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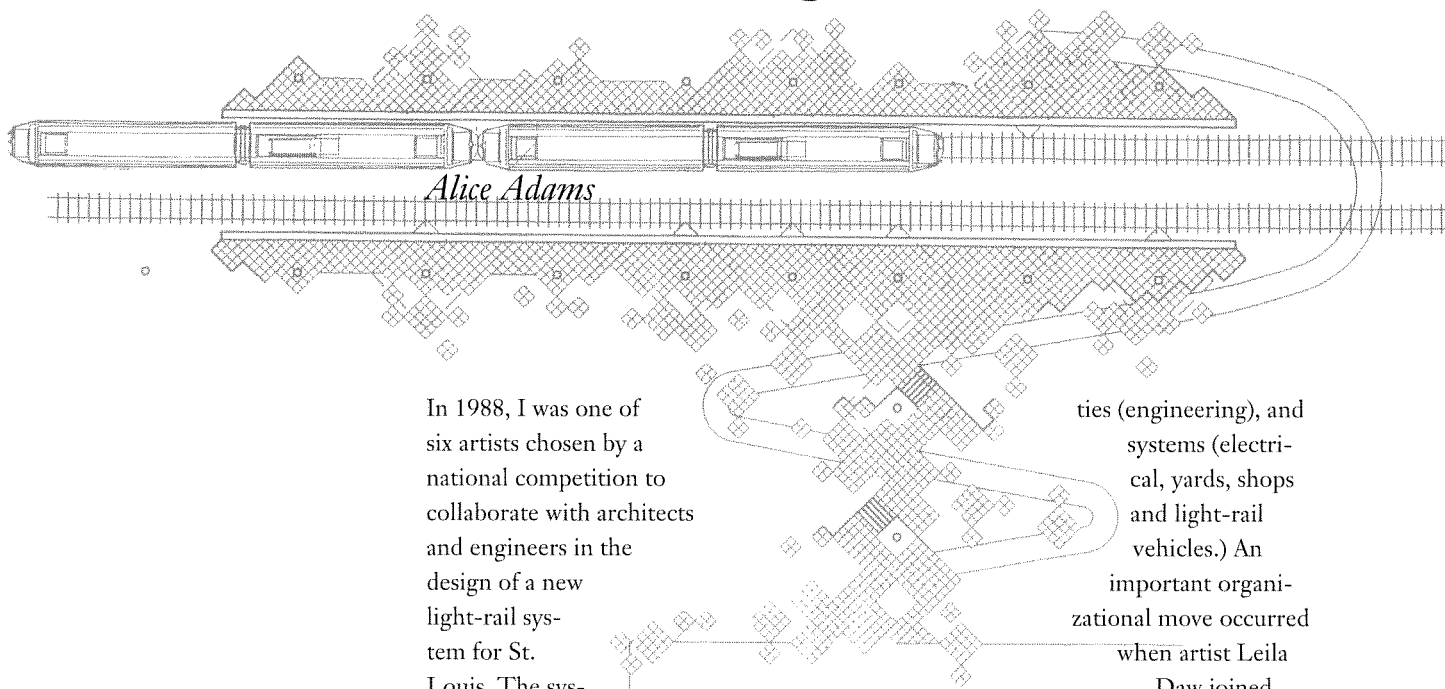
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St. Louis MetroLink: Changing the Rules of Transit Design



In 1988, I was one of six artists chosen by a national competition to collaborate with architects and engineers in the design of a new light-rail system for St. Louis. The system, called MetroLink, follows an eighteen mile, east-west route from East St. Louis (Illinois) through the St. Louis central business district to Lambert International Airport.

MetroLink planners felt artists might be able to improve the character of the built elements and spaces and to add a positive image to the transit environment. But the budget had no specific allocations for art projects, and no guidelines existed for our involvement; we had to invent our own. Moreover, preliminary engineering documents had been completed by the time we were appointed.¹ We decided to approach the entire system as a work of art — to infuse familiar forms of columns, walls, ceilings, platforms, stairways and landscapes with special qualities and references.

