

# Atlantic Cities - How Design Can Help Build a 'Transit Culture'

- [Eric Jaffe](#)
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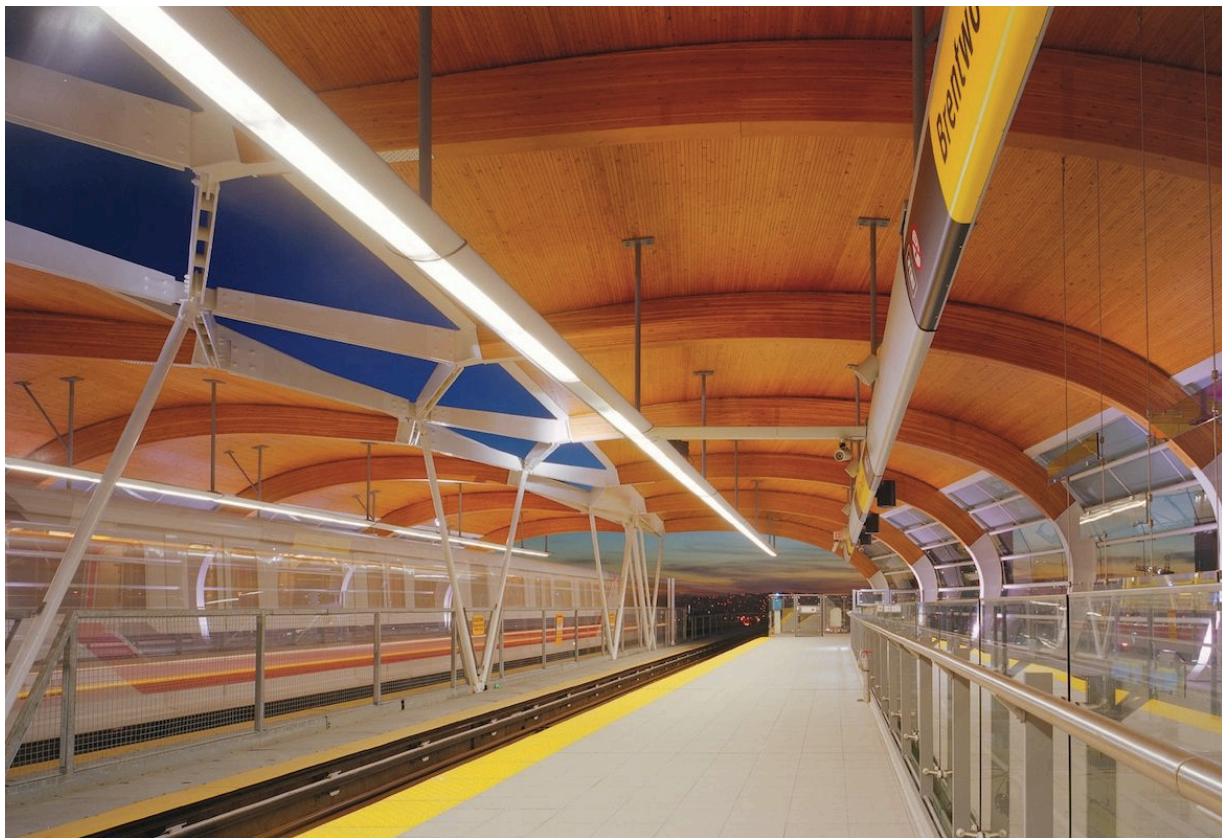
Earlier this month the transit agency serving metropolitan Rochester, New York, announced a [million-dollar "rebranding" effort](#). That means everything from a new logo to new uniforms — all aimed at changing the public perception "that buses are only for people who have no other option," the *Democrat and Chronicle* reports. The next brand will try to surround Rochester transit with a sense of comfort and ease.

Rochester isn't alone in its desire for a transit brand. [Jeff Doble](#), director of transportation design for the Vancouver office of architecture firm Perkins+Will, says system branding is becoming "more and more prominent and important to cities." From the architectural design of stations to the wayfinding style of [signage and maps](#), branding can help cities that are "trying to build a transit culture."

"You realize how much a brand — whether it's station design or just a refresh of signage within the city itself — really becomes part of the experience of the rider," says Doble. "[Cities] are still struggling to get people to really appreciate the benefits of public transit. I think branding plays a big role in that."

Public perception of a transit system is no superficial matter. Recent studies suggest it can have a ridership impact [on par with](#) actual service quality. The most iconic transit brands tend to conjure up positive feelings; think the art nouveau entrances of the Paris Metro, or Beck's famed map design of the London Tube. On the flipside, consider the negative image people had of New York City's subway when its cars were [covered in graffiti](#).

The key to an effective transit brand, says Doble, is to connect a design with the local culture of the city itself. He points to Vancouver's transit system as a great example. The city's involvement in the Pacific Northwest forest industry inspired an architectural style that incorporates wood into the transit stations. Exposed wood now graces canopies and shelters throughout the system.



*Photo by Nic Lehoux*



*Photo by Enrico Dagostini*

Some of the other projects Doble has been involved with lately include transit station designs in [Riyadh, Saudi Arabia](#), and in [Honolulu, Hawaii](#). A unifying element in both places is strong canopy that unifies the system and becomes identifiable to city residents and visitors as a transit hub from afar.

"It's mostly about providing a nice environment that elevates that experience," says Doble. "Transit stations — it's important to make them very durable, but through that you don't want to make them sterile environments that aren't inviting or comfortable for passengers."



*[Courtesy Perkins+Will](#)*



[\*Via Honolulu Transit\*](#)

Designing new stations is one thing; reinventing an existing system, as is the case in Rochester, often poses additional challenges. In such cases, says Doble, architects must consider whether to tweak the present identity, start completely fresh, or impose new brands on individual parts of the system — especially routes serving neighborhoods that see themselves as unique communities. Balancing the character of an individual line with the branding of an entire system can be tough.

"It's working within those existing systems that I think is probably more of a challenge," he says. "To look at ways to modernize them and expand upon a language that's been established."



Eric Jaffe is a contributing writer to *The Atlantic Cities* and the author of [\*A Curious Madness\*](#) (2014) and [\*The King's Best Highway\*](#) (2010). He lives in New York. [All posts »](#)