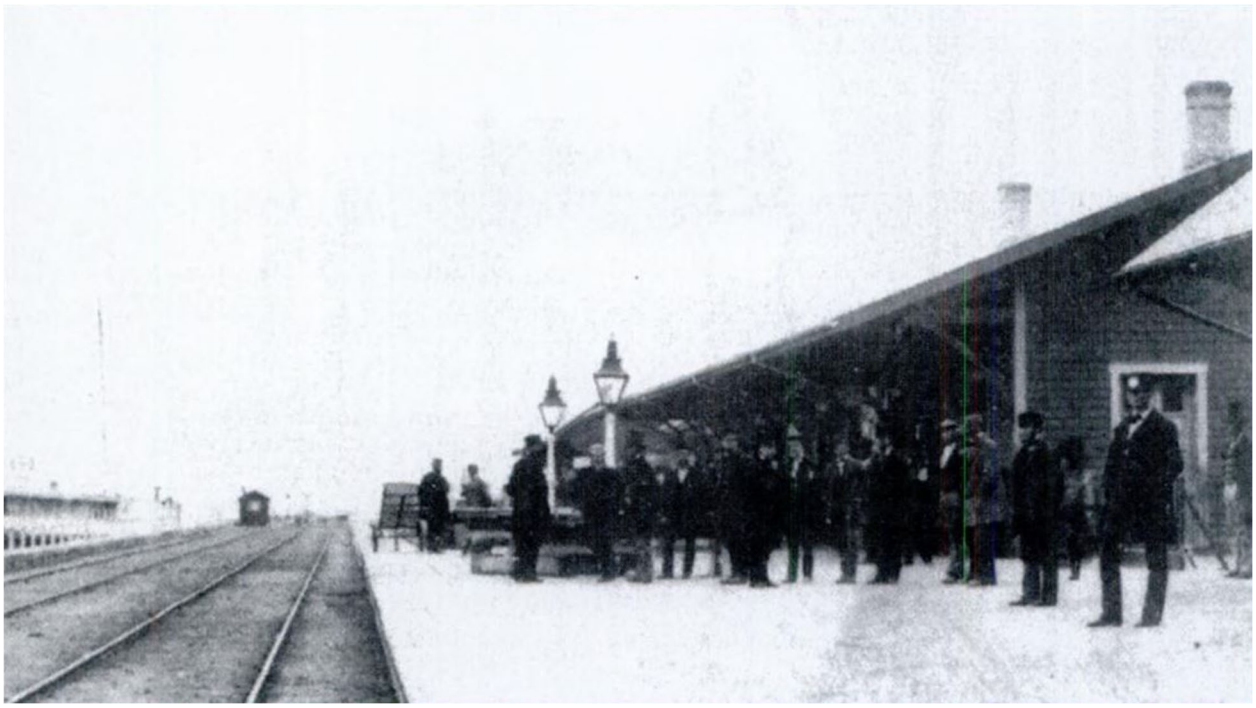


Figure 2.1: Toronto's first Union Station, c. 1860s.



Figure 2.2: Toronto's second Union Station (1873–1927).

consensus of opinion is that the Toronto Union is one of the most inconvenient stations in North America, expensive to run and unsatisfactory in very many respects" (Bradburn, 2018, para. 4). While a new rail terminal was proposed in the same year, any prospect of improving the second Union Station quickly faded, as it failed to gain any political will.

The impending doom facing the station and ultimately, Toronto's much larger infrastructural network would be averted at the turn of the century. On April 9, 1904, a large fire swept across the downtown core, destroying "virtually all of the buildings in an area bounded by the railway lands, Wellington Street, Yonge Street and York Street" (Marshall & Bow, 2019, para. 10). Regarded as the Great Fire of 1904, this event, while tragic, opened up much of the area to be redeveloped and proved opportune in the City's pursuit to assemble the land needed for a new station. A 752-foot stretch of City-owned land on Front Street would become the location of the third and current Union Station. Part of a bold attempt to modernize rail infrastructure and improve safety along the waterfront, particularly at congested crossings, the site would not only house a new station building but also a grade-separated rail corridor to "permit cross-waterfront railway traffic as well as pedestrian and vehicular access via the main north-south traffic arteries…" (Filey, 1994, p.37). To accomplish such an undertaking, which included constructing, maintaining and operating the proposed facility, the City leased the land to Toronto Terminals Railway, jointly owned by the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Grand Trunk Railway (later Canadian National Railways). With a project cost of an estimated $1,000,000 (approximately $35.5 million today) and an optimistic completion date of February 1908 (Toronto Historical Railway Association, n.d), this new Union Station was a prime opportunity for the City to position Toronto as a modern and economically competitive urban centre in North America and the Western world more broadly.

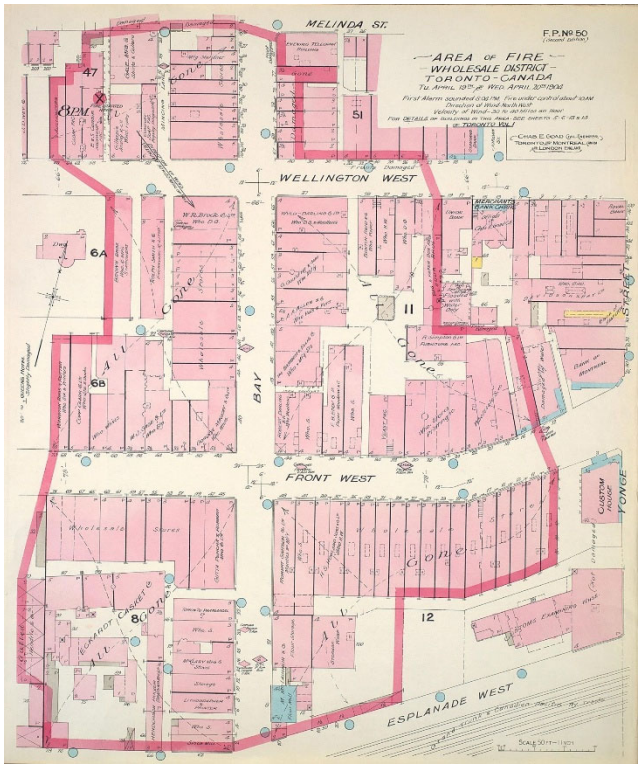


Figure 2.3: Map of Toronto's Great Fire, 1904.

The Toronto Terminals Railway company brought together a group of architects, including Ross and Macdonald of Montreal, Hugh G. Jones, and noted Toronto architect John Lyle, to design the station. Each of the above represented a different stakeholder in the project, with Ross and Macdonald linked to the Canadian National Railway, Jones to the Canadian Pacific Railway, and Lyle to the City and several related committees (Hunt, 1982). Concurrently, the design process unfolded at the height of the City Beautiful movement and had to navigate the ambitions of civic collectives such as the Civic Improvement Committee, which Lemon (1989) states "advocated for the reshaping of the street pattern within the built-up area and proposed wide diagonal roads… to create an aura of monumentality" and precincts of architecturally stunning edifices (p. 11). As the committee's consultant architect, Lyle played a central role in translating these aesthetic principles into the station's design and ensuring that the third Union Station, not to mention the entire city, embodied the movement's ideals of civic grandeur and urban improvement. Drawing upon his École des Beaux-Arts training, which similarly focused on principles such as axial symmetry and monumentality, his affinity for civic architecture and public space, irrespective of public advocacy, became inscribed within the station's architectural design (Bradburn, 2018). This vision, along with its associated design plan, was subsequently approved by the Board of Railway Commissioners in April 1914 (Parks Canada, 2002).

Created as Canada's largest and most elaborate Beaux-Arts railway station, the architectural form of Union Station can only be described as monumental. Becoming a defining fixture on Front Street, its exterior is made almost entirely of beige Indiana limestone and organized around a central colonnade, flanked by expansive four-storey wings (Toronto Historical Railway Association, n.d). This colonnade, which is buttressed by twenty-two colossal Doric columns and framed with a considerable setback from the front lot line, would house the station's primary rail functions while the east and west wings were, at least for this time, dedicated to office and service commercial uses. A Commemorative Integrity Statement by Parks Canada (2002) states, this "sense of spectacle invoked by the facade is continued on the interior where passengers enter into a monumental ticket lobby whose lavish decor includes Tennessee marble floors, walls faced with exotic Zumbro stone under a two-storey high vaulted ceiling decorated with coffered tiles" (p.7). This lobby, later known as the Great Hall, would become the country's largest interior room and a node of pedestrian circulation, as the design team incorporated multiple access points and exit ramps to ease future congestion (Mitchelmore, 2017). Two of these

connections were to a pedestrianized plaza (now Sir John A. Macdonald Plaza) and exterior 'moats' for vehicular traffic usage. Forming part of the station's Beaux-Arts ideals, the new Union embodied a form of civicness and grandeur while remaining inherently functional.

This significant investment in Toronto's mobility network would be completed on August 7, 1927. When regular service launched four days later, the press "gushed about improved passenger amenities and safety… the modern conveniences were a lunch counter, large dining room, full telegraph and telephone facilities, barber shop, beauty parlours, and… individual bathrooms containing the most sanitary appliances" (Bradburn, 2018, para.7). With its monumentality, it was no surprise that the third Union became a focal point for the city in the following decades. Hosting organ recitals twice daily and making space for murals in the Great Hall, especially during the war years, the station was more than just a manifestation of the dwindling City Beautiful movement, but also of the desire for a civic *destination* for all its residents. According to Henighan (2010), it was "a public space in the classical sense: a location in which civic experience, shared by many different strands of society, was woven together" (p.1). This civic experience encompassed a wide range of emotions, such as grief, as families said farewell to their children departing for the Second World War, and relief, when arriving passengers reached safety, along with other moments that evinced the station's growing capacity as a shared social and cultural space. The latter was further defined by growing immigration in the mid-1900s, as numerous immigrants used Union as a gateway to their new home in Toronto (Heritage Toronto, n.d). With culturally based community groups making camp at the station to meet with them directly and provide housing and job assistance, the station immediately transcended the bounds of its transportation functions (Heritage Toronto, n.d). Architecture historian Douglas Richardson, at its inauguration, predicted it as such, stating this is "a very public building, a building for the use and enjoyment of all the people... not only recognized [for] its unusual physical dimensions but evidently… the new aspirations it embodied" (Bebout, 1972, p.72; Mitchelmore, 2017).



Figure 2.4: Construction of Toronto's third Union Station, 1917.



Figure 2.5: Alternate view of Union Station construction, 1917.



Figure 2.6: Toronto's third Union Station following its opening, 1927.

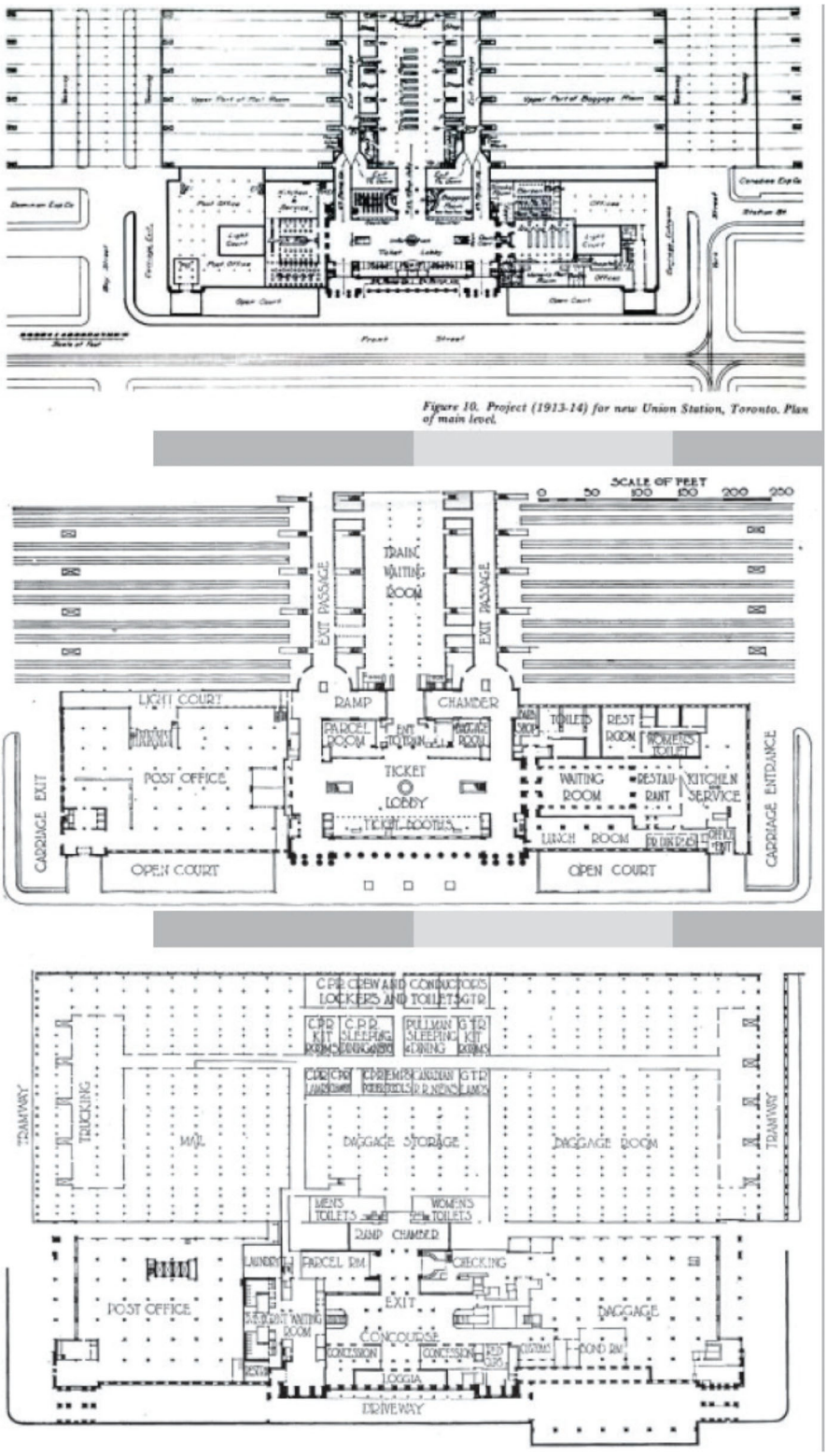


Figure 2.7: Floor plan of Union Station, 1927.

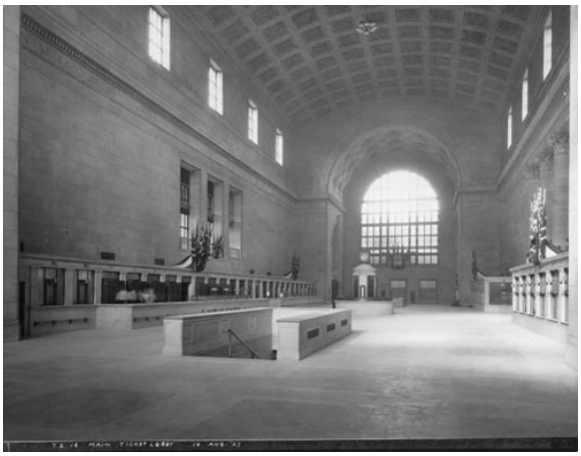


Figure 2.8: The Great Hall following completion, 1927.



Figure 2.9: Passengers purchasing tickets during Union's opening week, 1927.



Figure 2.10: Immigrants arriving at Union Station, 1948.

The Need for Revitalization

Following the war, the Toronto Terminals Railway found itself facing dwindling freight and passenger markets. With air travel being made more accessible to Torontonians, particularly through the Malton Airport (now Toronto Pearson International Airport) at the edge of the city, the profitability of specifically mid-to-long distance passenger rail became severely bleak (Marshall & Bow, 2019). This downturn was further compounded by the growing affordability of private automobile ownership and substantial public investment in highway infrastructure, as mandated by the *Provincial Highway Act* (Sewell, 2009). Yet, with rising congestion and the mounting inefficiencies associated with an automobile-dependent urban form, public transportation would not fall into obscurity. Amid rising international interest in underground transit systems, the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) inaugurated the city's first subway system with the opening of the Yonge Subway line (Line 1), which connected to Union Station in March 1954 (Vyhnak, 2016). In terms of traffic, its impact was immediate, as Baker (1973) notes, "its success was such that the equivalent of some 10,000 cars had been removed from the north–south street system" (p.86). This would prompt subsequent expansions of the network, including the opening of the University line between Union and St. George stations in 1963 (Baker, 1973). Marking a critical turning point in the station's history, this integration of rapid transit infrastructure transformed Union into an intermodal node and grew its significance within Toronto's public transportation network as well as an urban public space.

