

Alexander Shu
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What's in a Name: Salesforce Transit Center

Introduction

Although the subject of this paper is the name of the Salesforce Transit Center, I hope to paint a more complete picture of my thoughts on the subject by telling a history of the project and its predecessor, the Transbay Terminal. I hope to tell of how the terminal has historically been underwhelming as a public space, and how the new incarnation should not repeat the same mistakes, nor should it sell out its naming rights to corporations who will strip it of its community fostering identity and purpose.

Prologue

It's 1939 in San Francisco, California. The Great Depression has been in full swing for nearly a decade now. War is brewing in far-off Europe, but the United States has yet to get involved, still pursuing its policy of isolationism. Here on the West Coast, the City by the Bay is just starting to form its identity as we know it today. The TransAmerica Pyramid skyscraper may still be several decades away from making its mark on the San Francisco skyline, but the Golden Gate Bridge and Coit Tower have just been built a few years ago and are already establishing themselves as icons of the city, which they will continue to be well into the future.

San Francisco's most recent big project, however, is somewhat less glitzy: a transportation complex has recently been opened. For now it is a train station serving as the terminus for passenger trains operated by private railroad companies, but in the decades to come it will transform into a massive bus depot serving transportation agencies across the bay. The

physical building itself reflects its utilitarian purpose: it is a rather drab looking rectangular complex, distinctly devoid of any color or non-right angles. The name of this building stays in line with this theme as well: for the better part of the next century it will be known as “The Transbay Terminal.” It would be a challenge to come up with a more literal and uninspired title, and yet time will tell that it could arguably be worse.

Drab Transit

Transit stations with uninspired names are no rarity in the United States: according to Wikipedia there are at least 140 depots named some variation of “Union Station” alone (n.d.). To some this might not represent a problem. Why not provide a purely functional building with an equally functional name? This attitude can be seen elsewhere in the sector; the romanticization of anything having to do with public transportation in general is a rarity in this country where car centric culture is king. Most of our trains sport understated liveries, choosing to instead unashamedly show off the bare steel used in their construction. In the handful of U.S. cities that have subway systems, the stations are equally bare, with low ceilings and monochromatic interior designs. The only splashes of color one will typically encounter during a commute via American public transit come from the advertisements adorning most large uninterrupted surfaces, exemplifying transit agencies’ desperation for supplemental funds in light of budget cuts over the decades.

Contrast this with other countries: travel to cities with expansive transit systems in Europe, Asia, and Latin America (yes, the global south is home to many impressive transit

oriented developments!) and one will find colorful buses and trains, and breathtakingly grand stations that show off local architectural prowess. These buildings become destinations in and of themselves, rather than unmemorable steps in the journey from point A to B. A timeless example is King's Cross Station in London. The restored train station is held in high cultural regard, being the subject of a Pet Shop Boys song as well as the setting of a fictional young wizard's first taste of a magical world awaiting. Its grand name and grand architecture reflect its grand purpose: serving as a hub for tens of millions of London's rail travelers each year (Rail Statistics, n.d.).

I challenge anyone to find any songs written about the San Francisco Transbay Terminal. After its initial construction, it dutifully served its purpose as a regional rail station for the San Francisco Bay Area until the 1950s, when it was reconfigured to be a bus depot. Steel rails were replaced with concrete, and the building continued to serve a busy public until the 1970s, when the sleek Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system began operation, offering commuters a faster space-age means of crossing the bay. For a building whose entire identity was solely a reflection of its usefulness, declining ridership left the complex with next to nothing. As the number of commuters traveling through its halls waned, some of the terminal's businesses began boarding up their windows and moving out. The resulting sudden increase in vacancies attracted much of the city's unhoused population, further scaring many potential commuters away (Fagan, 2011). The Transbay Terminal's physical integrity was challenged by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, which resulted in most of the remaining businesses leaving as the building had to be repaired and brought up to modern safety codes.

Towards the end of the terminal's life, it was being described by San Francisco Chronicle writer Michael Cabanatuan as "dingy, dusty and drafty" and "something to be hurried through or, at best, endured" (2010). Throughout its existence the old Transbay Terminal was so

unmemorable that many San Francisco residents hardly noticed when it was demolished in 2011. Wait, so if it was demolished, why are we even talking about it? Well the purpose of the demolition was to clear land for the terminal's spiritual successor...

