

# At DART stations, I travel through time

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Opinion

## Public art at light rail stations, though overlooked, documents our changing city.



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The sunflower clock at Pearl/Arts District station during a tour of public art in downtown Dallas on Sept. 23, 2023. (Anja Schlein)

I've now spent six months car-free in Dallas, and riding DART light rail nearly every day has taught me more about the city than blindly following directions on Google Maps ever could have. As I gradually memorized station names and watched landscapes and street signs whiz by, a map of the city's neighborhoods was coming to life in my mind.

Using public transportation has helped me understand the geographical contours of this city, but it's also helped me understand Dallas' history.

One summer day, a few weeks into my time here, my train emerged from the Cityplace tunnel, into the light of downtown Dallas. I gazed lazily out of the window and did a double take when I saw huge copper sunflowers blooming out of the pavement between the tracks at Pearl/Arts District station. I had taken countless rides through this station, but I'd missed this artwork hiding in plain sight, distracted by the Plaza of the Americas and the old Dallas High School buildings. The sculpture lets riders know what time it is — its petals crown seven analog clock faces and the rims of the clocks glow when night falls.

This whimsical timepiece and other artworks at stations are like Salvador Dalí's melting clocks — they are Dallas' persistent memories. At DART light rail stations, the city's very own open air museums, poetry, bronze sculptures and murals house the history of the Dallas' railroads, changing neighborhoods and its lovers.

## **A changing downtown**

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In the 1990s, when DART was first building the light rail system, Brad Goldberg was enlisted as design artist for the four stations downtown. Goldberg told me that the design team used materials seen in the architecture of the neighborhoods near the stations for the columns and paving of the stations. That's why West End station has striking red brick columns and Victorian street lights to match the rest of the historic district. In addition to basic finishes, DART put aside money to commission artists, like Michael Brown, the Californian sculptor who made the sunflower clock and two others for different stations.



Allan Zreet shows a detail of a 3D station map to Kay Shelton (left) during a tour of public art in downtown Dallas on Saturday, Sept. 23, 2023. (Anja Schlein)

In addition to the interesting clocks, my favorite thing about the four stations downtown are the bronze map sculptures that Goldberg made. The sculptures show buildings that are a 10-minute walk from the station in three dimensions, while the rest of the map is flat.

“I wanted it to be a conversation starter but also a practical tool for wayfinding,” Goldberg said. These maps are tangible snapshots of what downtown looked like in the 1990s and whenever I look at them and see what buildings are missing, I’m fascinated by how much Dallas has changed even in the last 30-odd years.

## Carrying on the legacy of rail

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DART gave Dallas’ history with railroads a nod in its station art downtown. A granite slab between West End and Akard station proclaims, “The architecture of a city becomes both its language and its memory” and memorializes the passenger depot of Texas & Pacific Railroad that was originally located here in the late 1800s. Less than 100 years later, DART resurrected rail along Pacific Avenue.

Just one train stop away is Eddie Bernice Johnson Union station where, in 1921, all rail traffic was consolidated. Now the station plays a similar role, receiving Amtrak, Trinity Railway Express and DART trains. Freight trains run through the station as well. EBJ/Union features “drumheads,” circular plates with the colorful logos of old passenger trains from a time when “Frisco” referred to the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway, not the Collin County boomtown. Without these displays, I would never have thought of Dallas as a thriving center for railroads and streetcars, considering its tangle of freeways and car-centric design today.

## **A city for poets and romantics**

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As a newcomer, it’s easy to write off Dallas as a city of Fortune 500 companies and no artistic soul. But at Lovers Lane station, along DART’s Orange and Red lines that hug U.S. 75, I discovered one man’s affair with poetry. The station’s windscreens are adorned with colorful typography of verses by the late Robert Trammell, a freelance poet who cultivated a literary community in the city. Trammell’s words conjure up images of a Dallas in years gone by, when Lovers Lane was just outside city limits, an area lined with bois d’arc trees where couples would rendezvous.

His poem, “YOU ARE HERE” is a clever nod to waiting riders and a recognition that they are a part of how the neighborhood around the station changed. Trammell writes,

“YOU ARE HERE

On the banks of the Expressway

YOU ARE HERE

& smell the memory of a freshly plowed field.

THERE,

Blocked from sight now you could see the Flying Red Horse as the lovers did.”

The words make you think about a time when the highway was new, before DART tracks were put in and buildings sprung up all around, when you could see the red pegasus on top of the Magnolia Hotel even though it’s all the way downtown.

Even a manhole cover at the station is engraved with the phrase, “Loves me, Loves me not,” as if the design of the whole station is winking at you, inviting you to decipher veiled meanings and playful puns.

## **The perception problem**

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If all you ever hear about Dallas Area Rapid Transit are the headlines about the agency's inefficient service and homelessness on its trains, this whole piece may seem a bit surprising and maybe myopic.

In 1996, when the light rail system opened, David Dillon, *The Dallas Morning News*' erstwhile architecture critic, wrote: "Design is only one aspect of light rail ... but indispensable to wooing a public that believes transit is dirty and dangerous. ... In this context, good design serves an evangelical purpose; it can raise hopes and make converts."

Even 27 years on, negative perceptions of public transit in the United States, especially in Dallas, haven't changed. We cannot ignore the fact that DART trains are sometimes a refuge for those who have nowhere else to go. But in my own experience being a regular rider for the last six months, the agency's new transit security officers have been effective and the police chief's plan to reach out to vulnerable passengers is promising. Severe safety issues on trains are rare.

Increasing ridership is the only way to make public transit more inviting — busy trains police themselves. So this is me hoping that good design does make converts. If you live in Dallas and haven't taken a ride on the light rail in a while, go explore some of the station art I wrote about. It's the best time machine I've found.

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