



The aluminum-skinned Slough Bus Station in the UK, which was designed by bblur and opened in 2011, stood as a rare example of adventurous architecture aimed at bus riders. It was damaged by a fire in 2022 and remains closed. *Photographer: View Pictures/Universal Images Group Editorial via Getty Images*

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What a Beautiful Bus Stop Can Do

Stations and shelters for bus riders don't get much design attention from architects. A new study argues that quality aesthetics and amenities pay off for transit operators.

By [Sonja Wind](#)

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Would you pay more to wait at a prettier bus stop? According to a recently published [study](#), you would. And you might even be willing to take a longer journey to use it.

A team of Italian researchers surveyed riders at Lampugnano bus station outside of Milan and handed them virtual reality headsets that showed them an improved version of the bare-bones suburban depot, spiffed up with comfortable benches, a bright platform and upscale shopping facilities. The result: The roughly 300 respondents would be willing to pay an average €4.3.

(\$4.71) more per trip or travel up to 28.2 minutes longer to use the more high quality version.



Like many bus stations, the current Lampugnano depot outside of Milan isn't much to look at. *Photographer: Giovanni Mereghetti/UCG/Universal Images Group via Getty Images*

The study, published in the journal *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, shows that the “hedonic quality” of bus facilities should not be underestimated, the authors wrote. The term encompasses design, services, comfort, hospitality – in short, a place where it’s a pleasure to spend time in.

While the aesthetics and amenities of airports and rail stations often command attention and resources, the same is rarely true of the terminals and waiting areas for bus riders. In many cities, local bus stops may be little more than an unsheltered bench (or worse), and the downtown stations that once served intercity bus lines in the US have been disappearing. Many newer private companies like FlixBus and Megabus don’t have facilities at all, as their buses collect passengers right off the street.



An abandoned Greyhound bus facility in Birmingham, Alabama. *Photographer: Raymond Boyd/Michael Ochs Archives via Getty Images*

This is a missed opportunity, said Armando Cartenì, lead author of the study and a professor in transportation planning at the University of Campania Luigi Vanvitelli near Naples. His research on the hedonic value of transit facilities suggests that the average traveler is ready to pay an extra 25% to 40% to enjoy riding in style.

“In my opinion this is a disruptive result for transport operators and planners,” Cartenì said in an email. “It means that there are other attributes, addition to the traditional ones of waiting time, travel time and ticket cost, to attract users to bus transport. It is what I call the ‘beauty brand.’”





Survey respondents were shown virtual reality renderings of the Milan station, improved with seating (top) and shopping amenities. *Source: Armando Carteni*

Apart from increasing passenger satisfaction and ticket revenue, building more attractive bus facilities would draw more riders to public transportation, reducing emissions and congestion associated with private car use. The practical implication from the study is that beauty should be an explicit design consideration for transport services, Carteni said, as the costs are offset by the benefits. Any improvement in aesthetics, comfort, personal safety or services contributes positively to travelers' willingness to pay.

This is backed up by earlier research. About a decade ago, Carteni noticed a difference between the two subway lines in his hometown of Naples: The “art metro” line – which features stations heavily decorated with contemporary art – seemed to attract more riders from further afield than the other, more utilitarian metro line. In a study, he found that people would be willing to pay roughly 40% more to use the more visually appealing transit system.



The Toledo metro station in Naples showcases work by artist Oscar Tusquet Blanca. *Photographer: Mario Laporta/AFP via Getty Images*

Other transportation researchers have also delved into the role that waiting facilities and amenities play in the ridership experience. One 2016 study of transit stops and stations found that passengers waiting at stops equipped with shelters and real-time arrival information perceived time passing more quickly than those in unsheltered stops.

One factor to bear in mind is that not every bus rider is equally passionate about aesthetics. The 324 participants in the Milan intercity bus study were traveling for tourism, not commuting; those making a daily trek to and from work may be less willing to pay more for attractive waiting rooms. Women over 30 and people who were employed showed a stronger preference than men or unemployed riders. Those most engaged with the visual appeal of bus stations were highly educated women with high incomes: They appreciated beauty up to four times more than other riders. That lines up with other research on transit service preferences, which found that women “generally take greater pleasure in using high quality and comfortable facilities, and which provide greater perception of personal safety,” the study observes.



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The study singles out several particularly striking rail stations as models of high-quality transit architecture, such as Santiago Calatrava's World Trade Center Oculus, Zaha Hadid's Afragola high-speed rail station in southern Italy and John McAslan + Partners' renovation to London's King's Cross station. Some of these projects have also faced criticism for their exorbitant costs, particularly the \$4 billion spent to create Calatrava's soaring New York City transportation hub. Still, Cartenì defends the Oculus as a “symbol to the city,” and one that a million subway and PATH train passengers get to experience every week.



This restored former Greyhound Bus Station in Jackson, Mississippi, is now a preserved icon of the civil rights movement. *Photographer: Rory Doyle/Bloomberg*

Bus riders tend to have lower incomes than users of other transit modes, and they're rarely the beneficiaries of such showpiece facilities. In the 1930s and '40s, the intercity carrier Greyhound built a swoopy series of Streamline

Moderne terminals in scores of US cities; few remain in use today amid an industry-wide trend of station closures (though several have been preserved and successfully renovated).

For riders of local city buses, waiting spaces are generally even more minimalistic. While bus rapid transit systems like those in Bogotá and Jakarta have elaborate boarding facilities that resemble rail stations, typical urban bus shelters are spartan or missing entirely.



A melon-shaped bus shelter in Nagasaki, Japan, is part of a series of fruit-themed bus infrastructure. *Photographer: John S Lander/LightRocket via Getty Images*

Still, even a humble bus stop, if thoughtfully improved, can provide some hedonic benefits. The study points to several global examples of playful shelters, from the fruit-shaped stops that sprouted across Nagasaki, Japan, to the book-equipped bus stop libraries of Colombia. In Singapore, some particularly well-provisioned stops boast rooftop gardens, swings and charging outlets. But these examples tend to be the exceptions to the rule.

That should change, Cartenì says. He's convinced that building more attractive places to wait for a ride would pay off handsomely for transit agencies and bus companies.

“Investing in beauty is always a good move both for private operators and public administrations,” he said.

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