Although the new subway was exciting, the Ontario Government was concerned with urban sprawl beyond the city's boundaries and thus, saw the need for improved suburban rail passenger service. To achieve this, the province created GO (Government of Ontario) Transit in 1967, a regional authority to manage growth and commuter traffic into Toronto, and established a rail line running from Oakville to Pickering (Bradburn, 2018). Soberman (1997) notes that, "just as Torontonians fell in love with their first subway, suburbanites fell in love with their first GO trains, and the system has since been continually expanded to serve outlying communities with considerable success" (p.35). By 1978, this expansion had resulted in a five-line network, including the Lakeshore Line, Georgetown Line (now the Kitchener Line), Richmond Hill Line, Milton Line, and Bradford Line (now the Barrie Line). It would also eventually supplant the service previously offered by other transportation agencies, like the Canadian Pacific Railway. As

for Union, which emerged as the centre of this expanding network, the City constructed a dedicated waiting area for the new bi-level GO trains the same year (Mitchelmore, 2017). This would be the first significant reinvestment in the station since its inauguration, over 51 years earlier. Symbolizing its pivotal role in addressing the region's transportation needs and advancing the recommendations of the Metropolitan Toronto and Region Transportation Study (Soberman, 1997), which informed the need for GO Transit initially, this intervention would shift Union Station's trajectory as an organizing point for mobility at both urban and regional scales.

Notwithstanding these developments, the station still faced several challenges that would shape its development and surrounding land use. With GO establishing MacMillan Yard in Concord, Ontario, freight services were gradually removed from the rail corridors around Union and moved to the periphery (Heritage Toronto, n.d). Freeing up substantial tracts of land in the process, especially by the City's underutilized waterfront, numerous development proposals began to pop up to optimize adjacent lands. In particular, on December 19, 1968, Canadian National unveiled a redevelopment proposal known as Metro Centre, which called for the demolition of all existing structures across former railway lands bounded by Front, Yonge, and Bathurst Streets, including Union Station itself (Parks Canada, 2002). This mammoth of a project consisted of "a telecommunications tower, convention centre, hotel, housing for 20,000 and a transportation centre bringing together rail, GO commuter, subway and bus lines… and, of course, a cluster of towers where Union Station stood" (Vyhnak, 2016). Providing more than "five million square feet of office and commercial space" (Heritage Toronto, n.d), it was considered to be the biggest redevelopment project in North America at the time.

Similar large-scale redevelopment schemes were widely embraced across North America, such as the 1963 demolition of Penn Station in New York City to make way for a new Madison Square Garden (Bradburn, 2018). This burgeoning form of thinking led to Metro Centre being approved by the Metropolitan Toronto City Council in December 1970, which enraged many Torontonians, including renowned urbanist Jane Jacobs, who were shocked by the potential loss of such an architecturally and historically significant structure (Leblanc, 2020). Along with backlash from the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario and the Confederation of Resident and Ratepayer Associations (Leblanc, 2020), residents formed the Union Station Committee to ensure this demolition would not be realized. Luckily for them, with the election of Mayor David Crombie

and a fiscally conservative council, Metro Centre stood no chance of destroying Union and only the telecommunications tower, which became the CN Tower, was approved (Henighan, 2010).

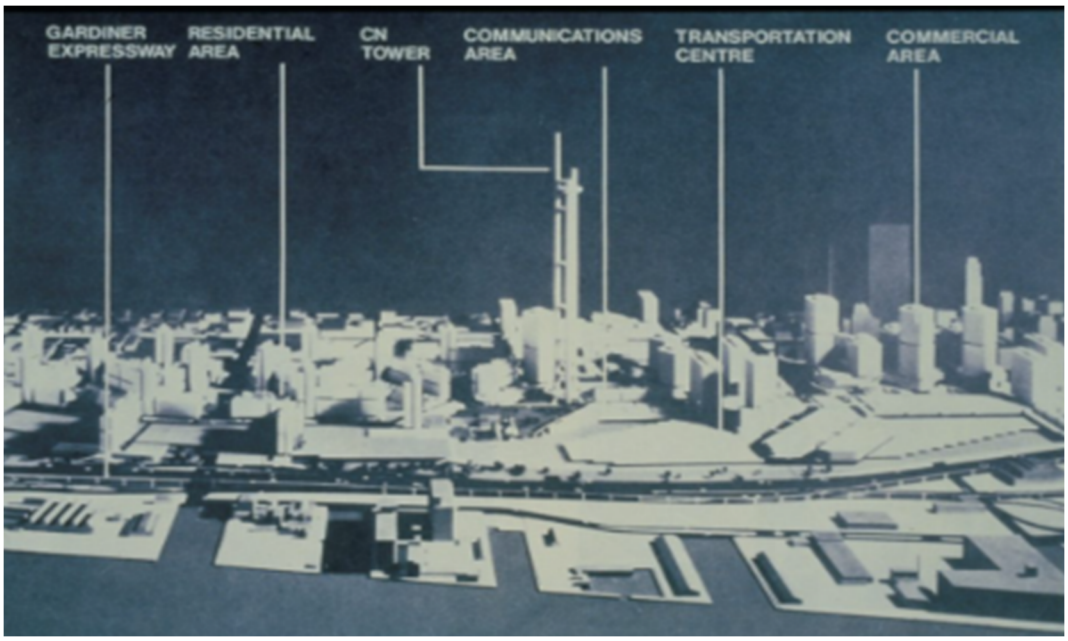


Figure 2.11: Proposed Metro Centre development, 1968.



Figure 2.12: Passenger queues at Union Station ("cattle line"), 1987.

By 1975, to protect the station from further demolition threats, Parks Canada “designated Union Station a National Historic Site, citing the building as ‘the finest example in Canada of stations erected in the classical Beaux-Arts during an era of expanding national rail networks and vigorous

urban growth'" (Daair, 2022, p.26). This attention on Union, albeit initially contentious, ultimately compelled the City to recognize the need for more investment in the station.

As demand intensified for a more robust regional rail network throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Union Station required a severe expansion, or for the sake of this paper, *revitalization*. At this point, the Station was morphing into "a maze of stairs and elevated mezzanine corridors… [that] lacked adequate vertical access to handle the future increase in passengers" (Du Toit et al., 2001, p.16). In response, the City advanced a Master Plan in 1989 to scope potential pedestrian connections to the newly completed CN Tower, Rogers Centre, and Air Canada Centre (Fournier Gersovitz Moss & Associates Architects, 2006). One of these connections would convert the west wing of the Great Hall into the entrance of the current Skywalk, "a raised pedestrian walkway linking Union Station to the CN Tower… [that] required the demolition of the upper two floors of the three-storey Canadian Express building" (Payer, 2007, p. 8). This plan would also form the foundation of many other revitalization efforts, such as the Union Station Internal Pedestrian Circulation Study (2001) and the VIA's Transportation Hub Study (1997). The latter was particularly significant in envisioning the station beyond its Beaux-Arts architecture and passenger rail uses, as it proposed the "renovation and commercialization of VIA's passenger concourse" (Fournier Gersovitz Moss & Associates Architects, 2005, p.32). Although the analysis was confined to the VIA-owned portion of the station, City officials would begin to use its economic recommendations to inform all future projects within and surrounding Union Station. It would also mark the beginning of a trend in which Union Station was viewed as a valuable piece of urban real estate.

With these conditions in place, private interest in Union Station would continue to grow. In 1997, Maple Leafs Sports and Entertainment proposed a new sports facility atop the train shed south of the station building, with the Great Hall envisioned as its primary entrance (Marshall & Bow, 2019). Although the proposal never materialized due to complications surrounding the train shed's heritage designation, it nevertheless echoed the growing urgency and appetite for revitalization. Amid concerns that such transformations could be driven predominantly by the private sector, the City of Toronto moved to assert greater control over the station's future and, subsequently, potential earning value (Mitchelmore, 2017). Beginning in 1998, the City undertook the strategic acquisition of remaining parcels of land still held by the Toronto Terminals Railway (Fournier Gersovitz Moss & Associates Architects, 2006). Two years later, the City would finalize

an agreement with GO Transit and the aforesaid to purchase Union Station outright, excluding the width of the rail corridor extending beyond York Street and Bay Street, which would remain under the province's jurisdiction (Mitchelmore, 2017). A major investment in the multi-modal transit hub and the broader GO train network, plans for a renewed Union were well underway by the turn of the century and would become "the impetus for a… restoration ironically paid for by the private sector… [that] would make available up to 200,000 square feet of retail and commercial space" (Bow, 2019, para. 7).

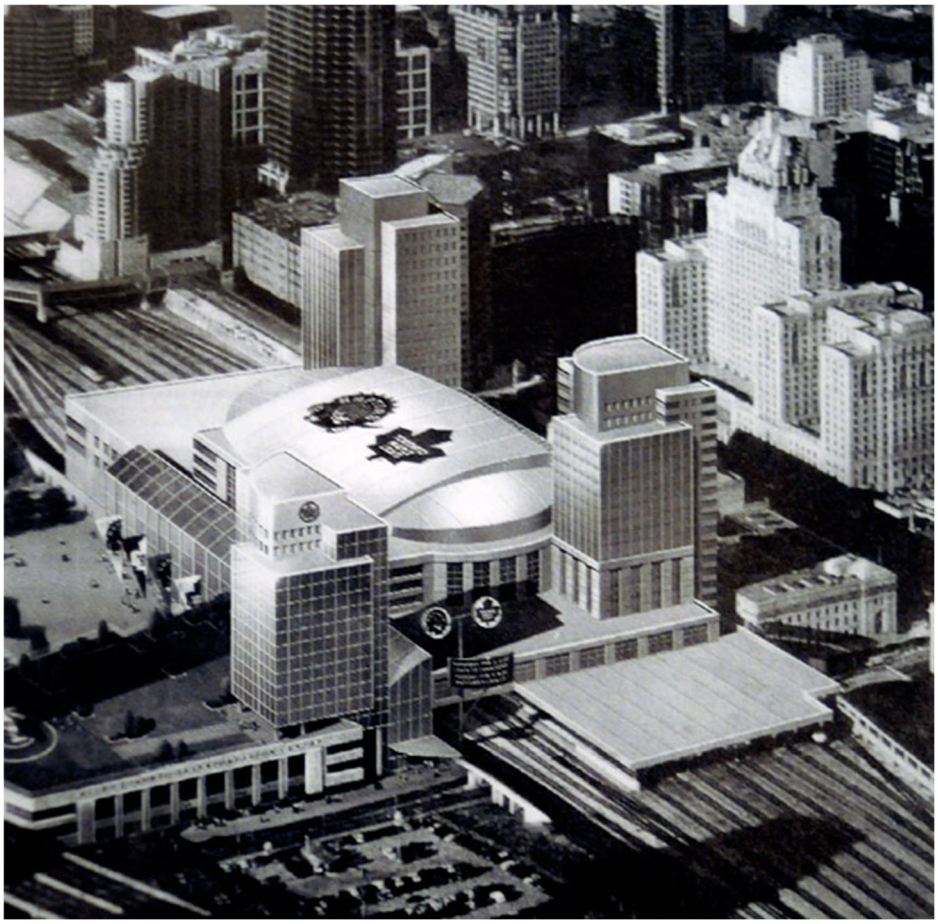


Figure 2.13: Proposed Maple Leaf Stadium above Union Station's trainshed.

Reimagining Union Station

As part of its broader effort to reposition the station within the evolving waterfront redevelopment, the City envisioned Union as not only "a multimodal transportation hub but as a landmark destination" (City of Toronto, 2007, p.1). While the necessity of upgrading the station's core infrastructure was a given within this project, these improvements also served to rationalize the reconstitution of the station as an "aesthetically and behaviorally controlled, homogeneous environment of… consumption" (Franck & Stevens, 2007, p.3). The starkest expression of this directive was the proposed retail component, for which the City sought to secure a head lessor, otherwise known as a private entity tasked with overseeing and financing its development and operations. Consequently, a request for expression of interest (REOI) was issued in 2001. The request outlined three key objectives:

> "i) To enhance the transportation attributes of the station;
> ii) To revitalize the station as a destination; and
> iii) To ensure that capital improvements, including heritage preservation and restoration, are undertaken by the developer" (Mitchelmore, 2017, p.26).

Out of eight responses, only two, LP Heritage and Union Pearson Group, submitted a comprehensive redevelopment proposal for the station. The former, a US-based developer with experience in infrastructure restoration, was initially awarded the leasehold by City Council the following year. However, as concerns began to circulate about its financial health, a second vote was held, which landed in favour of the Union Pearson Group (UPG), albeit narrowly. This quick and peculiar shift was criticized by the public and collectives, such as Save Union Station, a group of heritage advocates, who questioned the approval process and, most importantly, if there had been any corruption (Henighan, 2010). These concerns were further amplified by Union Pearson Group's leadership, as it was chaired at the time by Larry Tanenbaum, head of Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment. Critics accused "then-mayor Mel Lastman, whose son Dale Lastman was Tanenbaum's lawyer, of having a conflict of interest, and discovered, through a freedom of information request, that the original ballots [from Council's decision] had been shredded" (Henighan, 2010, para. 11). Even so, following a review by City Council in May 2003, Lastman was cleared of any wrongdoing and the REOI process was ultimately deemed fair and legitimate

(CBC, 2003; Henighan, 2010). This controversy, nevertheless, would weaken early public confidence in the then-unnamed project and emerge as a central issue in the 2003 municipal election that ultimately brought Mayor David Miller into office (Marshall & Bow, 2019).

In 2004, the City of Toronto commissioned and formally adopted an independent peer-reviewed document, known as the *Union Station Master Plan*. This Plan was a consolidation of previous policy documents related to Union Station, such as the Union Station Pedestrian Circulation Plan (1991/2001), the Union Station Heritage Guidelines (2001) and the Commemorative Integrity Statement (2002) (City of Toronto, 2004). The preface of the 108-page document describes the initiative as "a one-time opportunity to… put forth the guiding principles and policy framework that will ensure the Station complex contributes to… the thriving of the downtown, the fruition of the City's plans for a dynamic Waterfront, and the vitality of the entire region" (City of Toronto, 2004, p.xi). Although more high-level in the grand scheme of the revitalization, its content and organization were paramount in formulating how Union should be reimagined as both a multi-modal transit hub and an "important civic asset" (City of Toronto, 2006, p.16). Providing direction on a range of issues, the Master Plan generated the momentum necessary to initiate and sustain a project of such significant scale. This cause was structured around four 'Big Moves,' which included:

1. "An Integrated Public Realm, celebrates the Station's two key frontages, Front Street and Union Plaza, and advocates redefining both;
2. A Modern Station, Accommodating Change, addresses two outstanding issues that hold enormous capacity to reshape the experience of Union Station: the future of the trainshed and potential development above the Station complex;
3. Revitalization of Underutilized Spaces, recognizes the Station as valuable downtown space that can be redesigned to better serve transportation functions and to add vitality to the downtown;
4. Maximized Porousness through Extended Pedestrian Connections, identifies the Station as fundamentally a pedestrian environment, that serves not only functions related to transportation, but also the urban environment of which it is a part." (City of Toronto, 2004, p.13).

