

All Aboard: Planning for Diversity at Chicago's Union Station

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Planners in the United States have historically prioritized car infrastructure over public transportation¹. Consequently, our built environment reinforces hierarchies that privilege the wealthy, white, and car-owning at the expense of others and contributes to our current climate crisis². Planners must shift focus toward public transportation to foster urban resilience. In addition to expanding train infrastructure around the country, planners should also update existing transit infrastructure. This paper employs a case study of Chicago's Union Station, grounded in theories of urban space envisioned by Jane Jacobs, to provide recommendations for planning train stations to effectively cater to the diverse needs of our communities. Based on my research, I suggest planners enhance the signage, material amenities, and dining options within Union Station.

When researching for this report I employed mixed methods. During my site visit, I utilized ethnographic observations. I recorded my observations of the space over a few hours. In total, I spoke with 7 people and captured 36 photographs. Post-visit, I completed supplemental research from various primary and secondary sources to inform the context of my recommendations. As the most populated city in the Midwest, Chicago is a pivotal location in the American transportation network³. Union Station, the intercity and commuter rail terminal of Chicago, is the most visited train station in the country, outside of New York City⁴. Union Station is a quasi-public space owned by Amtrak, a federally chartered corporation. In other words, Amtrak is a for-profit company, in which the federal government is the majority stockholder, and the U.S. President appoints its Board of Directors⁵.

Union Station's greatest strengths are its central location, grand architecture, and open layout. It is located at 225 S Canal St in Chicago, IL, just west of the Chicago River in the downtown area (see Figure 1: *Map of Chicago Downtown*). From Union Station, passengers can take an Amtrak or Metra train, or they can transfer to Chicago Transit Authority trains or

¹ Filion, "Enduring".

² Perez, "Invisible".

³ Wikipedia, "List of Midwestern metropolitan areas".

⁴ Wikipedia, "List of busiest railway stations".

⁵ Amtrak, "FY 2022".

Greyhound buses⁶. The Great Hall is the largest space within Union Station and the space in which visitors spend the majority of their time. It is visible from above upon arrival and greets visitors with a view of visual grandeur (see Figure 2: *The Great Hall Nov. 2023*). The Coffered ceiling is lined by Corinthian columns, and hundreds of visitors dot the premises during main hours of operation. Jane Jacob's theory of eyes on the street explains the connection between the presence of many people watching and safety⁷. Jacob's theory posits that formal surveillance is not necessary to create a sense of safety on sidewalks, and rather the presence of people and windows facing the street contribute to promoting overall safety through the sense of being seen. While not a sidewalk space, the Great Hall provides safety through eyes on the street in a similar way. Rather than small individual spaces, having most visitors all located within one large space creates a sense of security among the crowd. None of the visitors that I interviewed noted safety as a concern that they had.

Rather, comprehensibility was the main problem with Union Station noted by those that I interviewed. For instance, Filipe shared that he had to ask staff to help with where to go, even though he had been to Union Station before. One major factor that contributes to confusion around where to go for a specific train is a lack of signage and a lack of supplemental information on existing signage. The exterior of Union Station consists of a large stone building. From across the street, the lit up 'Union Station' sign is visible, but once you get closer no signs are visible from street level views. Each exterior door was marked with a decal reading "Amtrak Welcomes You to Chicago Union Station Hours: 5:00am - 1:00am Daily," but once entering, there are only a few signs visible in the Great Hall. The two primary signs visible from the Great Hall area are one temporary sign noting "Amtrak Ticketing" for those who did not already purchase tickets online and the "TO ALL TRAINS" sign above the walkway on the eastern side of the hall (see Figure 3: *Interior Signs*). Future improvements to Union Station should include a focus on clarifying the experience for visitors.

Within my recommendations for improvements, I aim to use the theoretical framework of Jacobs to center diversity-oriented planning, rather than traditional large-scale development approaches. Jacobs rejects traditional principles of city planning, where people get "pushed about, expropriated, and uprooted much as if they were the subjects of a conquering power"⁸.

⁶ Chicago Union Station, "Travel".

⁷ Jacobs, *The Death*, p. 36.

⁸ Jacobs, *The Death*, p. 5.

Rather, she upholds the value of planning for “close-grained diversity of uses that give each other constant mutual support both economically and socially”⁹. My recommendation for planning for diversity at Chicago's Union Station surround three main components: enhanced signage, supplemental material amenities, and transitioning to local dining options.

Enhanced signage aimed at addressing comprehensibility must also be tailored to improve the station's overall accessibility and inclusivity. Jacobs emphasizes the inherent diversity that is natural in big cities¹⁰. In Chicago one way diversity manifests is through variations of languages. About 30% of residents speak a language other than English at home, with Spanish speaking being the most common¹¹. Updating all signage and announcements in the station to also be in Spanish is an important step to making the station more inclusive and understandable for Chicago residents and international visitors. Moreover, planners should consider adding digital touchscreen kiosks in the highest traffic areas of the station, so that residents can type in their train number for instructions and updates. These kiosks should include a changeable language setting. Such a resource would provide major points for clarity to improve all guest experiences and reduce stress. TransPennine Express in Scotland has implemented this technology to meet the needs of their passengers who speak different languages¹². Similar technology should be considered.

