

Cornish College of the Arts

Finding Comfort in Liminality:
Bainbridge Island Ferry Terminal Redesign

Elizabeth Klusmeyer

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Nickolas Robertson and Ozge Sade Mete

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My senior capstone project is a redesign of the ferry terminal located in nearby Bainbridge Island, WA. With this design, I am particularly interested in exploring the ways humans can find comfort within the uncertainty of liminality in transitional spaces like terminals. As my final project at Cornish, this terminal also acts fittingly as a transition to my life post-graduation. My approach is to view this project as a love letter to Washington state, paying homage to a place that has given me so much through every stage of my life.

As a child, some of my happiest memories are of taking the Bainbridge Island Ferry to Seattle with my family to go to the aquarium or the zoo. Yet, I always remember the adventure beginning on the ferry itself, not in the terminal. I actually have very few significant memories of the terminal as my experience of it has blurred with my experience of the ferry. There was never a transitional marker between getting out of the car and boarding the ferry. Without this transition, there was no chance to appreciate the moment before the journey started, the moment to build anticipation. There is a missed opportunity here in creating a transitional space that is enjoyable and unique from the rest of the journey.

I began my research by looking at what appeared to be the opposite of this terminal, stations of the past. In Jean Dethier's book, *All Stations*, he states that "as much from the town-planning as from the psychological point of view, the station became a new entrance to the city, taking the place of the gates in old city walls." As such, the designs of these stations were monumental, heralding the progress of the industrial revolution. The interiors, with their high ceilings to dissipate railway steam, often mirrored those of ancient cathedrals. In comparison to the Bainbridge Island ferry terminal, these terminals of the past appear to fully understand their value as a distinct experience separate from that of the journey. In fact, it can be argued that these stations were intended to be destinations in and of themselves. This concept is vastly different from the current design of the

Bainbridge Island Ferry Terminal, which is built to move people from one place to another as quickly as possible without regard for the importance of this transitional space as a separate moment.

In modern times, a similar trend can be seen with the airport-isation of stations. According to Hugh Schofield's article, "Gare Du Nord: Why Europe's busiest station needs a makeover fast," airport-isation is what occurs when stations begin providing other amenities in addition to travel. The name airport-isation comes from the trend of filling airports with restaurants and stores in an effort to make the experience of travel more enjoyable. Yet, even with these extra amenities, research has shown that even the most luxurious airports are still seen by passengers primarily as a travelling space. They would not choose to go there for another purpose, and they would not choose to spend more time there given the option (Huang). While offering more amenities in stations and terminals often seems like a good idea, in practice, it does little to draw more people in. I think this is a poignant lesson in knowing the purpose of a space and then giving that purpose the respect it deserves to stand on its own without resorting to false incentives.

After studying the grandness of historic stations and the luxury of modern ones, I looked to Bainbridge Island's vernacular and realized that neither option would make sense. If a building such as those were located on Bainbridge Island, the destination would become the terminal and not the town of Winslow because the terminal would dominate the surrounding vernacular. There are valuable design elements of these old terminals which capture the imagination and valuable elements of these new stations that create a feeling of comfort, but neither will be reproduced exactly in my design. Instead, I've chosen to take elements of each, from the curving arches of the historic stations to the multi-zonal layout of the modern stations, to give my redesign a sense of familiarity.

This research helped to solidify in my mind what a terminal is and what it should be. A terminal is not a destination. It is a liminal space marking the transition between one place and another. No

one will come to a terminal just to hang out, and they shouldn't, because that is not its purpose. A terminal should provide a waiting space that is functional, yet comfortable, encouraging the user to enjoy the moment on the threshold of their journey. As it is not a destination, the Bainbridge Island terminal shouldn't look separate from Bainbridge. Instead it should pull from the best parts of the surrounding area, acting as a response to the vernacular of the landscape and the needs of the users.

On Bainbridge Island, there are multiple user groups: commuters who pass through every day and tourists who might pass through just once or twice. It is equally important to create an enjoyable experience for both. For daily commuters, the excitement of travel has worn off and the ritual has become mundane. The problem here is an overemphasis on efficiency. As stated before, the sole purpose of a terminal is often to move people as quickly as possible from one point to another. Therefore, terminals are often designed with thought only allotted to efficiency, and not to the human experience of the space itself. This mindset, however, disregards the function of commute as ritual and the importance of ritual to the individual and to society (Mitchener). In order to create a ritual that is meaningful to commuters, this space must be activated with a thoughtful design that subtly separates this part of the journey from the next. For the tourist, on the other hand, the design must be compelling enough to act as the first welcome and final goodbye to the Bainbridge Island. As an unfamiliar space for a tourist, the design must also be easy enough to understand with proper wayfinding and signage. The challenge of this design will be to satisfy the needs of both user groups without one inconveniencing the other.