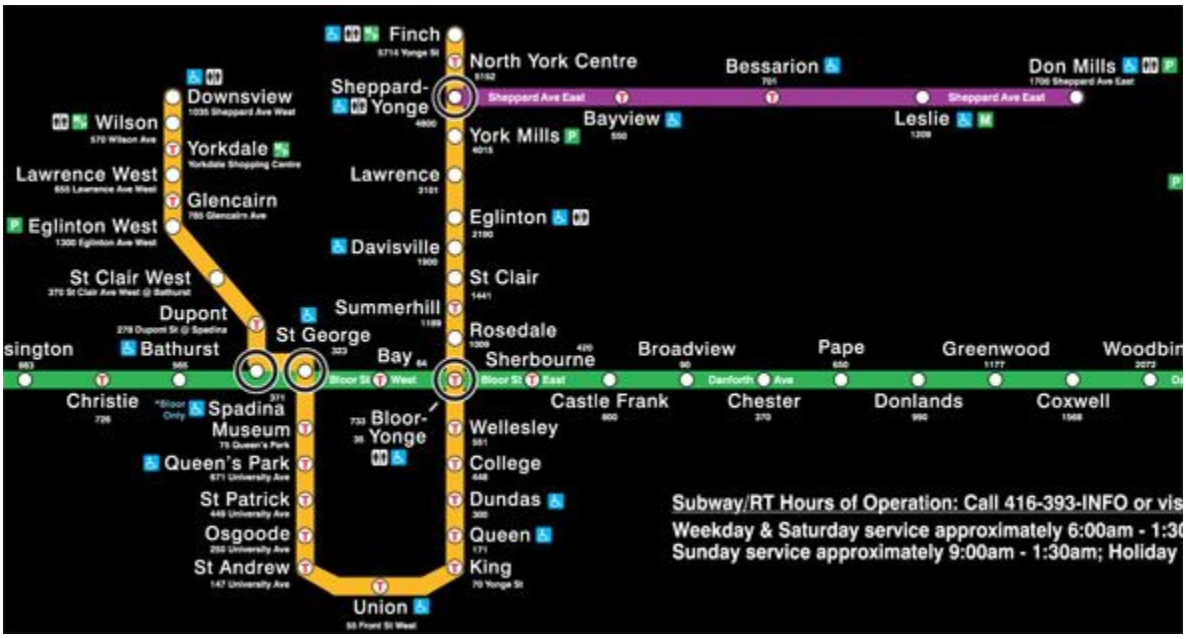


Figure 2.14: Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) subway station map, 2002

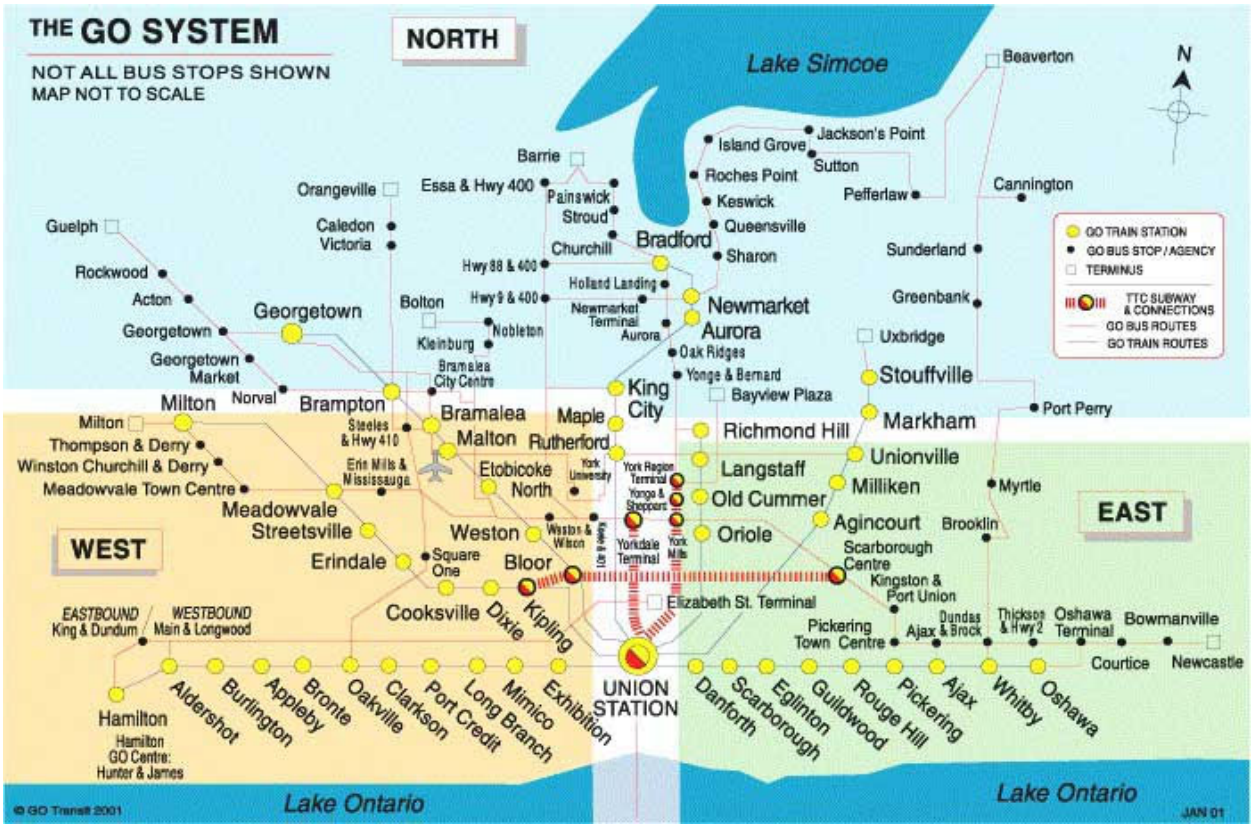


Figure 2.15: GO Transit bus and rail network map, 2001.

Similar to the structure of an Official Plan, this foundational document was organized around a series of guiding principles and objectives intended to direct both the short- and long-term evolution of the station. Both extensive and specific to the distinct needs and repairs of the station, these guidelines would mark the very first articulations of what the station could ultimately become. Among them were:

- "1.3 The transportation function of the Station should be paramount in the internal and external design of the building…
- 2.4 The pedestrian system should be clearly legible to all users of the Station, facilitated by clear sightlines and a hierarchy of distinct pedestrian routes and places…
- 2.5 The distribution and location of key functions, connections and access points should be integrated and should facilitate the even distribution and direction of pedestrian movement throughout the Station and to the surrounding facilities…
- 2.7 The design of connections, access points and vertical access facilities (including stairs, escalators, elevators), should consider the comfort, safety and visual interest of pedestrians…
- 2.8 Station design should meet the requirements for barrier-free access to accommodate users of varying and special needs…
- 5.5 Public routes, connections and spaces in and around the Station should be enhanced and animated with appropriate uses that provide users with variety and interest while not hindering the primary transportation functions and continuous pedestrian flow…
- 5.7 The City of Toronto's Accessibility Guidelines should be used to guide the design, planning and construction of accessible facilities at Union Station" (City of Toronto, 2004, p.11-17).

The years following the implementation of the Master Plan would prove tenuous in orchestrating what would become the USRP. In June 2006, City Council adopted the Union Station District Plan and Heritage Conservation District to guide future development surrounding the station (City of Toronto, 2007). Closely aligned with the four Big Moves, these policy documents helped consolidate a more coordinated planning framework for subsequent projects within and around Union Station. Around the same time, the Union Pearson Group proposal to lease Union

Station for 99 years and undertake all capital and tenant improvements fell through, after the group "issued a statement indicating that, faced with an extensive list of items to complete the transaction, it was not prepared to proceed with the transaction" (City of Toronto, 2006, p.4). These requirements included substantial heritage restoration obligations, such as repairs to the building façade, the main pedestrian bridge, the skylight in the West Waiting Room, and the expansion joint at the York Street tramway, among others (City of Toronto, 2006). In response, a 2006 report to City Council stated:

> "Now that the transaction has been terminated with UPG [Union Pearson Group], it is imperative that the City give immediate and serious attention to the state of repair at Union Station. Experience to date has shown that the extent of deterioration is generally greater than anticipated and costlier to undertake due to the heritage requirements. Consequently, the capital repair program must be revisited and re-prioritized" (City of Toronto, 2006, p.7).

Concurrently, efforts continued to materialize the vision articulated within the newly established policy framework. Over the next two years, the City would retain multiple consultants, including FGMA, NORR Limited Architects and Engineers, and Deloitte Touche LLP (Deloitte), to prepare a comprehensive Building Condition Assessment, a recommended conceptual design and a business case analysis for development options (City of Toronto, 2007). These studies culminated in the "Recommended Approach," which proposed that the City "fund and manage the state of good repair, heritage and transportation components of the Station, and construct the shell of the new retail area… [which] the head lessee would operate and manage" (City of Toronto, 2007, p.9). Supporting this approach, the engineering firm Arup conducted detailed pedestrian modelling to evaluate future capacity requirements under the proposed redevelopment scenario, focusing on anticipated circulation patterns and system performance under projected peak conditions in 2021. Referred to as the Union Station Internal Pedestrian Circulation Study, and identified in both the Master and District Plans as essential to improving pedestrian amenities, the analysis validated its proposed interventions, including strengthened connections to the street network and the PATH system (Bateman, 2007). It would also illuminate some serious constraints, particularly the very heavy orientation of pedestrian flow between the station and the downtown core and the entry and exit points to the station (Bateman, 2007). Yet, the findings from this study

indicated that "the Recommended Approach, while still requiring some additional analysis, clearly demonstrated the potential to maximize spatial opportunity objectives for pedestrian flow and... generally exhibited an encouraging degree of efficiency" (City of Toronto, 2007, p.10).

Regardless, the design itself began to take clearer form as the approach was translated into a more defined architectural and spatial strategy. As construction neared, the core elements of the project were formalized and communicated to the public, alongside its official naming. A report to the Toronto and East York Community Council on September 15, 2009 described interventions as follows:

> "There will be a "dig down" underneath the concourse area of Union Station in order to improve pedestrian circulation and provide for the introduction of two new GO concourses off York Street and Bay Street and a new retail area in a central concourse below the existing VIA concourse. In addition, other alterations to the building are being proposed including the reintroduction of pedestrian movement through the arches on the south wall of the Great Hall, the opening up of an originally planned passage from the Great Hall into the East Wing, and reconfiguring circulation areas in the York Street and Front Street Promenades" (City of Toronto, 2009, p.75).

When considering these elements, the revitalization of Union focused heavily on improving pedestrian movement and infrastructure. By introducing expanded concourses, additional vertical circulation elements and, most notably, the Bay Retail Level and Union Food Court, the USRP reflects a pertinent shift in the early 2000s toward multi-modal transit hubs as mixed-use environments. For instance, many City reports explicitly cite Grand Central Terminal in New York City and St. Pancras International Station in London as key precedents informing the station's design vision (City of Toronto, 2016; City of Toronto, 2020). The former, in particular, underwent a significant retrofit a couple of years prior, which included the expansion of subway platforms and mezzanines and the addition of a 7,400-square-foot European-style food market arcade on a lower level (Frumkin, 1999; Brown, 2003). Comparable to Union, as both are housed in Beaux-Arts buildings and function as major multi-modal transit hubs within a dense downtown core, the design team behind the Recommended Approach, NORR Architects & Engineers, would use the makeover of Grand Central as a guide.

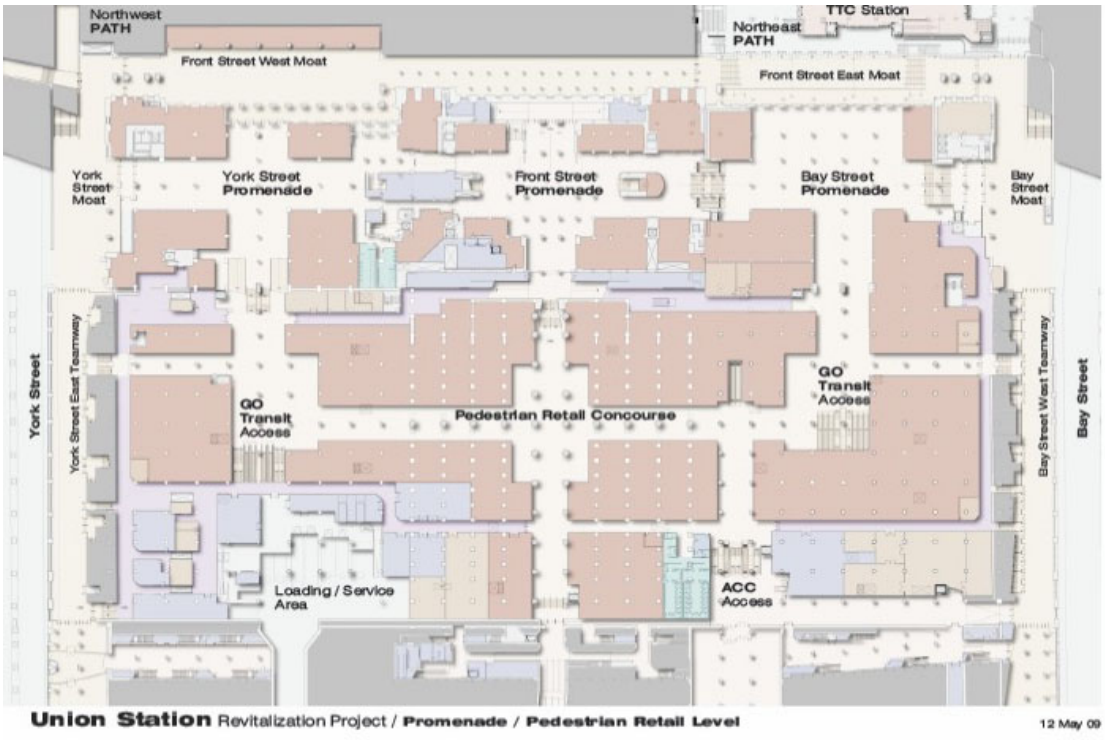


Figure 2.16: Proposed USRP floor plan, 2009.



Figure 2.17: Proposed "dig-down" expansion beneath Union Station, 2009.



Figure 2.18: Dining concourse beneath Grand Central Terminal, New York City.



Figure 2.19: Rendering of Union Station's food market, 2016.

This is true for St. Pancras International as well, whose 2007 redevelopment transformed the station into “a major retail and leisure destination… that offers Europe's longest champagne bar, a daily farmers' market… and an individual mix of 67 independent boutiques and shops featuring some of high street retail's best-known brands” (Muir, 2008, p.11). Centring this commercialization alongside modern concourses and clearly defined movement corridors, the intentional blurring of pedestrian planning and consumption-based programming became a defining feature of this London hub. With the USRP adopting this ideology of mobility infrastructure as an enabler of commercial activity and surrounding real estate valorization, this intentional pivot in Union’s existence as an infrastructural asset would start to alter the station’s public function and civic qualities.

In 2009, the Toronto City Council approved the selection of Redcliff (Union Station) Inc., a subsidiary of Osmington Inc., one of Canada’s largest private real estate companies, to replace Union Pearson Group as the preferred head lessee (City of Toronto, 2009). Under this arrangement, Redcliff assumed responsibility for financing, leasing and operating the station’s retail and commercial components, which would substantially increase the overall financial viability of the USRP (City of Toronto, 2007). In return, the company would receive a “management fee of 4% of the annual gross revenue for the retail and commercial components of Union Station” (City of Toronto, 2009, p.5). However, the terms of the lease departed in several respects from the policy direction established in the Master Plan. As stated in the Union Station Head Lessee – Supplementary Report, the “Head Lessee has the exclusive right to run commercial special events in the City-owned common areas of the Building” (City of Toronto, 2009, p.4). With this including retail pop-ups and ticketed events, the Head Lease Agreement would have immense control over the publicness of the station. Since the agreement focused only on the “station’s performance as a transit hub, satisfaction of heritage requirements, and ensuring stable financial performance” (Mitchelmore, 2017, p.34), Redcliff was under limited obligation to address and sustain the civic preservationist objectives outlined in the Master Plan. This arrangement, an undeniable oversight by the City, would unquestionably distort the civic character of the station and, even worse, restrict its potential as a “renewed, vital public space that contributes broadly to city building” (City of Toronto, 2004, p.13).

Through their marketing strategy, however, Redcliff fiercely pushes back on this idea. On their official platform for the station, they routinely frame Union as “one of the world’s most

engaging civic destinations" (Toronto Union, n.d). Packaged as an experience for users to enjoy beyond their daily commute, the website's description of the station and its diurnal activities intentionally positions Union as a place to gather, explore and participate. This is articulated by its meticulously devised language, which includes:

> "At Union everything – food, shopping and events – is considered programming. From national brands to independent start-ups, acclaimed artists to emerging talent, locals to tourists – Union is where Toronto happens. Union is a fluid stage for Toronto's most imaginative combinations of culinary, cultural and retail offerings…
>
> Union Station has a multidisciplinary programming vision that offers free public events showcasing the best of Toronto for tourists and locals to create a destination where all are welcome…
>
> [O]ur team is constantly seeking to program a wide roster of activities that are accessible, fun, and foster meaningful thought and emotional dialogue about our experiences." (Toronto Union, n.d).

These free events, as mentioned, include public art installations, monthly DJ performances and Union Samples, a program for companies to offer complimentary food, beverages and products to commuters and visitors (Toronto Union, n.d.). Indisputably contributing to the multifunctionality of the station, these activities affirm Redcliff's framing of Union as a more dynamic and engaging pedestrian environment. With *Union Samples* specifically proving very popular among users, the existence of such programming suggests that the civic role of this multimodal transit hub has, in many ways, been strengthened by the firm's involvement and the USRP more broadly. What is not stated on their website, however, are the grave flaws embedded within this programming, including its fleeting nature. While implying "a loyal relationship based on vague assertions with enticing descriptions" (Mitchelmore, 2017, p.56), these activities lack permanence and operate on an event-by-event basis. Solely designed to attract consumers when convenient to the lessor, its cultural programming ultimately lacks the resources and reach to make this a truly engaging civic space on its own. In contrast, the over 30 retailers that make Union "a shopping, dining, and cultural destination" remain always open and are prioritized by the firm

above all else (Toronto Union, n.d). Turning the station into a commodified and exclusionary environment for its users, the commercialization of Toronto's most significant MTH has eroded its existence as a social and cultural hub and its legacy as a transportation facility.