To facilitate our overall approach two artists each were assigned to the three system areas: architecture, facili-

ties (engineering), and systems (electrical, yards, shops and light-rail vehicles.) An important organizational move occurred when artist Leila Daw joined artist program coordinator Ann

Ruwich on the overall project management team.

The most successful collaborations occurred in the large infrastructure elements that had to be designed, bid and built first. For example, we helped redesign standard “T”-shaped bridge piers into graceful “Y” forms. This particular shape makes these supports for the trackbed varied and dramatic in their march across uneven terrain.

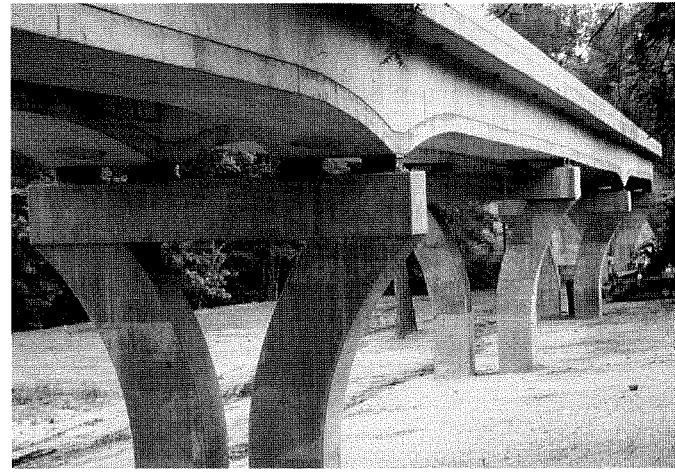
We rethought the proposed Band-Aid-shaped platforms. Our early drawings show platform edges opposite the tracks breaking into areas that merge with the surrounding site to allow waiting areas and overviews. This idea did not survive but might have made passengers feel safer when approaching the stations and waiting for the trains.

Although we were able to do little with the platforms and their sites, a simple and eloquent canopy for out-of-door stations emerged from a com-

Landscape proposal for station platform and surrounding landscape. By Alice Adams and Mark Randale. Courtesy Alice Adams.



Delmar Station shortly after opening. Courtesy Alice Adams.



MetroLink bridge piers and superstructure. Courtesy Bi-State Development Agency.

bination of artist ideas with later design work by Tod Williams and Kennedy Associates, an architecture firm. The sculptural character of this canopy is apparent in the concrete columns (cam-shaped in section) that support double pipe beams and rippled canopies that resemble the skeleton of a river creature.

We also worked with the architects to reshape the two underground stations. Original plans called for box-shaped spaces with columns along the platforms; the finished stations are free of columns and enclosed by curved ceilings and battered walls. In one station, the light-rail line threads through the opening of an old railroad tunnel, whose walls project into the station.

We left other reminders of the past to enrich the present: The LaCledé's Landing Station incorporates old brick walls whose arched windows were opened to allow views of the Gateway

Arch and the Mississippi River; stone columns have been left standing at the Delmar Station.

