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Soccer, Shopping, Dining: Mass Transit Stations Aren't Just for Travel Anymore



It used to be that the local transit station was the place you went to get somewhere else. But these days, increasingly, transit hubs are turning into destinations in their own right.

In Atlanta, for example, empty space around two MARTA stations has been [converted into community soccer fields](#) where teams of local kids get to play for free, in addition to hosting adult amateurs who pay to compete there. In Montgomery County, Maryland, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority teamed up with an area real estate developer in summer 2017 to experiment with [pop-up flower, clothing and food shops](#) set up in old railcars at a station. In Miami, a transit station is being expanded to include a common area that will serve as a future venue for yoga classes, food trucks and a farmers market, and to anchor a retail, office and residential complex. And in [San Diego](#), the local Metropolitan Transit System is looking to turn under-utilized parking areas at local transit stops into affordable housing.

It's all part of a growing movement to transform transit stations into places that can host a wide range of activities and fill numerous needs for local residents, in addition to helping them get to where they need to go.

"I think we can say that transit hubs are now community hubs," explains [Darnell Grisby](#), director of policy development and research for the [American Public Transportation Association](#).

One thing that's driving the evolution, according to Grisby, is that transportation itself is changing. In addition to serving as stops for buses and [trains](#), transit hubs also increasingly offer bike lockers and scooter rentals, or serve as the terminus for pedestrian pathways. Users often make use of these other transportation modes, as well as ride services such as Uber, to cover the so-called last-first mile between transit stops and their homes or workplaces. That mix is bringing residents — particularly millennials with an aversion to cars — together in a new way.

"We're seeing a lot of different types of innovation at these hubs," Grisby says. That spirit is encouraging communities to take advantage of the stations and unused space around them to meet other local needs.

The idea of a transit hub serving as a community gathering place isn't entirely new. In Washington, D.C., massive [Union Station](#), an early 20th-century Beaux-Arts architectural masterpiece that fell into ruin [before being renovated in the 1980s](#), has long been a place where people came to dine at restaurants, shop in clothing stores or see movies. But increasingly, it's also become a nexus for the fast-growing, trendy [NoMa](#) neighborhood nearby. "Union Station provides a great place for people to

go and do some shopping and grab a meal, and not necessarily ever step on a train," explains [Barbara Anne Spignardo](#), a Washington-based real estate attorney. More restaurants have sprung up in the neighborhood nearby, she says.

Atlanta

In Atlanta, [Soccer in the Streets](#), an Atlanta-based nonprofit, convinced the local transit authority to join forces to create soccer fields that local residents could access via the transit system. "I had been to the U.K. on a visit, and I saw kids on the trains in soccer gear," explains Sanjay Patel, director of strategic projects for Soccer in the Streets. "They don't have spaces there for fields next to the stations like we do, because they hadn't built parking lots — in Europe, you basically walk to the station. But here, we've got spaces that are unused."

Patel says that Soccer in the Streets plans to open eight more soccer fields in Atlanta, including three in 2019, and has had inquiries from other cities interested in emulating the concept. But as he explains, the soccer fields are just the first phase. The organization aims to build learning centers alongside the fields, where the young athletes can also learn job and life skills. Eventually, the spaces will include community gardens as well.

Miami

In Miami, a transit station is being expanded to serve as the anchor for [Link at Douglas](#), a planned mixed-use complex that will include 1,500 residential units, over 280,000 square feet (26,013 square meters) of office space, and 68,000 square feet (6,317 square meters) of retail. The developers plan to spend \$20 million on the renovation, which includes reconfiguring the walls to create space for other uses outside the station, according to [Aaron Stolear](#), an associate vice-president at [13th Floor Investments](#), which is partnering with the Adler Group to develop the project.

Stolear says the additional 60,000 feet (18,288 meters) of public space will be available for a range of different uses at different times, from pop-up retail, food trucks and a [farmer's market](#) to space for yoga classes.

"It's valuable land that's being under-utilized," Stolear says.

San Diego

In San Diego, the transit system is now looking to attract developers to build homes on 57 acres (23 hectares) of land around bus and trolley stops, which mostly is taken up by under-utilized parking lots. A [recent report](#) by Circulate San Diego, a community group, says that space could be filled with 8,000 new homes, including 3,000 for low-income residents.

"Repurposing empty parking lots near transit into homes is a win-win-win," [Colin Parent](#), Circulate San Diego's executive director and general counsel, explains in an email. "First, more housing, especially for low income families, helps address our region's housing affordability crunch. Second, allowing more people to live and work near transit reduces car trips, which is key to achieving greenhouse gas reduction. Finally, putting under-utilized lands to higher and better uses has a big economic development impact, creating jobs and growth."