Figure 2.20: Arts programming at Union Station.



Figure 2.21: Music programming at Union Station.

III. Building Union Station: The Politics of Megaprojects

The following section examines the USRP as a transit megaproject by situating its development within socio-technical systems of infrastructure planning and design. It defines the characteristics of megaprojects and argues that, despite its deviation from established definitions, the USRP stands firmly as a megaproject due to its complexity and transformative ambitions (Garemo et al., 2015; Kennedy, 2021). It further examines the controversies surrounding the initiative to demonstrate how megaproject delivery is inherently complicated and, perhaps most importantly, political.

USRP as a Transit Megaproject

The USRP commenced in August 2010, with major construction works beginning in 2011. The Federal and Provincial Governments announced their funding a year prior in the amount of $305 million, alongside a $25 million commitment from VIA Rail and an additional $6.5 million in federal support through the Transit Secure Program (City of Toronto, 2009e). The balance of the $640 million cost of the revitalization, which amounts to $303.5 million, was to be financed by the City. As for responsibility for the project's construction, the UK-based firm Carillion Construction Inc. was appointed as the general contractor. Despite this considerable political, financial and logistical momentum, it soon became evident that the recommended approach would be much harder to realize in practice. For instance, in a 2013 report to the City's Government Management Committee, Roberto Rossini, the Deputy City Manager and Chief Financial Officer at the time, wrote:

> "The current facility is nearing 100 years old. The original construction and the changes to the facility over the years have been poorly or inaccurately documented. In particular, existing structural, mechanical, electrical, and life safety systems are very poorly documented. With the continued occupancy and use of the building by both passengers and tenants, implementing the installation of entirely new systems while maintaining the existing services has been a constant and ongoing challenge" (City of Toronto, 2013, p.11).

As a response to this condition, the USRP is described in various reports as "one of the most complicated projects in the country, 'wedged' into one of the most congested parts of the

City" (City of Toronto, 2016, p. 2; City of Toronto, 2013; City of Toronto, 2015). Embodying considerable societal relevance and infrastructural ambition, the revitalization would come to constitute one of the most significant transit megaprojects in Canadian history. While it fails to fully align with the criterion that McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm, uses to define such large-scale initiatives (Garemo et al., 2015), as the USRP would clock under the typical benchmark of $1 billion, it is for many reasons emblematic of the characteristics associated with megaproject development. It is also important to note that this $1 billion monetary threshold lacks merit and cannot be regarded as a universally applicable measure of megaproject scale. As Flyvbjerg (2014) argues, if the "mega" prefix is "interpreted solely in economic terms, then strictly speaking, megaprojects would be million-dollar (or euro, pound, etc.) projects" (p.7). Negating mainstream definitions of such large-scale initiatives, which would more appropriately assess gigaprojects, this definition ignores the socio-technical and institutional dimensions through which large-scale infrastructure is both produced and experienced (Garemo et al., 2015; Flybverg, 2014; Ashkanani & Franzoi, 2022; Boateng et al., 2015).



Figure 3.1: Union Station redevelopment funding announcement, July 24, 2009.

Kennedy (2021) addresses this issue in his analysis of the USRP, stating that irrespective of its deviation from the billion-dollar benchmark, the project "shares many of the hallmarks of a big infrastructure job [megaproject], including considerable complexity, multiple stakeholders and over-optimism about what can be delivered at what cost" (p.5). Harbouring immense constraints, in addition to those listed, that reduced the predictability of the project's cost and schedule, the MTH would be home to a highly complex and dysfunctional construction environment over the initiative lifecycle. Although one would opine that maintaining transit operations while undergoing construction work is the driver of such dynamics, the absence of effective coordination with adjacent major capital projects would be the true root of its issues. Particularly, the lack of a clearly

defined and approved working schedule, which was reportedly omitted in key stages of early implementation (Doolittle, 2014), meant that construction phasing was repeatedly disrupted, ultimately contributing to the delay of substantial completion from 2016 to 2021. The extent of these coordination failures was examined in a 2014 article by Robyn Doolittle in *The Globe and Mail*, which, citing an anonymous source with access to high-level progress reports, described instances of significant rework and phasing conflicts, noting: "Walls would be built without knowing someone needed to do work behind it, so then they'd have to tear it down, do the work, and rebuild it" (Doolittle, 2014, para. 4). While the City remains inseparable from the conditions that produced these outcomes, those working behind the scenes would also play a significant role in the coordination breakdowns.

Carillion Construction Inc. (CCI), which was supposed to undergo all three phases of construction, would become a major obstacle in completing the USRP. Carillion would file an "unsubstantiated construction claim action" against the City in 2015 due to cost overruns, delays and disputes about responsibility for those issues (City of Toronto, 2016, p.6). In response, the City expressed that the firm's "inadequate performance… in its contractual role as the City's Construction Manager" had materially contributed to the coordination challenges and delivery inefficiencies observed in the project's youth (City of Toronto, 2015, p.9). Consultant on the initiative, Tom Ingersoll, raised concerns regarding Carillion's work practices in a 2013 report to the City, noting that "money is being spent unnecessarily, construction details [are] not being followed and there is too much internal fighting" (Doolittle, 2014, para. 18). Coupled with inadequate record keeping and excessive payroll submissions for unverified work and labour, this whole dilemma would elucidate the complex institutional framework that would negatively affect its project delivery. Thus, the City "would decide to pursue the delivery of Stages 2 and 3 through a more typical stipulated price, lump sum contract… and CCI's scope of work would be reduced, limited to the completion of the Stage 1 work it had begun" (City of Toronto, 2019, p.3). The claim itself would eventually be settled out of court in 2018, but would have lasting effects on the perception and effectiveness of the USRP.

Complementing these technical and logistical difficulties were the "additional challenges associated with the status of the building as a National Historic Site and the associated requirements by this designation, which are significant and materially impactful" (City of Toronto, 2015, p.9). To address these complexities, the heritage consultant, EVOQ, was retained to work

closely with Heritage Canada throughout the project in order to ensure that construction activities did not adversely affect the station's heritage attributes and character-defining elements (Young, 2026). Reflecting on this process, Dima Cook, Principal at EVOQ, explained that "the challenge was really understanding the building well enough to be able to propose changes that actually worked with it" (Young, 2026, para. 10). Before that, however, the station had to undergo extensive cleaning after decades of exposure to emissions from coal-fired steam locomotives and diesel-powered trains (Young, 2026). Along with the restoration of heritage elements, such as "the Great Hall revitalization including the East and West arches, windows, north wall and south wall" (City of Toronto, 2021, p.5), the USRP would require a painstaking level of intervention that extended far beyond routine renovation or refurbishment. Albeit difficult, this work would align with the objectives set out in the Master and District Plan to preserve Union as a "landmark heritage facility" (City of Toronto, 2019, p.2).

Designing Movement

Over the 11 years of construction, Union Station had been pricked and probed by contractors, consultants and city officials. By working towards "a rational and cohesive 'lattice' of pedestrian routes… and connections" (City of Toronto, 2004, p.12), as well as embracing and promoting multifunctionality, its work is unparalleled from any renovation the facility has received prior to the USRP. In total, key features included:

- "Gross floor area at Union Station has increased approximately 14 per cent approximately 76,400 square metres (822,000 square feet) pre-revitalization vs approximately 87,000 square metres (936,000 square feet) post-revitalization;
- More than triple the capacity of GO Concourses with the completion of the York Concourse and the revitalized Bay Concourse;
- An addition of approximately 14,900 square metres (160,000 square feet) of new retail space, which includes the new retail level under the concourses, Union Food Court, Fresh Market, and an overall enhanced retail experience;
- A revitalized VIA Concourse and Panorama Lounge;
- The Front Street, York Street and Bay Street glass moat covers; [and]

- Expanded PATH access. Previously, PATH access was only through the TTC. Now, Union Station's Bay Concourse connects to the PATH through the Bay retail area" (City of Toronto, 2024, para. 3).

As a megaproject, these interventions would make the construction a convoluted process, even without the behind-the-scenes politics and lawsuits attached to the USRP. The sheer ambition required to simultaneously expand capacity, restore heritage elements and maintain continuous operation within Canada's busiest MTH evinces the deeply technical nature of the endeavour (Moore et al., 2025). Many of the proposed design moves, particularly the "dig-down" excavation, are conducive to this bold thinking. The retail level and food court alone required "digging several metres below Union Station's existing floor level… immediately below the tracks while the trains continued to operate above ground… to replace 447 concrete columns, 185 of which directly support the train tracks" (City of Toronto, 2024, para. 9-10). Complicating the translation of the recommended approach into built form, the construction process would become iterative and call for constant adjustments to accommodate structural constraints and unforeseen site conditions. Worsened by the fact that the design was only 66 percent complete at the time of project approval (City of Toronto, 2013), this would limit the extent to which construction activities could be organized ahead of time. As a result, and following many budget increases, the project's cost landed at $824 million, a near $200 million increase from the approved budget when the USRP was originally announced (City of Toronto, 2021).

Another complicated design goal for the project was the new glass atrium over the trench connecting the TTC station to the new Bay Retail Level. Enclosing what was previously the moat, this intervention was intended to advance the USRP's goal of facilitating "efficient movement through the station and… get people through the lower concourse and into the Path system with minimal delay, confusion — or stimulation" (Henighan, 2010, para. 18). To achieve this, the design team NORR truncated the light well and adjusted the floor elevation of the east wing to align with the Great Hall's floor level (NORR, 2026). In more technical terms, "the base of the shortened light well is now a laylight over this main floor, and a new aperture cut through the floor, directly under the laylight, provides views down to the new retail space" (Young, 2026, para. 8). A means to tap into Union's tremendous potential to be a user-oriented environment, this



Figure 3.2: Bay Retail Level following completion of the USRP.



Figure 3.3: Atrium connecting Union Station to the TTC subway station.

choice would combine protection from inclement weather with aesthetic glimpses of skyscrapers and the CN Tower. It would also, from an accessibility perspective, support many of the objectives stated in the Master Plan, since it would smooth this section from stairs to a continuous ramp. However, its complexity came from the placement of the original station building, as "this covering needed to keep a low profile: a parapet [was required to] screen it at street level, minimizing its visual impact on the original building... and stopping short of the heritage façade, to avoid impacting it structurally" (Young, 2026, para. 9). With this in mind, the atrium becomes a signifier of the uphill battle that USRP would face to modernize the station.

It is through these designs and their user-oriented elements that this vision set out in the policy framework for Union had the chance to become a reality. By restructuring how people occupy and traverse Union Station, the goal was to create a cohesive and accessible public environment that could operate simultaneously as infrastructure and destination. Yet, as the progression from vision to implementation is never truly easy, achieving this transformation highlighted the gaps in the project and, ultimately, its exclusionary undertones that contradict this vision. In the next section, I organize and elucidate my fieldwork at the current Union Station to examine whether these design choices truly prioritized users in the way they claimed they would. I ask: do these design choices align with the spatial needs of such users? If not, where does this disconnect appear to be concentrated?

IV. Experiencing the Revitalized Station: Civic Life and Control

To successfully determine whether the USRP produced a civic and user-oriented station environment, I draw upon findings from the empirical research I conducted at Union Station that examines how the MTH is used and navigated in contemporary practice. As Martin (2023) argues, "bodily behaviour and social interactions can only happen spatially, and space cannot be studied without considering the bodily behaviour and the social interactions" (p.3114). Using this perspective, the subsequent observations and categorizations aim to identify the tensions that emerge between the station's built form and the observed patterns of movement and use among its users. For analytical purposes, this section sorts these direct observations into four researcher-defined zones, each characterized by recognizable patterns of movement and use identified through fieldwork. These zones are then used as analytical lenses to critique processes actively forming Union, including commercialization, surveillance, circulation and the uneven production of publicness.

A Station of Many Spaces

Union Station consists of multiple interconnected spaces that can vary significantly based on size, location and use. While the station may be perceived as one, the organization and built form of the node have contributed to the production of distinct environments that have their own spatial and temporal conditions (Feng et al., 2023). Imposing possibilities and constraints on movement and use as a result, their discovery elucidates the uneven experience of movement within Union and the varied forms of occupation that emerge across its differentiated spaces. From large and underutilized rooms like the Great Hall to the ever-congested York and Bay Concourses, the explicit variances in form and meaning indisputably affect the perceived success of the USRP in creating a more convivial environment for residents, commuters and visitors alike. With this in mind, it is imperative to examine these environments individually, as their differing normalities can provide greater clarity in comprehending Union as a socially produced space with location-based affinities and disjunctures in user experience. Conversely, it can also highlight the overarching managerial logic of the station, which remains highly under-researched.

Through my observations, Union Station is delineated through four primary realms: (1) high-flow transit spaces; (2) open distribution spaces; (3) transitional-commercial spaces; and (4) waiting spaces. What follows is the dissection of the realms in a spatial and temporal context, for they can provide a granular understanding of how the station's internal environments operate as varied yet mutually informing conditions of use.

High-flow transit spaces

High-flow transit spaces can be defined as areas where core transportation functions, whether related to pedestrian circulation or modal transfer, are concentrated and continuously prioritized. Consisting of York and Bay Concourses, and at times the Via Concourse, these frenetic spaces are structurally configured with lower ceiling heights (in contrast to the Great Hall), a dense grid of structural columns and relatively narrow movement corridors. Vertical circulation elements are present for accessibility, including staircases and elevators, which are commonly used to reach train platforms above or the retail level and food court below. Spatially, many of the design decisions within this environment are intended to channelize users along predetermined paths, such as through extensive wayfinding signage. While configured in part to control crowds during rush hour periods, it also simultaneously "attacks the crowd by homogenizing it… [producing] a veritable symphony of swarming, consuming monads moving from one [point] to another" (Davis, 1990, p.257). Pedestrian movement, hence, is continually negotiated and adapted as inbound and outbound passengers adjust their speed and trajectory based on a myriad of factors, such as fluctuating crowd densities and train schedules (Hoy et al., 2016; Srikukenthiran et al., 2022; Hoy et al., 2023). A clear temporal condition, it is through high-flow transit spaces that both the overall

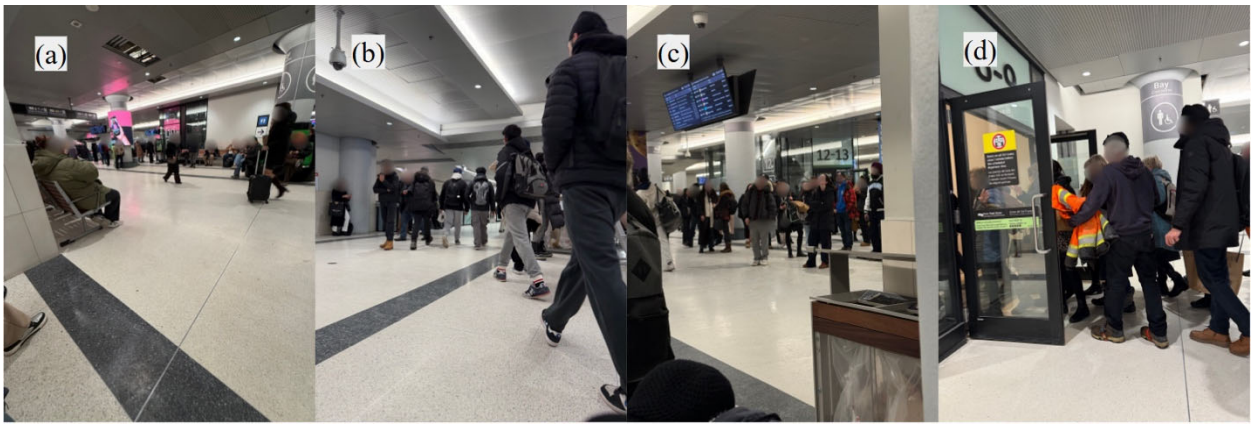


Figure 4.1: Observed conditions within high-flow transit spaces at Union Station.

intensity of movement within the station and the broader ebb and flow of pedestrian activity that feeds through other realms are established.

Open distribution spaces

In contrast, the Great Hall and its adjoining east and west wings operate as open distribution spaces. Of an expansive scale and architectural openness, its large floor space, paired with minimal structural obstructions, helps distinguish itself as a space of relief from shoulder-to-shoulder congestion. Strengthened through the axial organization of the hall, it is within this realm that Union becomes more legible for users, who can use its expanse to orient themselves within the station and toward the downtown core. For the latter, access points to Front, Bay and York Streets are directly connected and provide greater clarity to the extensive wayfinding system dispersed throughout the station building. With such spatial openness, varied spatial practices emerge as users are afforded greater flexibility in their movements. This distinct trait is due to the "underutilization of the Great Hall …[as] the configuration of the GO concourses in combination with the desire of travellers to connect with the PATH system, results in very few daily commuters/travellers entering [into it]" (City of Toronto, 2004, p.57). Although exceptions occur during sporting events and concerts, the Great Hall and its adjoining wings often function as liminal spaces with a subdued temporal structure. With most users passing through rather than lingering, albeit brief moments of pausing occur through activities such as phone use, I observed no sustained forms of interaction or occupation within this realm.