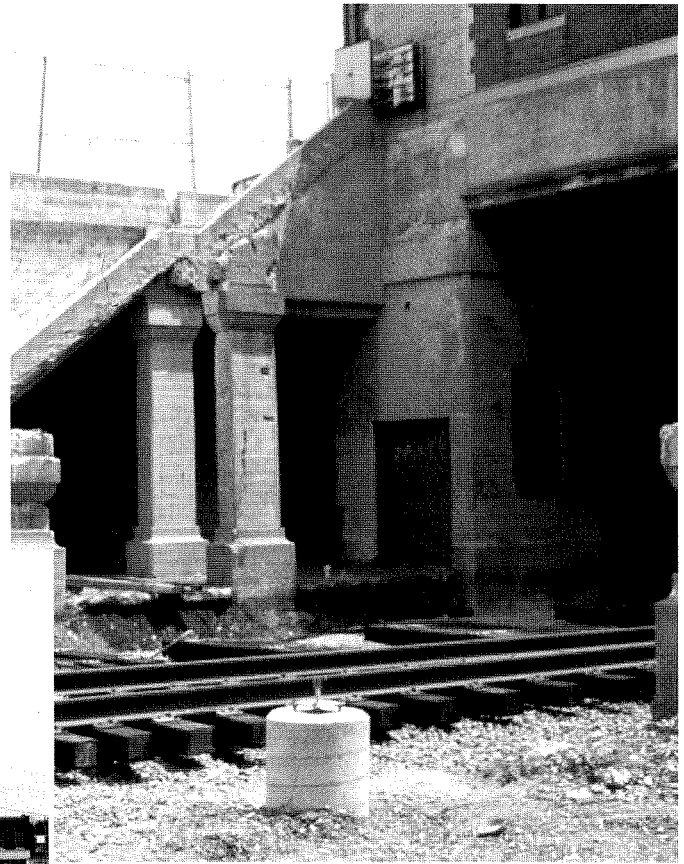
We placed the signal bungalows near seven of the stations on concrete pedestals surrounded by open steel frameworks painted blue, making visible these important yet often anonymous off-the-shelf electrical buildings. We gave the yards and shops buildings, interior viewing platforms so that the workings of the system not usually seen could be open to the public.

From the beginning we had worked with the project architects on landscape plans that included terracing, sweeping prairie planting, tree-lined approach roads and parking lots that responded to the terrain and placement of the station platforms. The parking lot designs, however, fell prey to budget cutting and typical asphalt plots were built.²

In the final stage of design documentation, when most of us artists had gone home, a number of elements that we thought would be included did not appear. We were never certain whether this was because of management resistance or overall budget cutting. For example, at 60 percent design the Forest Park Station had curving walks and stairways reminiscent of the architecture of the St. Louis Exposition (which had been held in Forest Park). The artists and architects both wanted this design but had to replace it with prosaic standard stairways and paths. This was an example of design from the architecture group being obliterated by the budget cutting of another group; in this case, the civil engineers of the firm responsible for the Forest Park station infrastructure.

The necessity of making the system earthquake proof increased the cost late in the design process and deflected

Left: East St. Louis Station canopy structure before sheathing. Courtesy Alice Adams.
Above: Historic architectural remnants incorporated into design of Delmar station at the recommendation of the artist team. Courtesy Alice Adams.



funds from elements that were last to be bid, such as station finishes. It also turned out that during the construction bid phase contractors were given the discretion to submit alternatives to the final design and profit from budget cuts they could make. In this process retaining walls along the right-of-way that had been selected and coordinated by the artists were replaced by versions that we had rejected.

The St. Louis design process confronted the rigid programs of contemporary engineering and transit system planning with the creative traditions of twentieth century site sculpture and community-oriented design. We made sure that when the question “How will it work?” arose it had to be confronted simultaneously with the question “What will it look like?”

Many of our ideas fell by the wayside in the final project stages yet the scope of our thought and research exists in our drawings and notes and is available from the Bi-State Development Agency.

When Metrolink opened in July, 1993, the Mississippi River had risen to within seven inches of the highest flood wall and threatened downtown St. Louis. Nevertheless, thousands of people who had probably never stood next to one another crowded the platforms to ride the trains and to celebrate at the stations along the route. As artists we had communicated with these passengers in shaping the paths and spaces that they were to travel every day. That was our intention and in St. Louis we had only just begun to change the rules.

Notes

1. The artist team (consisting of Alice Adams, Gary Burnley, Leila Daw, Michael Jantzen, Anna Valentina Murch and Jody Pinto) was chosen by the Bi-State Development Agency. The East-West Gateway Coordinating Council and Citizens for Modern Transit were local groups who initially recommended employing artists on the project.

2. After final design additional funding became available, and the artists and Austin Tao, a landscape architect, presented a landscape master plan that incorporated earlier design team work. Some of that work has started, including a prairie planting along route I-70 and a lighted, colored-glass passageway at the Central West End Station tunnel.