

Thank You Chicago!

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Architecture

New CTA shelters: A plus for passengers

By Paul Gapp

Architecture critic

MOST OF US take our public "street furniture" for granted. We are largely oblivious to good and bad design manifested by light poles, fire-plugs, directional signs, mail collection boxes, refuse bins, and other curbside objects.

Collectively, however, these often-clustered collections of utilitarian devices may make or break the appearance of the streetscape. Unfortunately, many are ugly.

It thus comes as a particularly happy surprise that the Chicago Transit Authority's new bus stop shelters are almost visually impeccable.

Their chief esthetic virtue is that transparent plastic sides and a simple, dark bronze aluminum framing system make them neutral, self-effacing, and compatible with any neighborhood setting.

Functionally, they come off well, although it is too early to predict their durability. The shelters' slightly domed, translucent roofs assure proper water runoff and protection from sun glare.

I have heard only one criticism from fellow CTA riders, who complain that cold winds sometimes whip in because the shelters' sides stop 6 inches above ground. The gap is deliberate, however, and prevents interior pileups of wind-blown litter. One also might quibble that the side panels are perpetually rain- and dust-streaked, but at a distance of more than a few feet, the soiling cannot be seen—and the security advantages of transparency are obvious.

The CTA was meticulous in writing 2,000 words of specifications before putting the shelter out for bids. Prefabricated units were purchased from the Columbia Equipment Co., Inc., of Jamaica, N.Y., whose architect-presi-



Tribune Photo by Walter Kale

Bus stop shelter: Visually impeccable.

dent, Arthur Cohen, did the designing.

This success is no small thing when one considers that 100 shelters have been built since last October and that hundreds more will be erected [there are 13,400 bus stops in Chicago].

It is indeed, a triumph when one realizes that a poor design would have spread a visual plague across the entire city. The CTA has built a lot of ugly things in the past, and some of the experimental shelters put up in recent years were patently hideous.

The lessons are clear: No structure is too small to deserve the best possible design, and when a prototype is to be duplicated hundreds of times, the stakes are big. Mass-produced ugliness is still one of the greatest curses of our age.

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