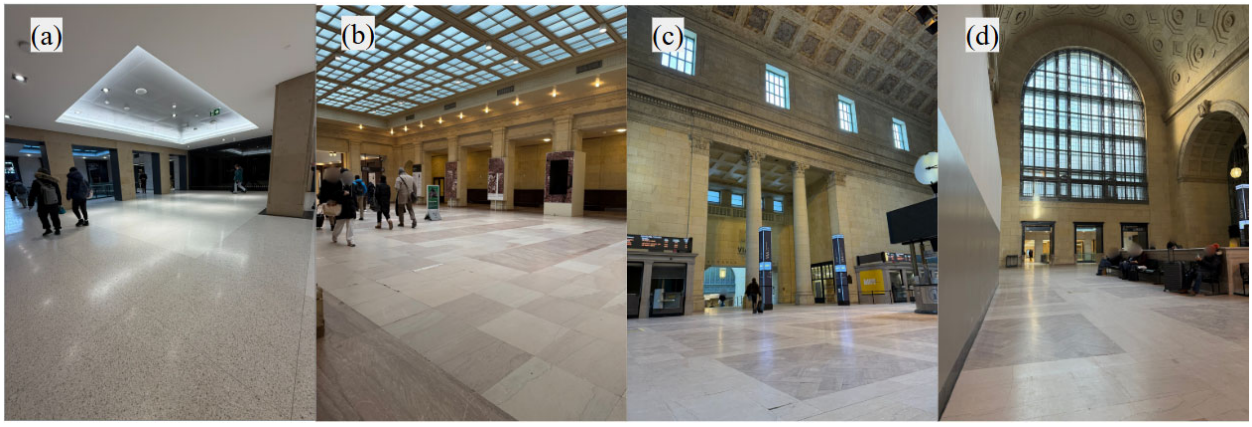


Figure 4.2: Observed conditions within open distribution spaces at Union Station.

Transitional-commercial spaces

Transitional-commercial spaces, such as the Bay Retail Level and Union Food Court, are where consumerism occurs most within the station. With corridors lined with storefronts, kiosks, and food vendors, the praxis of user movement in this environment is inherently complicated. By placing the aforementioned uses within Canada's busiest multi-modal transit hub, vital spaces intended for large-scale movement are now forced to generate economic value alongside their transportation role. This has positioned Union as a "satellite within the gravitational pull of the capitalist city… [in addition to] being an independent and self-contained structure" (Edwards, 1996, p.173). This was a key finding in my fieldwork, as these transitional-commercial environments, which are not just whole but are sprinkled within other sections of the station, often promote leisurely attitudes that run counterintuitive to the very spatial organization the USRP intended. While this pattern would inevitably occur in a commercial environment and was expected to a degree (Mulhall, 2018), it is within these spaces that the efficiency of the station is questioned. Spatially, the space is more enclosed than the Great Hall but less constrained than the concourses. In comparison to the latter, which are periodically relieved by departing trains, it remains consistently congested, particularly throughout the lunch period as overlapping break times among users are common.

Another important note to make is that these spaces are constantly changing, since temporary installations and pop-up vendors further alter the spatial layout. By being moderated by commercial activity, I understand it as a highly fragmented environment with overlapping and often competing patterns of use. Specifically, pedestrian flows are frequently interrupted by queues, storefront interactions and moments of hesitation associated with doing both, as individuals shift between moving through the space and engaging with "marquee restaurants, curated fresh markets and independent local retailers" (Toronto Union, n.d). This is visible in the Union Sample pop-ups, which frequently attract long queues that extend well beyond their designated areas. As a result, the temporal rhythm is neither entirely static nor fully fluid. While the presence of food vendors and seating areas would suggest the former, I have observed most users continue to treat the space primarily as a movement corridor rather than for its commercial functions. Consequently, this realm should also be understood as transitional, since consumption is integrated into but does not fully take over circulation.

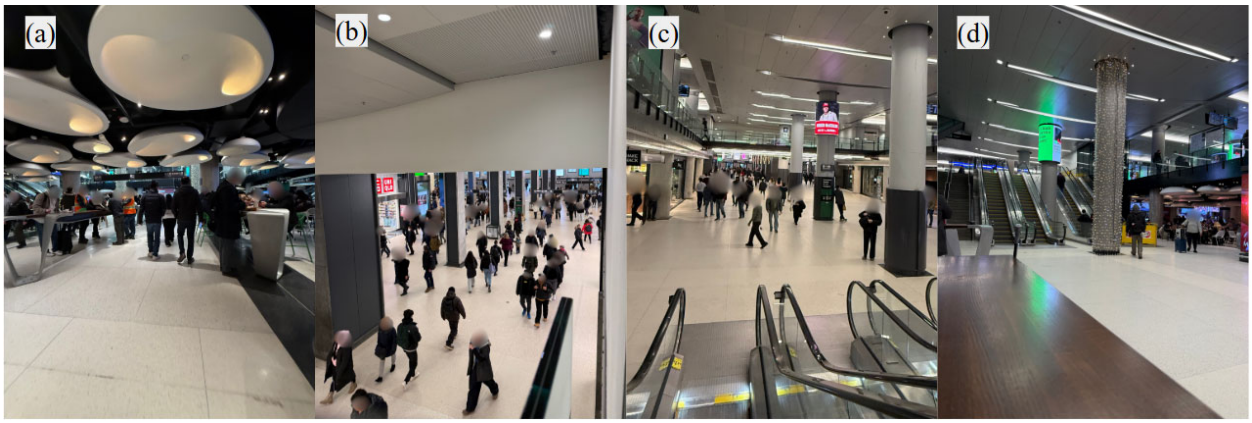


Figure 4.3: Observed conditions within transitional-commercial spaces at Union Station.

Waiting spaces

Waiting spaces are distinct from the other realms in that they prioritize stagnation and occupation over movement. Consisting primarily of seating areas distributed across all three concourses, albeit not limited to such, this unhurried environment is often filled with material obstacles (like luggage and bags) and offers little seating beyond forms of hostile architecture. Their layout is also quite disjointed, as there can be several smaller waiting areas distributed throughout the station to accommodate fluctuations in crowd density and thus, users need to loiter. This realm, then, should be viewed in tandem with comfort, which Wicki et al. (2024) state: "must be considered… in order to increase the share of public transport in the modal split" (p.7). By introducing an interesting set of micro-temporalities as a result, such as sleeping and phone use, pedestrian practices here are almost always stationary. In particular, perceived unhoused individuals and substance use abusers are a typical sight in these spaces, who remain within them regardless of scheduled intervals. With many, allegedly using waiting areas as shelter or a form of 'comfort,' the temporal dynamics within this zone are multifaceted and esoteric. Activity here, albeit idle, is contingent both on scheduled departures and boarding announcements but also on the prolonged occupation by individuals who are not engaged in transit-related movement. This layering of temporalities produces a space that is inherently public and redefines what a 'waiting area' could mean within a transit hub.

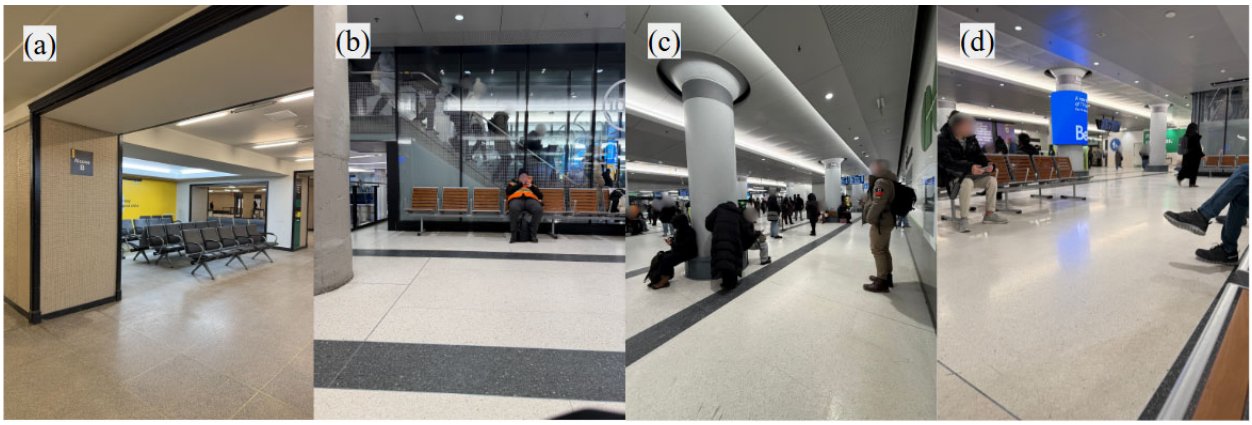


Figure 4.4: Observed conditions within waiting spaces at Union Station.

Observations of Usage

To further examine how the USRP has impacted the station as a civic space, direct observations were conducted to understand how different users encounter the renewed environment. This approach was chosen for its association with the fundamental advancement of knowledge (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999; Zhang et al., 2024), specifically within the bounds of public space. In terms of execution, these observations consisted of documenting user activity through field notes, which focused on interactions between individuals as well as behaviours and patterns of use within the station. By extension, they aimed to better understand how Union's built form informs the conditions through which public life is either fostered or constrained. Observations are presented on a session-by-session basis to account for the varied temporal conditions of the station environment and the ways patterns of movement change across different types of use. While this approach provides insight into conspicuous forms of interaction and spatial practices, it cannot fully account for the individual perceptions or motivations underlying user activity.

High-flow transit spaces

Observations of high-flow transit spaces proved to be the most challenging, for their persistent congestion yet high turnover rate impacted my ability to capture consistent patterns among users. To address this, I concentrated on recurring patterns rather than individual instances of use, albeit remaining attentive to notable exceptions that evinced alternative ways in which the

space was navigated. This challenge was further mitigated through repeated visits to these spaces, which were observed more frequently than any other realm in this study in order to establish a reliable baseline of everyday activity.

February 9, 2026 – 4:00 to 5:08 PM

As I step into York Concourse, I can immediately feel the frenetic energy of the space. Many users are walking to the platforms at high speeds while others stand in front of the look screens at 4:16 pm. With the latter seemingly trying to locate their platforms before other commuters, it is largely because of these stationary users that the corridor feels so cluttered and congested. I would describe the atmosphere as undeniably hectic, since walkers are clashing into loiterers and vertical access elements are so clogged that they are spilling into movement corridors in the space. Most people are coming from the food court below or the Scotiabank Arena PATH as of 4:38 pm. Very few people are sitting down or buying food right now, as incoming trains arrive what feels like every two minutes and everyone is in a rush to catch their ride home. There are customer service representatives around the concourse, who are helping navigate people to their platforms or provide information on train times, but they can only do so much. I spot one at 5:08 pm yelling to the crowd to use a different set of stairs to track 12, as the one they are all funnelling into is at maximum capacity. As I leave from the concourse to board my own train, I see how dependent the space is on the uninterrupted flow of bodies through it.

February 17 – 12:06 to 1:10 PM

The Bay Concourse is steady but nowhere near full capacity and features very sluggish movement, since there are few train arrivals and departures at this time. I see three security guards walking by at 12:35 PM, along with a few janitors and station workers. It appears that they are escorting an unhoused individual out of the space, who was sleeping on the floor near the Tim Hortons. There is lots of wayfinding signage, though its sheer volume appears to create confusion rather than clarity for some users, specifically those who appear to be tourists. For example, I just overheard a woman with luggage asking a customer service representative for directions to the subway station even though nearby signage references it. For those entering the concourse, it seems the majority are coming from either the Great Hall or the retail level, many with luggage in tow. One of whom is a man using a mobility device, who bumped into one of the TD seating

columns while navigating the concourse. By 1:08 pm, the current group mainly consists of individuals appearing as students, seniors, unhoused individuals and station workers. There are limited interactions between them, which makes me think that this space functions almost exclusively as a corridor of movement, even when there is not very much movement to begin with.

March 3, 2026 – 7:57 to 9:30 AM

I am seated on the TD column seating in the Bay Concourse, which is notably uncomfortable and a form of hostile architecture. A crowd of twelve are walking to the subway station and the Royal Bank Plaza PATH at 8:05 am, with all of them accessing escalators and elevators that descend to the retail level. Only a small proportion of people, roughly 15 percent, appear to be heading toward the Great Hall. The pace of movement is quite fast, as people seem rushed and certain of where they are going. Each new train arrival dramatically increases activity within the concourse. Waves of passengers pour down from the platforms, which clog the escalators leading to the retail level. Congestion is worsened by the fact that one escalator is out of service today and they only have a total of two in operation. I see an individual with luggage at 9:21 am struggling to maneuver through the busy movement corridor. The surrounding users instinctively reroute around them to make it to their destinations on time. I will say, the most interesting thing of note on this observation is how users are the biggest obstacles to their fellow users. By blocking each other from accessing escalators, elevators, washrooms, and so much more, I struggle to believe that this Union will be able to handle future capacity demands, as it already is busting at the seams.

Open distribution spaces

Open-distribution spaces were comparatively easier to observe, as their slower pace and immense scale allowed me to participate in longer periods of stationary analysis. Differing greatly from the dense and highly directional movement patterns identified in the concourses, these areas provided insight into patterns of use unconnected to core transportation functions, particularly socializing.

February 10, 2026 – 4:25 pm to 5:31 pm

At 4:30 pm, I am seated in the Great Hall with a direct view toward the Bay, VIA, and York Concourses. Most users entering the hall come directly from Front Street and move immediately into the concourses, while very few people remain within the space itself. Movement is pretty calm and predominantly west–east, with most users appearing certain of where they are going. The Great Hall feels notably less crowded than the concourses despite the peak commuting period, but I do question if that is just because it is such a bigger space. I'm writing these notes while sitting on a segmented bench with armrests in the middle, a textbook example of hostile architecture. I notice that nearly all furnishings here for users are hostile architecture, which is disappointing because they are quite uncomfortable and the majority of people in the Great Hall are either seniors or unhoused-appearing. At 5:09 pm, large groups entering the hall descend toward the subway and concourses, though movement remains fluid and unobstructed. Accessibility also appears less restricted than in the concourses, with users carrying luggage and mobility devices able to navigate the open floor space with relative ease.

February 17, 2026 – 8:00 am to 9:47 am

The west and east wings of the Great Hall are definitely underutilized, acting almost like a ghost amenity. Despite the former housing a washroom and a public art exhibition and the latter containing a restaurant, which seems very unpopular based on pedestrian activity, these spaces do little to encourage users to engage with them beyond their function as movement corridors. I spot a look screen at 8:34 am located behind two columns within the west wing, albeit no one appears to be viewing it for train information. I have also noticed users with luggage traversing, with approximately fifteen passing by me within a 30-second interval. Due to the lack of seating in these areas (I spot only one bench for use), there is a woman sitting on the floor with her laptop. As I move to the Great Hall, the space is the busiest I have ever observed it. Lots of people have entered through the VIA concourse, from a train arrival I suspect. It slows down, though rather quickly. The space expands and then contracts. At 9:37 am, three paramedics with an empty cart move through the hall. I leave here with a clear understanding of these spaces as underutilized components of the station environment.

March 2, 2026 - 2:22 pm to 3:29 pm

I'm in the Great Hall and most people are entering from Front Street through the east entrance. This is a recurring thing. They mostly just walk straight into the Bay Concourse. A man was using a city bike inside and two security guards confronted him at 2:49 pm. People do come in from the east hall, but it is minimal compared to the West Hall, which is more utilized. Most people seem to be certain of their whereabouts and where they want to go, but the ones who do not go to the Travellers Aid Society counter, which get some good use. It seems like a VIA train arrived and now people are coming up, many wearing Toronto Maple Leafs and Philadelphia Flyers jerseys. Most continue toward either the subway or York Street. A father and son stand briefly in the middle of the hall appearing uncertain of where to go, while a station worker assists a woman in a wheelchair toward the VIA Concourse. Movement throughout the space remains consistently fast-paced. At 3:56 pm, I observe two police officers stationed near the west staircase leading to the subway. Both hostile and non-hostile seating arrangements are present throughout the hall (very few non-hostile options though), alongside a noticeable amount of luggage moving through the space.

Transitional-commercial spaces

Observations within this realm provided the greatest insight into the USRP, as the majority of these spaces were created or substantially reconfigured through the megaproject. Making them particularly useful for understanding how the station has been transformed as a civic space, I spent most of my time within Bay Retail Level and the Union Food Court to analyze how tensions between commercial spaces, circulation and public life played out. Consequently, it was here that the 'zero-risk' governance of the station and its many flaws became most apparent, both through my own observations and in the everyday experiences of station users.

