



Photos by Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Public art thrown under the buses

By Charles Desmarais

It is likely that San Francisco's extraordinary Salesforce Transit Center, which celebrates its unveiling Saturday, Aug. 11, will be a public favorite and a historic contribution to the city's cultural fabric. Whether the individual works of art installed there under the auspices of the San Francisco Arts Commission, a city agency, will be as successful over the long term is less sure.

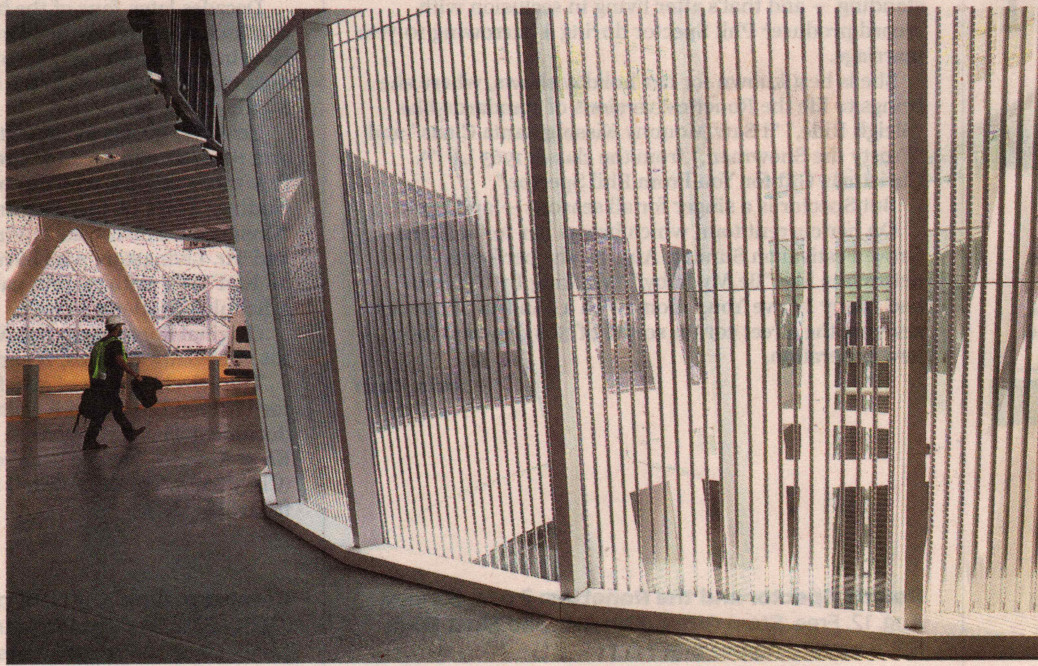
Works lose individual power when viewed amid new transit center's architecture

The four works — only three of which are completed — were commissioned at a cost of \$4.75 million. Each has its strengths, but all are subsumed into a vast machine of commerce, their authors required to pay such deference to the visions of the master architects that they retain little power as independent statements.

Even before trains roll into the transit center's lower level — optimis-

Center continues on E3

The terrazzo floor in the atrium of the Salesforce Transit Center, top, is by Julie Chang. It is surrounded by an LED digital text display by Jenny Holzer, right. Public art to adorn the center has been commissioned at a cost of \$4.75 million.



ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

New public art strains to be polite

Center from page E1

tic estimates put that more than 10 years away — the center will lift East Bay buses off the city’s streets, providing faster and safer trips and a pleasurable elevated view of downtown’s glittering new high-rise neighborhood. As a structure, the center is built around a soaring Grand Hall of sparkling white and crystal. Its rooftop park puts us instantly in mind of a fresh-built version of New York’s High Line. We float several stories above the street, as if through an urban canyon on a verdant raft.

The distinction often made today between architecture and art has not always existed. More and more, contemporary artists are ignoring that fuzzy borderline, bringing the disciplines ever closer with their embrace of environment and public engagement as elements of a new “social practice.” As an integrated work, senior designer Fred Clarke’s transit center structure and Peter Walker’s sweeping top-floor landscape can only be called a significant and invigorating art experience.

The works created by artists James Carpenter, Julie Chang, Jenny Holzer and Ned Kahn are stylish enhancements of that experience. They function primarily as decorative elements in the larger design scheme.

The effect, as an Arts Commission press release proudly puts it, is to “blur the lines between art and architecture.” To blur is to dim, however. In the context of the transit center, these works yield much of their power as independent statements.

The most striking of the commissioned pieces is Holzer’s digital work “White Light,” which encircles the main atrium with 16-foot-high excerpts from historical and literary texts. All related to the Bay Area, they are spelled out in animated, pulsing LED configurations.

Some of these texts are on view for no more than 20 seconds; others run as long as 90 minutes. The longest excerpt thus far, taken from a work by poet Edith Arstein Jenkins, had to be broken into shorter elements — its full length is five hours and 20 minutes.

The artist told a press tour that the current content total of some 30 hours eventually will double or triple. Holzer said that her piece will give waiting travelers “something to keep them company and to occupy their minds.” To grasp the full meaning of the rapidly passing words, however, would require the attention of a Chauncey Gardiner.

In the daytime, from below, snippets are decipherable with some difficulty; from the second floor, one can watch through strips of LED lights, unreadable close-up, to make out sentences across the way as they circle around. I have not seen the work at night, but the challenge is not light



Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

The rooftop garden of the Salesforce Transit Center, seen from the BlackRock roof deck, is several stories above the streets.



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

“Bus Fountain” by Ned Kahn, in the roof garden, has geysers that are activated by bus movements.

or contrast — I don’t think the texts were ever designed to be read in full. They are embellishments, their embedded meaning notwithstanding: a glittering necklace, white against the white skin of the soaring atrium.