In Jacobs’ writing on the generators of diversity in cities, she notes that people “contain so many different tastes, skills, needs, supplies, and bees in their bonnets”¹³. To meet a diversity of physical needs, I also recommend that planners implement supplemental material amenities to meet the needs of diverse residents, including adding gender-neutral bathrooms, tactile pavement lines, and varied seating options. About 5% of generation Z identifies as trans or nonbinary¹⁴. To make trains more desirable for future generations, inclusive bathrooms at train stations are a basic and attainable change. Waterloo Station in Belgium is currently leading the way in this area as they plan to add gender neutral toilets this year¹⁵. Additionally, I suggest adding tactile pavement around and within the station to better accommodate visually impaired visitors. The sidewalk around the building could include raised tactile lines that guide visitors who use

⁹ Jacobs, *The Death*, p. 14.

¹⁰ Jacobs, *The Death*, p. 143.

¹¹ Acutrans, Inc, “The Many Languages”.

¹² Russell Publishing Limited, “TransPennine”.

¹³ Jacobs, *The Death*, p. 147

¹⁴ Twenge, “How Gen Z Changed”.

¹⁵ Sims, “Waterloo”.

walking sticks into the entrance with the most accessibility accommodations. Raised tactile lines within the space could also be used to point guests toward the ticket purchase area or an area with staff support. Alternative types of seating would also be beneficial. Currently, the station only offers large wooden benches. Incorporating at least one more type of seating option based on suggestions from differently abled populations would further promote accessibility. To be more accessible to older adults, having varied seat heights would be especially important¹⁶. These material updates are far from exhaustive, and collaborations with diverse stakeholders would be integral to continuing to update the station to meet more diverse needs.

The current dining options in Union Station are chain restaurants, including McDonalds, Starbucks, and Chick-fil-a. I recommend that Union Station transitions to local dining options that reflect the cultural variety of Chicago, use local goods, and finance local economies. Transitioning to local dining options would offer visitors a more authentic taste of Chicago's diverse culinary scene, providing a unique and culturally rich dining experience. By sourcing local produce, Union Station can potentially contribute to sustainability efforts while supporting regional farmers and businesses, fostering a stronger connection to the community. More specific research would be needed to determine the sustainability of specific product sourcing, but overall, this shift enhances the overall appeal of Union Station and plays a pivotal role in boosting the local economy. Such a change can promote a sense of pride among residents and visitors alike. The current dining options also reflect Jacobs' warnings of the self-destruction of diversity. Jacobs states "whichever one or few uses have emerged as the most profitable in the locality will be repeated and repeated, overcrowding out and overwhelming less profitable forms of use"¹⁷. While Jacobs' theory primarily applies to use types of spaces, it can also be applied to understand the way that large corporation-owned restaurants become a dominant presence in Union Station and Chicago's downtown more broadly. Paired with enhanced signage and supplemental amenities, transitioning to local dining options would ensure that Union Station follows through on a commitment to planning for diversity.

Union Station already boasts success in its location, layout, and architecture. My recommended changes aim to improve comprehensibility, accessibility, and inclusivity, aligning with Jane Jacobs' principles of diversity-oriented planning. Overall, these practical and

¹⁶ Coman, et al, "Impact of public seating".

¹⁷ Jacobs, *The Death*, p. 243.

achievable recommendations can transform Union Station into a more welcoming and resilient urban space that can lead the way for successful train infrastructure in the United States.

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Figures

Figure 1: *Map of Chicago Downtown*

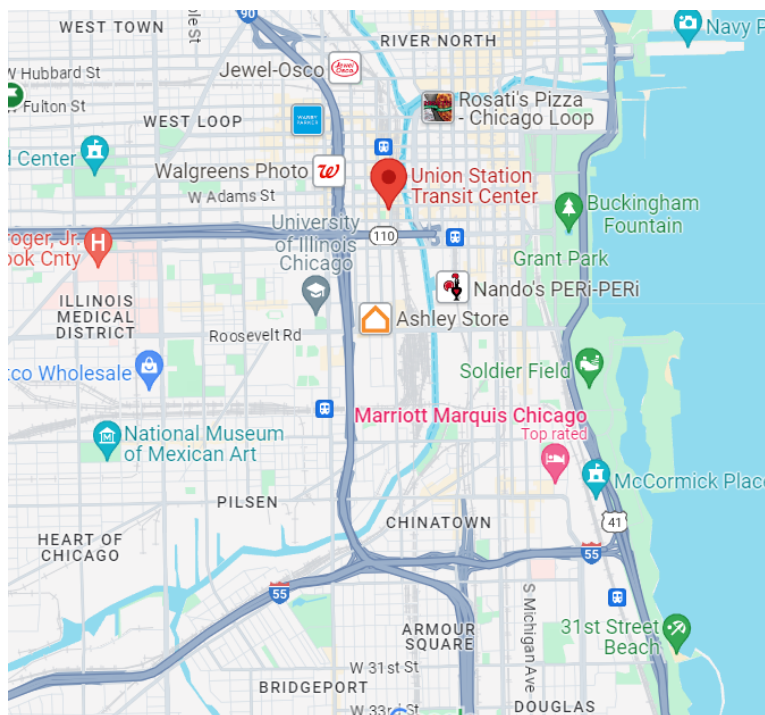


Figure 2: *The Great Hall Nov. 2023*



Figure 3: *Interior Signs*