February 17, 2026 – 12:06 pm to 1:10 pm

I begin my observations at the intersection of the Union Food Court and Bay Retail Level. The space is extremely busy as of 12:09 pm, with movement fluctuating between leisurely browsing and hurried workers trying to find a quick bite to eat. For the latter, I spot most of them walking from nearby office buildings via the Royal Bank Plaza PATH. They leave though

immediately after making their purchases and appear to ignore the fact that there is a lot of seating available in the food court. There is limited loitering as a result, that is except for the lines out the door of some establishments that spill into the movement corridor, specifically Shake Shack. As a positive remark, I will say the food court is very porous, so people have many options for entering, exiting and navigating through the space. This is seemingly ensured by two security guards whom I spot at 12:37 pm, stationed at the bottom of the escalators that go up to the York Concourse. It seems that they are present just to act as watchdogs, as I have been watching them do absolutely nothing but stare at people for the past 10 minutes. I see a considerable amount of social interaction occurring throughout the space, however, it is not because of the space itself. It appears only among coworkers and groups of friends who came into the space together, many of whom continue conversations while walking back to their office. As I leave for the library at 1:10 pm, I have trouble articulating how I feel about this space, as although it is full of life, it also is relatively dull.

March 3, 2026 – 8:39 - 9:45 AM

At 8:45 am, I observe a large influx of people entering the food court, which is odd because most people at this time are typically walking toward the subway, Royal Bank Plaza PATH, or Scotiabank Arena PATH. After further investigation, I realize that this influx of people is a part of a queue forming for a pop-up located closer to the glass atrium. Signage states this is part of Union Samples, a program seemingly put on by Union, and the products on this day are from Olly, a business that sells body wash. The line for this pop-up is moving relatively quickly, albeit still causing congestion near Shake Shack and the elevators up to the Bay Concourse. It is also blocking other individuals from entering stores along that side of the level, specifically Uniqlo. I see two security guards here at 9:23 pm, who are doing absolutely nothing to help assist pedestrian traffic. People generally know how to reroute if there are obstacles though. There is no seating here for people to use, so I'm standing up while taking notes. I observe the myriad screens along the level that are intentionally designed to show nothing but advertisements, such as those uniquely wrapped around columns. I feel like they are taking away from the space and give it almost a dystopian-like feel, and I do not mean that in a complementary way.

March 10, 2026 – 4:35 pm to 5:39 pm

On arrival, I noticed most people coming into the retail level from the subway station and/or the Royal Bank Plaza PATH connection. It is very busy as of 4:45 pm, with many people walking fast or running straight up to the escalators to get to the Bay concourse. The only word I can describe this setting is chaotic, as although the crowds are equivalent to morning rush hour, the urgency of GO users is unmatched and exhibits even more frantic attitudes. Hence, no one at this point is using the stores in this corridor, especially Uniqlo and Fika Cannabis. I assume this pace of movement, which is now at a light jog, would be very difficult for seniors and differently-abled individuals to keep up with. Solidified by the consistent bumping between individuals, particularly near the Shake Shack where some are entering the level while others get on the escalators to go up to the Bay Concourse, I would be genuinely nervous if I were them. An older gentleman with a mobility device passes by me at 5:20 pm. He is moving fine but people are walking around him. I also notice how many security guards there are in the space, roughly 10. They are not helping people navigate traffic, instead just standing in visible positions staring into the crowd. I feel intimidated by them right now, as one of them is looking at me standing in the corner writing notes.

Waiting spaces

As these spaces are the most mundane and repetitive of the four realms, I spent the least amount of time observing them. During each visit, I either positioned myself within the waiting areas or stood nearby to observe user activity occurring within the space. At the conclusion of each observation period, I remained there briefly to develop a more experiential understanding of how these environments were occupied. What I uncovered, however, is that these spaces represent far more than functional areas for waiting and act as important indicators of the social and spatial conditions produced through the station's redevelopment.

March 2, 2026 – 3:29 pm to 4:45 pm

I'm sitting in Alcove C in Via Concourse and it is quite slow. Most users remain seated and are occupied by their phones, surrounded by their many suitcases. This is except for those who appear to be living in the space. I spot a man digging through the garbage at 3:47 pm, evidently to find scraps of food or items that he can salvage for his nourishment. There are many homeless-

appearing individuals around here, more than in any other area in Union I have seen so far. I can see why, as some seating in the alcoves does not have armrests in the middle of them and it is relatively quiet, which makes it easier for them to rest. A family of four leaves Alcove E at 4:01 pm and walks to the Great Hall. At the same time, a few security guards walk through a few alcoves to seemingly monitor user activity. I do notice that there are fewer surveillance cameras in these areas and virtually no restaurants, except Tim Hortons, which is odd since everywhere else in the station has several. Overall, there was very little to observe here, which is perhaps the point as the primary function of the space is to accommodate passengers waiting for their trains or those living within the station.

February 24, 2026 – 4:55 pm to 6:05 pm

As I arrive at York Concourse at perhaps the busiest time of the day, its seating areas, which are scattered throughout the space, are not as occupied as I would imagine. I spot a man lying down on a few chairs and a couple of others resting on the floor near Uncle Testu at 5:07 pm. Surrounding users completely ignore his existence. Interestingly, most people who are sitting keep one chair between each other, which appears to be an unwritten rule as it is so prominent. This, however, further reduces the available seating for waiting users to enjoy and use, exacerbating the congestion in the concourse. An individual appearing to use the seating area as a place of rest, with personal belongings spread across multiple seats, begins shouting in the concourse at 5:17 p.m. Three security guards confront him to calm him down. Most individuals remain focused on their own activities, whether waiting for trains, checking their phones or looking at the screens. Aside from those who occupy these spaces for extended periods of time, this area has the highest turnover rate I have observed throughout Union, with most users remaining only briefly before continuing onward to their platforms.

The Governance of Exclusion

Union Station in the present day is viewed more than merely a multi-modal transit hub or a shopping centre, but as a "crucial piece of urban structure, through which the formation of spatiality and social structuring within a city can be traced" (Banerjee, 2025, p.2; Sak, 2008). Existing as a vital socio-technical infrastructure, for it shapes both mobility and forms of urban life, the station is as paramount to Toronto's transit network as it is to the identities who use it every day. This is a dimension that the USRP, unfortunately, failed to fully recognize, as did the institutional forces that conceived and supported its development. By reducing the station to a transportation and commercial asset, such work has neglected its role as a "social node that mediates the flows of people, goods and ideas" (Greene, 2026, para. 1). A clear manifestation of this shift has been the emergence of a highly regulated station environment, where efforts to mitigate disruptions that could interfere with transit services have hindered the "drama of communal life" from unfolding within its bounds (Carr, 1992, p.23). This has had serious implications in terms of Union's role as a public space, as civic activity is now surveilled and policed to ensure social order, efficiency and commercial viability. With such motives, an ultra-lucrative form of management has been yielded, one that focuses on exclusion and rejection just as much as safety and security. Strikingly apparent across the evolving landscape of MTHs, the "social interactions, bodily behaviours and spatial representations of passengers" are now used as justification for immense control measures that strip the facility of the civic spirit it is marketed to possess (Martin, 2023, p.3114).

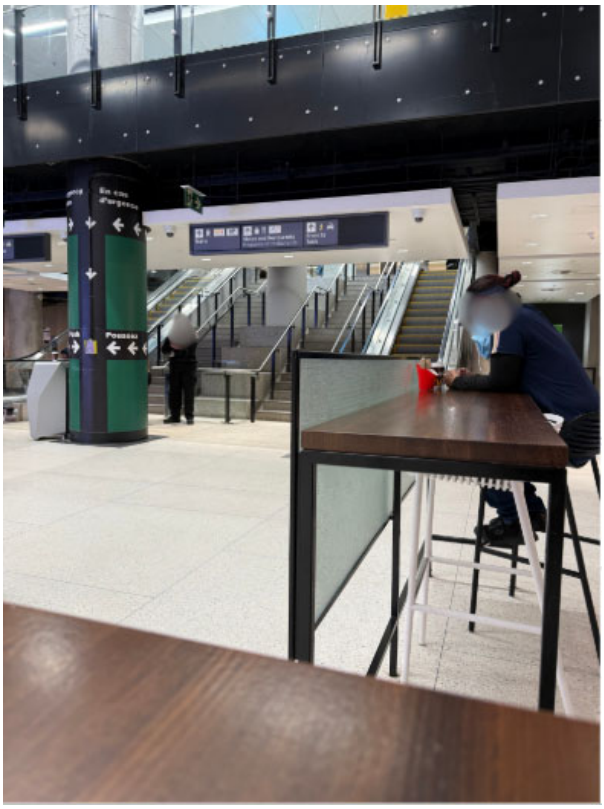


Figure 4.5: Private security presence in Union Station's food court.

In terms of circulation, this managerial logic has imposed coercive pressures on users by restricting the ways in which they can occupy, navigate and experience the facility. Although the Master Plan repeatedly emphasized that the USRP would ensure that "people will know where to go; they will get there with ease; and the experience will be delightful" (City of Toronto, 2004, p.9), the resulting environment often, ironically, conflicts with the physical and socio-political dynamics of user movement. By limiting almost all opportunities for spontaneity and informal social interaction outside transit operations and consumption, especially during peak commuting periods, the very spaces and amenities introduced through the USRP to position Union Station as a destination "beyond the daily commute" are compromised (Toronto Union, n.d.). This shortcoming is indisputably driven by infiltration of the private sector in its governance, which has introduced a "number of variables, such as operational safety (through crowd management, CCTV) and personal safety (through staff/security presence, good lighting, cleanliness)... [to influence] both the physical and the psychological experience of users" (Otsuka & Reeve, 2024, p.978). As for the latter, the sheer amount of surveillance infrastructure and security personnel throughout the station has transformed it into a panoptic environment that "penetrates and effects the very constitution of the individual" (Fitzpatrick & Kender, 2015, p.315). By creating an implicit expectation of continuous pedestrian flow, especially within high-flow transit spaces, the station's surveillance apparatus actively influences the spatial practices and forms of occupation through the perception of constant observation. Producing an "atmosphere of rejection" as a result (Jensen, 2020, p.396), since a hierarchy of acceptable users is produced, Redcliff's influence over Union has ultimately neutered the station's capacity to function as part of the public realm.

Benton-Short's (2016) comments on this form of security are particularly applicable to Union Station, where she argues that station areas and public spaces more broadly have become "over-regulated and underutilized in the name of safety" (p.516). However, I contend that this prominent dynamic, which is buttressed by the very organization and built form realized through USRP, is less concerned with safety than it is with order and spatial control. In 2025, the City of Toronto spent more than $14.8 million on private security services at Union Station in 2025 (Callan, 2025). Much of this responsibility has been carried out by the Canadian firm West Egg Security, whose guards maintain a conspicuous presence throughout all areas of the station to seemingly "help guests feel comfortable and at ease" (West Egg Security, n.d). As outlined in an active job posting for a Security Guard Specialist out of Union, many of their responsibilities are

tied to regulating circulation and managing those who negatively affect pedestrian flows. These include:

> "Screening unauthorized person and physically removing person found trespassing or engaging in criminal acts or breaching the policies. Legally arrest individual and surrender same to Police as soon as possible;
>
> Being an ambassador of the client site by providing customer service, answering public inquiries, and performing guard tours along designated patrol routes. Assist in the movement of visitors and staff;
>
> Monitoring and patrolling assigned areas, that includes responding to routine, emergency, and security & law enforcement calls" (West Egg Security, n.d.).

While these tasks may seem standard for private security operations, the disconnect lies in how they extend beyond responding to safety concerns and into the active enforcement of presence. As for the first duty, I observed across both open-distribution and high-flow transit spaces that individuals were removed from the station, with those targeted appearing visibly unhoused and occupying space in ways that were antithetical to "efficient movement" (City of Toronto, 2004, p.9). This, however, evinces a broader issue concerning the aggressive policing of those *unacceptable* within the station environment. Particularly, in anticipation (at the time of writing) of the FIFA World Cup 2026™ in Toronto, the Toronto Underhoused and Homeless Union (TUHU) interviewed people at Union Station who experience homelessness, who "described being pushed out of public spaces not because they posed a danger, but because their visibility was considered undesirable ahead of the mega-event" (p.4). Achieved through verbal and physical abuse, this targeted removal of individuals elucidates Union's existence as a managed space and its acute partiality toward private interests over the broader obligations of the public realm. With these practices also being decisions made and supported by the City, it becomes apparent that the extensive surveillance and policing are not isolated to Union Station and emulate broader approaches to the governance of public infrastructure across contemporary Toronto.

Revitalizing for Whom?

> "The completion of the Revitalization will… [produce] a pedestrian destination with retail and commercial uses serving the rapidly increasing densification in the adjacent residential and commercial community. In conjunction with the transit infrastructure improvements current and planned in the future, the station will act as a gateway to the waterfront and surrounding community and will renew and revitalize a major civic centerpiece of the city" (City of Toronto, 2013, p. 2).

The USRP's success in transforming Union Station into a financialized space of capital has undeniably reshaped the role of the user and, by extension, their lived experience within it. Situated within a consumptive paradigm, the "renewed and revitalized" hub increasingly mediates presence through financial transactions and displays of wealth (City of Toronto, 2021, p. 1). By expecting users to maximize the revenue potential of commercial uses, specifically as a means to offset the capital and operational costs of the megaproject, public life within the station has become conditional on economic productivity. This embodiment of neoliberal urbanism has contributed to Union's emergence as the fifth most luxurious and high-performing rail hub in the world, according to travel insurance provider AllClear, which evaluates stations based on indicators such as "first-class lounge access, fine dining options, retail offerings, online reviews, and the number of nearby four- and five-star hotels" (Buia, 2026, para. 6). However, the same conditions that elevate Union Station's global status simultaneously narrow the possibilities through which individuals can meaningfully participate in and occupy the space. Leaving it rife with hostility in both essence and form, the prioritization of its "over 100 individual shops and food vendors" over the autonomy and needs of its users has produced a fractured and frankly, quasi-public and completely uncivic space (Toronto Union, n.d).

Speaking of such hostility, it is fitting that hostile architecture would be commonplace within the station. Whether in waiting spaces or transitional-commercial spaces, these design elements are present to dehumanize users as part of a broader effort of spatial and social control. In terms of its seating typologies in Union, Toronto's architectural firm PARTISANS created and toyed with their coercive function, after being contracted by Redcliff in 2015 to design the station's furnishings (City of Toronto, 2015). While stopping short of acknowledging their punitive undertones, the firm describes its work as follows: "from seating to tables to trash bins, the…

designs honour the robust tradition of industrial design with an elegant twist" (PARTISANS, n.d, para. 7). 'Industrial design' here stands out as a misnomer for sterile and exclusionary materialities that actively harm those who are most dependent on the station as a public space. To be specific, I fully recognize that these are the *undesirables*, who do not "only live public space like the rest of the 'public', rather they live in public space, having, by definition, no private space or homes and no alternative but to be and live their lives in public" (Bergamaschi et al., 2014, p.2). For unhoused individuals, as observed, seating within Union Station does not just signify benches and ledges, but rather couches and beds that are integral to their daily existence. Thus, the weaponization of the built environment, with the explicit purpose of excluding those who fail to meet the aesthetic and economic expectations of Redcliff, has reimagined the MTH as an undemocratic space clearly unfit to be a "major civic centerpiece" of Canada's biggest city (City of Toronto, 2013, p. 2).