The other two works now available to view are decidedly less complex in concept. Ned Kahn’s “Bus Fountain” will charm viewers with a sequence of small geysers along a path in the park, erupting as they trace the movements of vehicles on the bus level below. Such dry-deck fountains, generally seen with children chasing water spurts and burbles, have become commonplace in shopping malls and the like. Here, the

pattern is not random, but a map and measurement of urban transit activity.

Julie Chang’s “The Secret Garden” is a half-acre expanse of terrazzo, covering the whole of the Grand Hall floor. It is a free-form, contemporary California update of ancient decorative themes, festooned with local flora, punctuated by images of hummingbirds, and brass inlays with multicultural associations.

The art and the architecture all fit together like the costume of a well-dressed politician.

The best public art has never been discreet, however. The origins of the form are in religious and civic monuments around which entire



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

A butterfly is among the designs that are inlaid on the terrazzo floor of the atrium by Julie Chang.

Transit center open house

Buses won’t be running, but the new Transbay Transit Center opens its doors to the public Saturday, Aug. 11.

A block party kicks off at noon with a performance by the West Grand Brass Band in the rooftop park’s central plaza. Events conclude with a sampler of Shakespearean scenes by the African-American Shakespeare Company at 4 p.m. in the western amphitheater.

Throughout the afternoon, there will be exercise classes and kids’ activities, including a petting zoo. The entire building is open for exploration, and from noon until 4 p.m., people can stroll the bus bridge that connects the transit center to the Bay Bridge — a one-time-only opportunity.

For more information: <http://salesforcetransitcenter.com>

cultures were built. A sculpture of Athena was not one element of the Parthenon, it was the reason for the temple. The Colossus of Rhodes was molded from weapons left behind by a fleeing enemy.

And it has never been polite. It commands public squares and major intersections, if not entire harbors or mountaintops.

It makes a point, which is why religious radicals blow up statues and political activists demand new icons.

If the low point for public art in America was around 1909, when construction of Confederate monuments peaked nearly half a century after the Civil War, the high point was surely the 1930s

and the WPA’s celebration of the heroism of labor.

The days when a public work of art commissioned by an official body had the power to shape thought or action are probably behind us. One representative of the San Francisco Arts Commission could not tell me whether the Holzer work was supposed to be programmed in complete sentences (it is). Nevertheless, she described hours of careful poring through texts to avoid content that might offend.

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Biggest sculpture done in by audacity

The official statement from the San Francisco Arts Commission is terse. “Due to unanticipated challenges related to the complex engineering of the sculpture, the construction schedule and the project budget,” it says, “the project was unable to proceed as originally planned.”

That is how San Francisco lost what had promised to be the most significant of five major works of public art originally commissioned for the Salesforce Transit Center, which opens to the public Saturday, Aug. 11. Conceived by Los Angeles artist Tim Hawkinson, who worked on the project for more than six years, the work was killed off last year by the Transbay Joint Powers Authority before it

ever had a name.

Creating a friendly golem out of the ruins of the old Transbay Terminal was never expected to be easy. At 41 feet tall, an 80-ton stack of concrete debris looming over pedestrians was a daunting engineering challenge, and the \$1.67 million budget, planners decided, was inadequate by more than half.

Still, I can’t shake the suspicion that the very thing that excited people about the art in the first place is what led to its demise. In a design that elevates decoration over provocation, it was the work’s audacity that did it in.

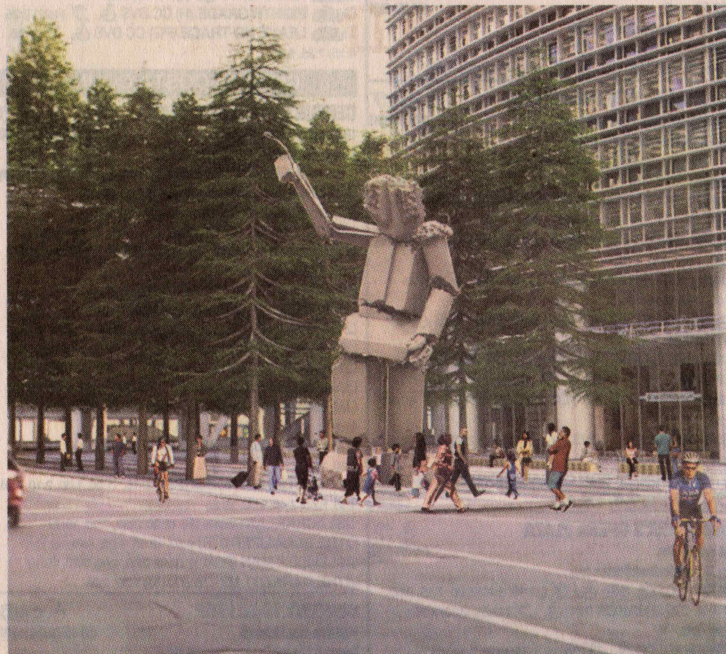
In an overall budget of \$2.26 billion (up from an original \$1.6 billion), the sculpture’s

increased cost would have amounted to less than one-tenth of 1 percent. But the rough giant it represented, a concrete-and-rusted-rebar embodiment of all that the Transit Center’s new neighborhood aims to erase, could not be allowed to command so prominent a corner.

Salesforce built the city’s tallest building on that block, and topped it with an anodyne, pixilated crown. It demanded that a planned grove of redwoods next door be replaced by a sterile plaza. It bought the transit center naming rights for \$110 million.

What chance was there ever for a work of art that would speak of failure, of impermanence, of fate?

— Charles Desmarais



Transbay Joint Powers Authority 2011

A 2011 rendering shows a sculpture by Tim Hawkinson, which was to have been made from debris of the old terminal.