New Beginnings

The aforementioned earthquake was the final nail in the coffin for the old Transbay Terminal. Once the extent of the structural damage was realized, plans for a complete replacement, and voters approved funding 10 years after the earthquake first shook the bay. Construction for the new terminal broke ground shortly after the demolition of the old terminal began in 2010. While demolition would continue into 2011, aboveground work on the new complex did not commence until 2014, and full service would not begin until 2018 (King, 2015). In the interim, the project continued to be referred to as the "Transbay Transit Center," and bus services were rerouted to the aptly named "Temporary Transbay Terminal."

While the perpetuation of pragmatic naming schemes did not garner much attention, it soon became clear that the new terminal would be nothing like its predecessor. The new structure has an organic flowing outer shell, interrupting the hard and straight lines of its neighboring downtown buildings. Perhaps most notably, the roof of the new transit center features a full park complete with trees, gardens, walking paths, and water features: a welcome addition of green space to the otherwise gloomy and gray financial district.

Through the lens of transit, the new depot makes vast improvements over its predecessor. Numbered bus bays feature digital signage with real-time arrival information, for example. However the improvements the new development makes to the surrounding community are not strictly limited to its role as a bus terminal. The depot's attractive and futuristic design has

already made it a “community magnet,” with the rooftop park alone making for a comfortable public place to eat, exercise, or simply relax (Baldassari, 2018). People working in the surrounding office buildings can enjoy the sprawling complex on their lunch breaks by grabbing a coffee or a bite to eat from the rooftop restaurant, or simply by walking a refreshing lap around the park.

Back to Names

With such a drastic transformation should come a complete rebranding, right? The scrapping of the original name “Transbay Terminal” in favor of “Transbay Transit Center” makes sense: While “transit center” is perhaps equally mundane, dropping the word “terminal” is smart, as the word has numerous negative connotations, such as thoughts of crowded and unpleasant airport terminals or perhaps even terminal diseases. However, I believe that the rebranding could be more drastic.

One might imagine my disappointment, then, when it was revealed that the “Transbay Transit Center” would be renamed the “Salesforce Transit Center” upon its completion. To be clear, Salesforce (a software company offering enterprise cloud-based services) did not buy the building, nor did it fund its construction. The depot itself remains in the ownership of the government and by extension the public, and its construction was likewise funded through taxes (San Francisco County Transportation Authority, 2013). Rather, Salesforce paid the governing Transbay Joint Powers Authority (TJPA) a cool \$110 million in exchange for 25 years of naming rights (Brinklow, 2019).

On the surface, this seems like a win/win transaction: the TJPA receives a not-insignificant amount of funding to operate the expensive transit center, and Salesforce gets a

massive amount of publicity. However from a more spiritual and legacy oriented perspective, having such a consequential addition to the city be named after a faceless software company is somewhat troubling. The role that Salesforce played (or rather lack thereof) in the depot's construction may get lost in the public consciousness, lending too much credit to private entities regarding successful community development projects, while the contributions of the numerous hard workers at various collaborating transit agencies will lie unappreciated .

While the current naming rights contract will likely not be voided, it is worth looking further into the future with high hopes for a better name for the transit center. The deal with Salesforce is set to expire around 2043 (Brekke, 2018). Most would expect either a renewal of the deal, or a new company to buy the next several years of naming rights (similar to how the Sears Tower in Chicago was renamed to the Willis Tower). However, one could instead hope that by then, public funding for these sorts of developments will be plentiful enough that there will no longer be a need for selling naming rights to private entities. A return to calling it the "Transbay Transit Center" would not necessarily be unwelcome, but I believe we can do even better, perhaps with a lasting commemorative name.

The U.S. is no stranger to commemoration via the naming of public infrastructure, such as libraries, airports, and even freeways. Perhaps by 2043, public transit will be held in higher regard, and we can name the transit center after someone great, both honoring them as well as lending a more iconic title to an otherwise already great development.

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