More into the station's built form, the USRP would create an authoritative and at times, domineering arena for users to navigate. With the addition of commercialized spaces like the Bay Retail Level and the Union Food Court, now more than ever does Union Station align with neoliberalism and its innate ability to protect private interests. Particularly, in a 2009 report to the City Council, the City Manager writes about the aforesaid spaces, stating that the whole "objective behind their creation… [was] to provide funding support for the overall revitalization… [and to] draw a broad cross-section of potential shoppers from the lower downtown" (City of Toronto, 2009b, p. 3). In light of this explicit aim, these spaces appear as little more than remnants of a stratagem to erode the social and cultural resources of the station. By prioritizing the transactions of retailers such as Sephora and Uniqlo over public life, specifically life that is not beneficial to any agenda or revenue-generating imperative, the whole building exists as an exclusionary and carceral environment. Suited with private security, CCTV cameras, punitive forms of architecture and bird's-eye vantage points for guards to overlook crowds of people, my observations of the space illuminate, if nothing else, that the revitalized station only works for those who "embody a habitus… [that will] validate their presence" (Smith & Walters, 2017, p.2983). This is most prominent when examining the dichotomy between the *beloved* Union Samples pop-ups, which compromise circulation by producing mass congestion, and the *objectionable* unhoused population, who are habitually removed despite being relatively subdued and needing the station more than anyone. That said, it is through the intentional design of the built environment, plus its

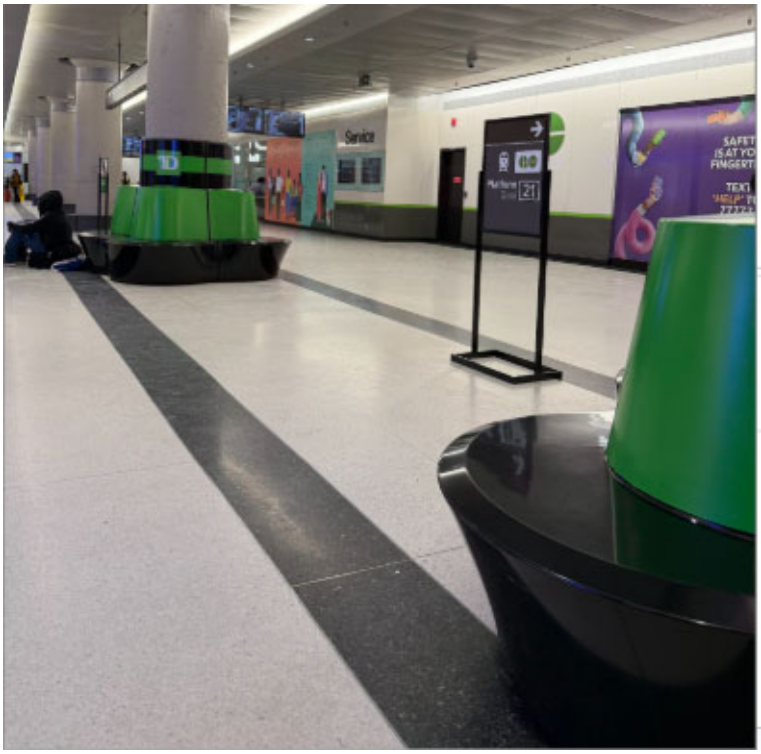


Figure 4.6: Hostile seating design in York Concourse.

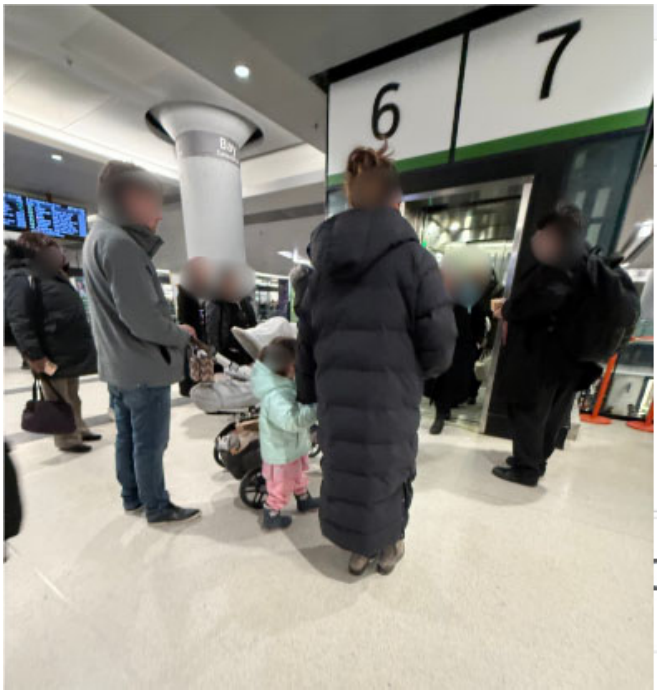


Figure 4.7: Passenger congestion at the Bay Concourse elevator.

antagonistic management, that these conditions can prosper and continue to subjugate the most marginalized users of the station.

In a similar vein, despite improvements to pedestrian circulation, this notion of conditional publicness extends to the station's accessibility. On paper, contemporary Union Station aligns with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and the City of Toronto's Accessibility Design Guidelines, as the USRP made great strides from its pre-revitalization state. Adding elevators, barrier-free pathways, tactile wayfinding features and more, I do not overlook the megaproject's contribution in making the MTH more accessible. The embodied experience of navigating the station, on the other hand, suggests that there is much more work needed to be done, particularly in addressing the unintended accessibility consequences experienced by differently-abled and senior users. During field observations, elevators and vertical circulation points were frequently overwhelmed by high passenger volumes and would spill into movement corridors, ultimately worsening congestion. This challenge is compounded by the limited availability and placement of the former, which Marshall (2024) writes, "though technically, the station is fully accessible to anyone using a wheelchair or other mobility device… there is only one small elevator that directly connects the… [retail] level with the Great Hall, UP Express trains, and Front Street" (para. 4). Affecting who can access the station and how easily, this inadequate planning for sufficient accessibility measures leaves individuals using wheelchairs, mobility devices, strollers or carrying large luggage vulnerable to both significant barriers and, unfortunately, obscurity. The USRP's promise of universal access, hence, becomes utterly contingent, as those unable to move through the environment with the same speed and ease as able-bodied users are effectively restricted from fully participating in its amenities, including the commercial and retail spaces that have become central to its revitalized identity.

This problematic dynamic further exposes the mobile processes and infrastructures that engender and reinforce exclusion. By highlighting the social and spatial trade-offs that come with transit megaprojects, it begs the question: if not for the diverse users who inhabit it, who was the USRP ultimately designed to serve? Chan et al. (2025) note that this interplay of "design and internalized preferences through habitus politicizes the psychology of mobility… [which] embeds not only power but also subtle forms of control within individual choices, reinforcing existing mobility patterns and urban economic agendas." (p.10). With the dominant agenda in Union expressed through the prioritization of speedy movement (except for when tied to consumption)

and the production of capital, I would assume the answer to the above question would be for middle-class workers, who often fulfill both. Throughout my observations, I very rarely mention their existence, not because they are absent but because their presence seamlessly aligns with the station's intended function. By remaining in Union for only brief moments before or after work, while still possessing the capacity to consume, they embody the ideal user envisioned through the USRP. However, public life cannot be reduced to these workers alone and can never be fully controlled by the mechanisms designed to regulate it (Stevens, 2007). The very presence of undesirables within the station evinces the limits of Union's managerial logic and further exposes the inherent unpredictability of Union as a public space. Seen through instances of individuals sleeping across hostile benches or congregating in areas not intended for social use, Union Station does and hopefully will always harbour a certain degree of fluidity. However, does this qualify Union as truly civic? Perhaps most importantly, does the station's present reality align with the vision established in the Master Plan to position it as such?

The Limits of the Civic

Throughout this research, I have used the terms *public* and *civic* to evaluate Union Station's evolving role as an MTH. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that the two are not the same and have very different meanings in the context of this paper. For instance, Union Station is a public space, for anyone can walk into the station building and access its concourses or the Great Hall without restriction or formal requirement. Civic, on the other hand, which is stated numerous times in the Master Plan for Union's revitalization, builds on this idea of publicness. A civic space, as described by Douglass and Daniere (2007), "provides not only the physical sites for civil society to function autonomously… [but] they provide civil society with a sense of place in the form of identity, meaning, memory, history, and linkages with the wider world" (p.1). Historically, Union Station has held a significant civic role, as its position in 20th-century Toronto, particularly during WW2, greatly contributed to the social and cultural life of the city. Thinking of users in every aspect of its design, the Beaux-Arts structure centred humanity just as much as efficiency in its effort to expand Toronto's rail network. The USRP, in comparison, whose goals were seemingly similar, demonstrate a starkly different set of priorities and outcomes.

Section 3.1 of the Union Station Master Plan states that any future project to the station would have to comply with the following principle: "additions or new development related to

Union Station should be designed to reinforce the distinction of the building as a civic structure, landmark and gateway to the City of Toronto" (City of Toronto, 2004, p. 92). On the surface, the USRP appears to have accomplished, or at the very least supported, this objective. From a technical standpoint, the megaproject restored key heritage elements, including the West and East Wings and Great Hall features such as the arches and windows, while also expanding the station's concourse spaces and creating a new retail level for users to enjoy (City of Toronto, 2021). Coupled with new programming, such as Union Samples and seasonal events, the renewed facility projects a form of civicness that is unwavering in its commitment to supporting station users. However, as observed throughout this research, the rhetoric surrounding the USRP's preservation of Union's civic integrity has proven to be meretricious. Beyond the physical additions outlined above, I conceptualize civicness as more than amenities and appearances, but as the gift of autonomy. In particular, in the same year the USRP was completed, Metrolinx updated its by-law to include new provisions related to loitering. These include:

> "No person shall:
>
> (a) loiter without due cause on Corporation property
>
> (b) For the purposes of paragraph (a), a person 'loiters' when such person:
>
> (i) idly spends time inside or on Corporation property without express purpose of using the transit system; or
>
> (ii) lingers, saunters, or remains on Corporation property without due cause, and;
>
> (iii) at least fifteen minutes have elapsed upon initial arrival onto Corporation property" (Metrolinx, 2021, p.10)

While these provisions only apply to the York and Bay Concourses, other policy frameworks such as City of Toronto's City-Wide Corporate Security Policy and TTC By-law No. 1 implicitly advance a similar approach. By enforcing "who has access to the property and what behaviour or activities are allowed" (City of Toronto, 2009, p.47), the promise of Union as a truly civic space is ultimately compromised. I make this argument not in opposition to the presence of security, which is both necessary and inevitable, but because the preoccupation with safety has become so pervasive that it entirely restricts users' ability to engage in the ordinary practices of public life, including moving through and occupying the station (Lefebvre, 1996). When

individuals are only allotted a limited amount of time within an environment, how can they foster meaningful connections to it? They cannot, which demonstrates that they are entirely too safe to function meaningfully outside of these constraints. Brands et al. (2020) note this, stating: "too strong an emphasis on safety and security in, and management and regulation of, urban public spaces… [has] resulted in them becoming less spontaneous, friendly, accessible... and more homogeneous." (p.59-60). This correlation, realized within Toronto's busiest MTH, reduces its opportunities to function as anything beyond its core transportation role, except where activities are tied to consumption. The prioritization of crime prevention and social order has displaced the convivial role Union Station could otherwise play at both the urban and regional scales, ultimately undermining a core pillar of its existence as a result, which is to serve its users and the broader public realm.

A key rebuttal to the foregoing argument is that Union has long incorporated commercial activity, private security and electronic surveillance within its bounds. Granted, the station building has never, throughout its nearly 99-year existence, existed without some form of retail or service-oriented commercial presence supporting its daily operation (Marshall & Bow, 2019). From barber shops and beauty parlours to fast-food chains and convenience stores, it should be very much understood as a space where transportation and commercial activities coexist. In turn, an MTH of this scale and significance also requires security and surveillance to ensure the safety of its users, as it often "creates a point of convergence and dispersal for a diverse mix of people, ideas and conflicts…" (Bonnet, 2009, p.1029). From this perspective, the USRP did not introduce anything entirely unprecedented to warrant the level of critique advanced throughout this research. Nor, on the surface, did these interventions necessarily diminish the station's civic character. Yet, I argue that this reasoning overlooks the scale through which these functions have



Figure 4.8: Bay Concourse in 2015.

been expanded and reoriented within present-day Union Station, particularly through the intensification of commercial activity and security-oriented practices.

To push back on this interpretation, these forms of management and commercial activity were historically ancillary to the station's "fundamental transportation and civic functions" and did not transport users into a luxury and consumption-focused environment (City of Toronto, 2004, p.9). It also did not regulate users' presence according to their capacity or willingness to participate in these spaces. The USRP would initially continue this philosophy, that is until "both the City and Osmington recognized that the 2009 vision for retail and events at the Station… [was] inefficient… as it was utilitarian, focused mainly on transit and commuters, and tempered by a harsh economic climate" (City of Toronto, 2016, p.2). *Utilitarian* is used here as a synonym for economically unproductive and as a descriptor of the earlier vision established in the Master Plan, which was seemingly abandoned during the construction process. Representing a critical turning point in the project's trajectory, one I associate with the displacement of Union's civic identity, this strategic choice demonstrates that the lived experiences of users shown in this research are not arbitrary. Existing as material consequences of the City and Redcliff's pursuit of "attracting significant sponsorship opportunities and greater rents from high-quality tenants" (City of Toronto, 2016, p.2), the contestations surrounding the spatial, temporal and socio-political dynamics of user movement should be considered premeditated. By realizing a station environment that is antithetical to the needs and desires of users, the USRP and the ambitions of those behind it are the reasons why the station is no longer a meaningful civic space.

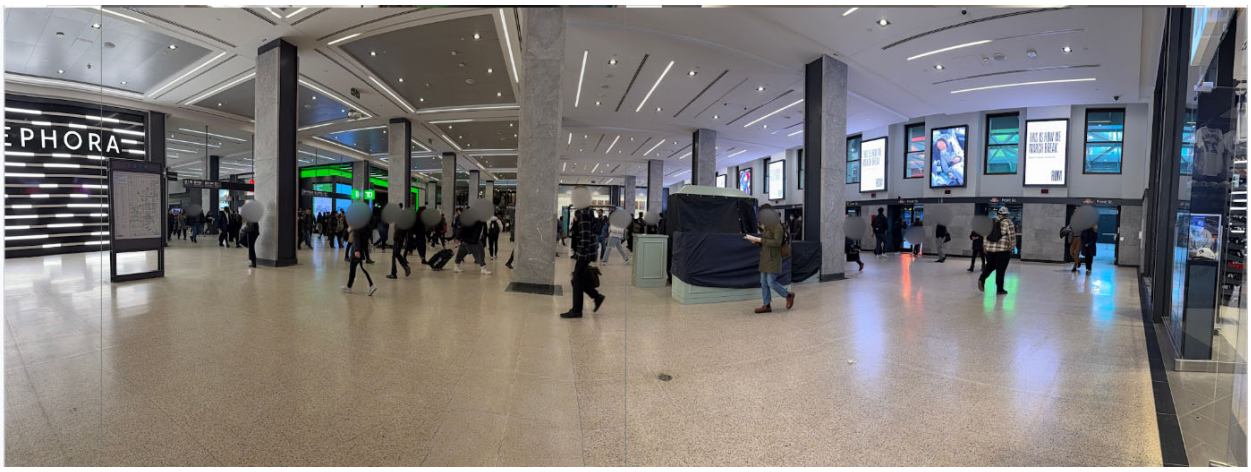


Figure 4.9: Bay Retail Level following completion of the USRP, 2026.

V. The Future of Union Station: Lessons from a Contested Civic Space

This final section considers the future of Union Station following the completion of the USRP. While the revitalization substantially transformed the station, Union remains an ever-changing environment that is mediated by several conflicting yet interconnected factors. Drawing on an interview conducted on March 24, 2026, with two professionals involved in the Union Station Enhancement Project (UESP), I use their insights to better understand these changes and how they might further shift Union toward the private realm. In doing so, the multi-modal transit hub is depicted as an incomplete project, i.e., as infrastructure that remains actively negotiated through operational pressures and the unpredictability of public life. On the flip side, it also explores the idea of what it would take for Union Station to become truly civic once again and how such a transformation could be realized.

Infrastructure Without End

Union Station is ever adapting to the needs of its users and the pressures they place on the broader public transportation network in Toronto. As the largest and most significant multi-modal transit hub in the city, it has been designed to withstand the impact of existing passenger rail, subway, bus, and streetcar services, at the expense of its own civicness. Yet, these pressures are only expected to intensify in the coming decades. With future projects such as the Waterfront East LRT and Alto's proposed high-speed rail corridor between Toronto and Quebec City anticipated to terminate at Union Station (TTC, 2026), the facility will assume an even greater role within municipal, regional, and national transportation networks. It will also become even more intertwined and hence, important in the lives of visitors and commuters. To make room for such growth, the Union Station Enhancement Project (USEP) commenced in 2022, which offers potential relief from these pressures while remaining complimentary to the work of the USRP. As an integral part of the GO Expansion program, this project is currently underway and will create "two new wide GO train platforms with canopies… several new vertical access points and a new south passenger concourse spanning from Bay to York Streets, with convenient open concept connections" (Metrolinx, n.d, para.8). At the time of writing in May 2026, elements of the Union Station Enhancement Project remained ongoing despite earlier projections that substantial completion would occur in late 2025.



Figure 5.1: Rendering of the Union Station Enhancement Project (USEP).



Figure 5.2: Rendering of the proposed South Concourse.

> "The amount of people and diversity of people that come through Union Station every single day is the biggest in the country, right? So having a transportation space specifically that people of all needs can access is important… So that looks like wider platforms, physically more space, more platforms, more trains, and more room to allow commuters with varying accessibility needs to come through." (Interviewee A, March 24, 2026)

This quote encompasses the rationale behind the project, particularly in relation to the prior investments made through the USRP. Acting more as a continuation of the station's decade-long modernization process rather than a completely new project, the USEP, at least through this research, should be addressed as a proactive remedy aimed at addressing the foreseeable cracks within both Union and Toronto's broader rail network infrastructure. In this regard, it undoubtedly focuses more on transportation functions than its predecessor, which remained more in the realm of restoration and place-making of the station building, or lack thereof for the latter. The second interviewee confirms this priority, stating the USEP is "about making sure we can get the right number of trains through the station to meet future demand and the future train service plan" (Interviewee B, March 24, 2026). Whether through track realignment to support higher speeds or upgrades to existing corridor systems such as signal improvements, the ongoing work is determined to optimize the station's "operational capacity and long-term reliability" (Interviewee B, March 24, 2026). Evidently, this emphasis on functionality does little to frame Union in a civic light, instead reinforcing its role as a highly managed and efficiency-driven transportation apparatus. In fairness to the project, however, it never explicitly claimed otherwise like the USRP.

Another way the USEP is distinct from the revitalization is in the way it is being governed. In particular, construction work is being implemented through an alternative yet historically successful procurement and delivery approach, known as the alliance contracting model. With the term *alliance* capturing "the spirit of the model… [which is] built on the fundamentals of a no-blame culture, a waiver of litigation, and a commercial structure that caps the financial exposure" (WSP, n.d, para. 3), such approach marks a departure from the more adversarial conditions that characterized portions of the USRP. It also intrinsically ties in collaboration and accountability throughout the process, as any issues that arise are deemed as "everybody's problem" and hence, must be rectified by all partners (Interviewee A, March 24, 2026). These partners include contractor Kiewit and Alberici Joint Venture, lead designer WSP Canada Inc., and signalling

specialist Mass. Electric Construction Canada Co., all of whom operate under the shared governance structure to reduce any conflict throughout this $562 million initiative's lifecycle (WSP, n.d). From the perspective of Interviewee B (March 24, 2026), the USEP "is set up in a way that everyone has a voice… yes, WSP is the design team… [and] they meet and have their own team meetings… but then they meet with their construction partner and the owner to regularly workshop those ideas and make sure they're comfortable with them." While this model has proven to be effective, with the project currently remaining under budget, improving project delivery does not necessarily guarantee improvements in how Union as a civic space is experienced. If this were the case, the USRP would have created a more inclusive civic environment and undermined the concerns of this research entirely.

This distinction becomes particularly important when examining the proposed interventions currently underway for the USEP. Albeit focused more on technical aspects, like signalling and snow removal stations, the proposed South Concourse is expected to expand on the work of its predecessor. As stated by Xuereb (2025), it will support greater "connections to the York, Bay and VIA Concourses, as well as Union Square and Scotiabank Arena… [and] will provide a much-needed capacity increase at Union Station, reducing choke points and easing passenger circulation." More specifically, by reducing congestion concentrated in high-flow transit spaces, the South Concourse is intended to redistribute passenger movement more evenly throughout the station and improve access between platforms and surrounding transit services (Metrolinx, n.d.). It will also support the further commercialization of the Union, which is something seemingly exciting to those who work on it. Particularly, Interviewee A (March 24, 2026) contemplates on the USRP's immense work, stating: "the [bay] retail level… really, like, transformed the space and gave it kind of that third-place energy… so, like, it's really continuing that vision as the station continues to go through its expansion, and making sure that it's not just somewhere you're passing through every day, that it's more like a hub for the city." Intertwining consumption with presence once again, it appears Union will only continue its trajectory as a conditional public and civic space, one that explicitly values commercial activity over the autonomy of its users.

Furthermore, the rapid transition from the USRP to the USEP demonstrates how Union Station has become a form of perpetual infrastructure. With various projects underway on the multi-modal transit hub, and even more nearing inception, Union Station is poised to remain in a

state of transformation for at least the next several decades. As a result, planning for the MTH is unlikely to ever reach an endpoint, which, in turn, creates greater uncertainty about its role in the future urban landscape. In particular, it risks worsening two existing tensions: the further securitization and exclusion of certain users within the station; and the continued privileging of efficiency over conviviality and democratic forms of occupation. This undoubtedly restricts public life. Creating an operational environment designed to regulate and expedite the movement of bodies through the downtown core, Union Station leaves less room for users to enjoy the space as a meaningful civic destination. However, Interviewee A states the opposite, as they explain: "so even though it is retail focused, there are places that you know they're still seating that people can do… there's always free events in the station" (March 24, 2026). My question remains: is this enough?

Can Union Still Be Civic?

In the midst of various geopolitical conflicts, a mental health crisis and deepening housing insecurity, the loss of Union Station as a civic space and the democratic values it once represented is deeply worrisome. While it is currently being operated as exclusive retail space, it is important to imagine how the station and all other MTHs could function beyond its commercial imperatives, for the sake of those who need it most. In *Rethinking Urban Parks: Public Space and Cultural Diversity,* Low et al. (2005) provide a set of principles to follow to preserve and reinforce urban public space and ultimately support their social and cultural vitality. Albeit futile in terms of the USRP, this scholarship nevertheless offers an important framework for envisioning a more inclusive and socially responsive Union moving forward. Such framework includes:

> "(1) If people are not represented in urban parks, historic national sites and monuments, and more importantly if their histories are erased, they will not use it.
>
> (2) Access is as much about economics and cultural patterns of public space use as circulation and transportation, thus income and visitation patterns must be taken into consideration when providing access for all social groups.
>
> (3) The social interaction of diverse groups can be maintained and enhanced by providing safe, spatially adequate "territories" for everyone within the larger space of the overall site.

(4) Accommodating the differences in the ways social class and ethnic groups use and value public sites is essential to making decisions that sustain cultural and social diversity.

(5) Contemporary historic preservation should not concentrate on restoring the scenic features without also restoring the facilities and diversions that attract people to the space.

(6) Symbolic ways of communicating cultural meaning are an important dimension of place attachment that can be fostered to promote cultural diversity" (Low et al., 2005, p.4).

These principles act as a starting point for evaluating the title of this subsection. As of the time of writing, Union Station's civic identity is largely sustained by nostalgia and the convivial intentions embedded within its initial design. It is a relic of the times when social and cultural resources were being pumped into the heart of Toronto, where its purpose was to support civil society as population booms and growing industry were underway. A clear means of instilling civic pride amongst Torontonians, Union Station acted as a gift, or more importantly, compensation to the folks who had driven the growth necessary to have such a monumental structure. Contemporarily, Union Station does everything it can to dehumanize some users, particularly unhoused individuals, through private management practices that surveil and police their presence. As demonstrated through the observations presented in this research, the insatiable desire for consumerism and social order has come at the expense of users' ability to engage meaningfully with the station. It is, thus, difficult to reconcile that the subject site of this research once held organ recitals and housed culturally based community groups that supported Torontonians, particularly without an underlying motive to encourage consumption. This prompts further questions: while retail destinations and so-called "public" amenities are great for those who can afford it, how does the present-day station project civicness to those who are unable to financially participate? How does it give back to them in the same way it once did?

For me to answer both, I want to give credit where credit is due. Without the USRP, Union Station would have fallen into obscurity and put the city's whole transportation network at risk of collapse. It brought the station into a state of good repair, all while preserving the heritage elements of an architecturally significant structure. It also provided room for Union to grow with the transit users in the Greater Toronto Area who will evidently travel through it in the future. Simply put, I would not have been able to question its civicness right now if it were not for the work done over

those eleven years. The work that the UESP is continuing to lead on. Nonetheless, this very work has distorted Union's role and meaning in society, as the "inclusion of private actors in its production and management has served to override values such as accessibility, equity, diversity, and inclusion" (Leclercq & Pojani, 2023, p.1). Turning the transit station into a semi-private space, effectively a quasi-shopping mall where presence is regulated and transient pop-up venues are organized around consumerism, the direction of these projects has pushed Union Station away from being a 'third space' in a time where Toronto's waterfront is desperately in need of them. While it is inherently public and therefore anyone can use it, patterns of design and management impede users from engaging with and benefiting from it in meaningful ways, that is if you are anyone outside the private companies that have invested in it. This is unfortunate and perhaps a consequence of naive ambition, as the Master Plan was very clear in its intentions of preserving Union as a civic space.

To move towards a more civic future, Redcliff's strategy of tolerating only consumption-oriented activities within the station must come to an end. Making the station accessible to all of Toronto, not just the best of it, this shift will require ownership and management to view the space as a civic common with intractable social and cultural capital. It will also need to encourage Union Station to be a producer of discourse, difference, community and learning amongst its users. From a design perspective, Mitchelmore (2017) presents a blueprint for the station to achieve such reality, which "reprioritizes movement through the Great Hall… with the ambition of re-affirming the Station's Beaux-Arts ideals and… the station's historic role as an interior public space (p. 84). Providing an alternative to the commercialization of Union Station as its dominant organizing function, its support in the repoliticization of the station offers hope in making it again a space for the people, a space that stands firmly within the public realm. Beyond a new architectural strategy, though, on-site interventions must be introduced that directly support the diverse communities who rely on Union Station. From cooling and warming centres during extreme weather events to social service partnerships, affordable food vendors, non-hostile architecture, farmers' markets, and free public programming such as performances and community events, the civic spirit of Union, along with other MTHs, can be resurrected (Martin, 2023). Demonstrating that alternative futures remain possible, a rise of infrastructure capable of sustaining accessibility and the complexities of public life could flip the Union Station I observed in this research. With that, I think it can still very much be civic.

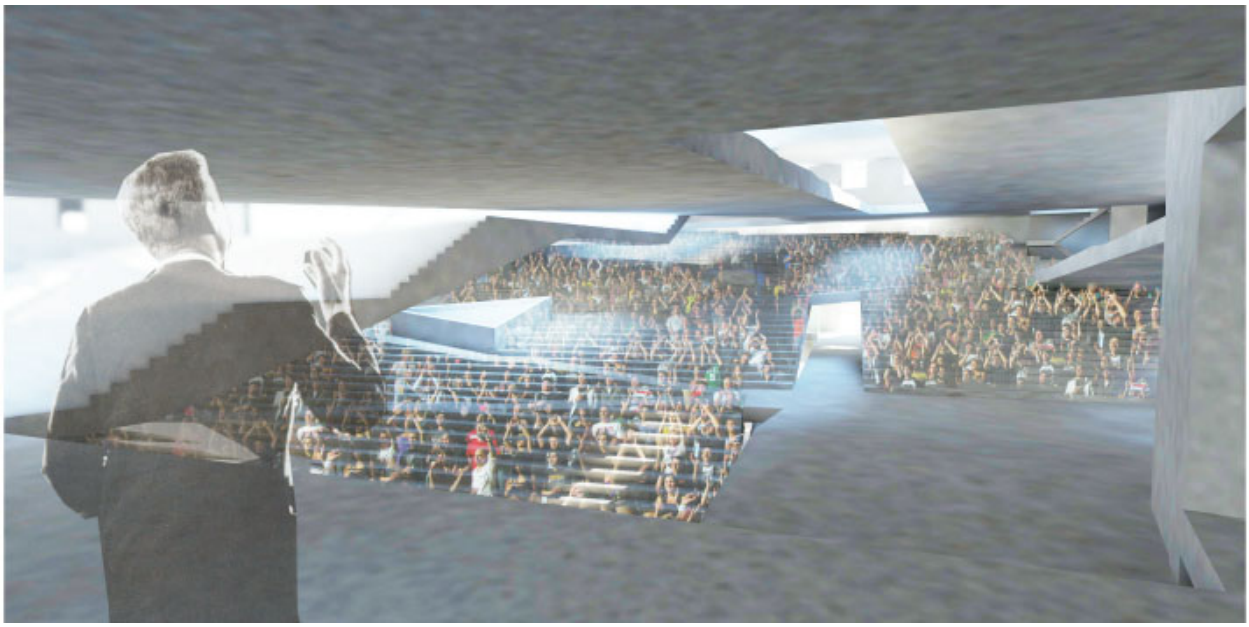


Figure 5.3: Mitchelmore's vision of an ideal Union Station, 2017.

Conclusion

This Major Research Paper argues that the Union Station Revitalization Project (USRP) has produced an exclusionary and commodified station environment at the expense of its position in the public realm. Using a qualitative research design grounded in critical urban theory, a mix of direct observations, policy document reviews and semi-structured interviews was used to examine the performance of the USRP both as a megaproject and a civic space in Toronto, Canada. The findings show that the renewed and revitalized station often conflicts with the socio-political movements of users and is experienced unevenly across different "realms" and demographics. However, there are shared conditions that all Union users face, including electronic surveillance and shoulder-to-shoulder congestion, that evince the disconnect between the USRP's objective of creating a pedestrian-oriented environment and its current status as an overregulated space.

This research's case study approach offers a better understanding of an underresearched dynamic: megaprojects as a means to privatize and securitize multi-modal transit hubs (MTHs). Demonstrated through the USRP, the growing demand for sustainable mobility infrastructure in contemporary cities has frequently been leveraged as a justification for transforming transit spaces into financialized instruments of capital (Ashkanani & Franzoi, 2022; Flyvbjerg, 2014; Otsuka & Reeve, 2024; Wicki et al., 2024). The addition of commercial spaces, such as food courts and retail levels, exposes this directive and has particularly distorted their socio-cultural meaning and role to residents, visitors and commuters alike. My observations within the Union Station highlight that this commercialization reimagines station users through a capitalist paradigm, which conditions presence and occupation on economic productivity. By disciplining those who are unable to meet this *normative* threshold, largely through measures of private policing and hostile architecture, users' spatial practices, as showcased, vary significantly according to socio-economic status and one's propensity to consume. This reality is socially produced through the public-private partnerships that govern MTHs, which are born through these very transit megaprojects. Thus, as the demand for sustainable mobility infrastructure persists, acknowledging this harmful dynamic is paramount in informing public actors of the severe implications of such improvements and ensuring station environments remain democratic public spaces.

In evaluating the USRP's success in preserving Union Station's civic prominence, this research grounds its analysis in the policy framework that informed the revitalization, most notably

the *Union Station Master Plan* (2004). What was found was the notable contradiction between the Master Plan's aim of creating a "revitalized and pedestrian-oriented civic precinct" and the station's contemporary form as a capital-generating asset whose programming largely benefits its private partners, most notably Redcliff (City of Toronto, 2004, p.11). This financialized environment, where consumption and retail revenues are prioritized before all else, has blatantly undermined a large part of what the USRP was designed to achieve. This is not to diminish the substantial improvements the project has made in preparing Union Station to accommodate current and future capacity demands. By creating a more spacious and efficient station, improving accessibility and addressing many of the "dilapidated, difficult to navigate, congested, and historically degraded" conditions that were previously associated with the space (City of Toronto, 2004, p. 11), the USRP presents a more complex evaluation of success. However, by repositioning Union Station within a public-private governance model, many of these achievements are ultimately undermined, for users are unable to fully reap their benefits. For a project that cost $824 million dollars and took 11 years to complete, this is a significant shortcoming and elucidates the defects in how cities worldwide conceive, design and deliver transit infrastructure in the contemporary age.

The findings of this research should not be seen as an endpoint and are fully intended to provoke further research into this matter. While this paper provides insight into the relationship between transit megaprojects, commercialization and the transformation of civic space, it does not examine this dynamic across different multimodal transit hubs and urban contexts. A comparative analysis of similar transit redevelopments instead should be done to identify whether patterns within the USRP expose other trends in the privatization and securitization of sustainable mobility infrastructure. Additionally, future research should further investigate the role of public-private partnerships in these transit spaces, particularly how private interests influence their design and everyday management. Another important area for future exploration is the lived experience of diverse station users, which has been under-researched and can provide valuable information on how different social groups resist or adapt to these hostile station environments. Such research could examine how factors such as socio-economic status and duration of occupation affect users' relationships with these spaces. Finally, future research could also explore alternative approaches to evaluating transit megaproject success by moving beyond conventional measures of efficiency and economic performance to consider their role within the public realm and their ability "to create

the possibility for democratic transformation" (Paget-Seekins & Tironi, 2016, p. 177; Mitchell, 2005).

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. How do both of you understand Union Station as a civic space? How has this idea of 'civic' influenced planning and design decisions within the Union Station Enhancement Project (UESP)?

2. Union Station accommodates a wide range of users and transit modes. How does the UESP approach designing for that level of complexity, particularly in terms of circulation and spatial organization?

3. What remain the most significant challenges that currently affect how Union Station functions as a multi-modal transit hub?

4. In advancing the UESP, what constraints most shape what is possible at Union Station? How do these factors influence decision-making?

5. Given that the UESP is being delivered through an alliance contracting model, how has this approach shaped collaboration and decision-making at Union Station?

6. Looking ahead, what would an ideal Union Station look like in terms of how people experience and move through the space?