This next half of my essay will describe how my design responds to the challenges and concepts outlined in the research above by narrating the movement of users through the space. When approaching the terminal, users will see that the new location is slightly to the left of the current building, which will be completely torn down. Half cantilevered out over the Puget Sound, the new

terminal acts as a reflection of the idea of liminality. The hovering waiting chamber is now an in-between territory, not fully set into the land, but also not yet embarking onto the water. This positioning allows the building to be integrated into the ground of the site while also implying the direction of travel. From the approaching ferry, visitors will see the cantilevered belly of the terminal hovering over the water (see fig. 1). A wall of windows creates a glow that can be seen at night or glinting in the sun during the day.

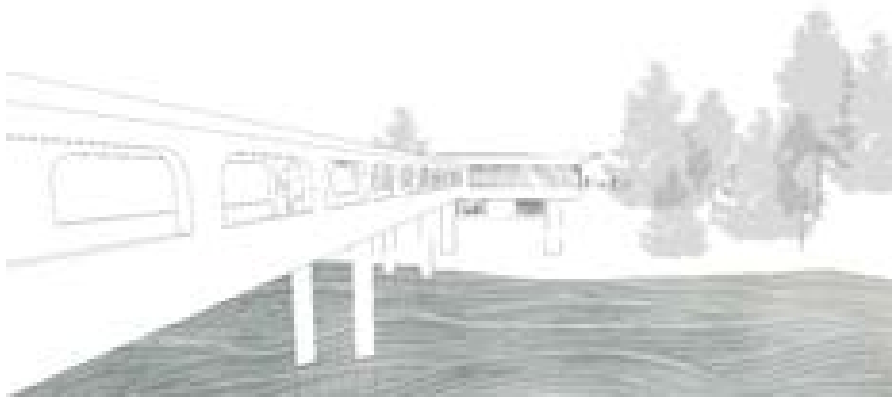


fig. 1. Projected view of the terminal from the approaching ferry

Upon entry, the user is greeted by an information booth set into a rounded wall. The roundness invites the user in, implying the direction of motion and acting as architectural wayfinding (see fig. 2). Curves are repeated throughout the space, creating a comfortably enveloping atmosphere. To the right of this entry are two pathways subtly separated by a wall permeated with arches (see fig. 2). These arches mimic on a small scale the grandness of historic stations in a way that is still enticing, yet humble. The two paths serve different purposes: the inner path acts as a slower walkway for tourists while the outer path serves as a fast track for commuters, 45% of whom arrive between five to ten minutes of the ferry leaving (Carpenter and McIntosh). These two paths respond to the needs

of both user groups by providing a necessary balance between efficiency and the enjoyment that comes from wandering slowly.



fig. 2. The curving wall invites the user in. To the right, the walkway splits in two to serve different user groups.

Moving into the waiting area, users are greeted by a café (see fig. 3). At the current terminal, the café is located outside with no seats. This enforces the idea that coffee is something that must be grabbed quickly and drunk while walking, creating a feeling of more forced momentum. Having the coffee located inside where there are seats allows users the option to take a break while they wait. Like airport-isation, the addition of a café adds a layer to the terminal's program. However, unlike airport-isation, providing a café within the space doesn't change or detract from the purpose of the terminal. Instead, it enforces the idea that waiting in a moment between two states of travel can be enjoyable. In fact, research shows that such habitual pauses of waiting in commutes can act as a

mental resetting between work and home, providing psychological relief (Donaldson). The more of a pause the users can take to appreciate here, the more able they will feel to take the next step.



fig. 3. The café is located in the waiting area.

In many local terminals, including Seattle's new terminal at Colman Dock, windows are floor-to-ceiling. These windows limit all attention to the direction of travel while distracting focus from the present moment. While this supports a sense of efficiency by allowing the user to see exactly where they are going, it also detracts from the user's ability to appreciate the moment of waiting as part of the process. By cutting the windows in my redesign into smaller panes of glass, the intent is to place the focus back on the present moment by subtly dividing interior and exterior, defining a sense of place (see fig. 4). As Aldo Van Eyck once said, "I live in it [architecture] from the inside. I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me – not in front of me," (McCarter). Instead of showing everything all at once, the smaller windowpanes require the user to move closer to the window to see clearly, creating a moment of intimacy with the landscape by drawing the user nearer

to it. The smaller windowpanes also make the space feel more personable by enforcing a human scale that is comforting when faced with the expansiveness of the Puget Sound.

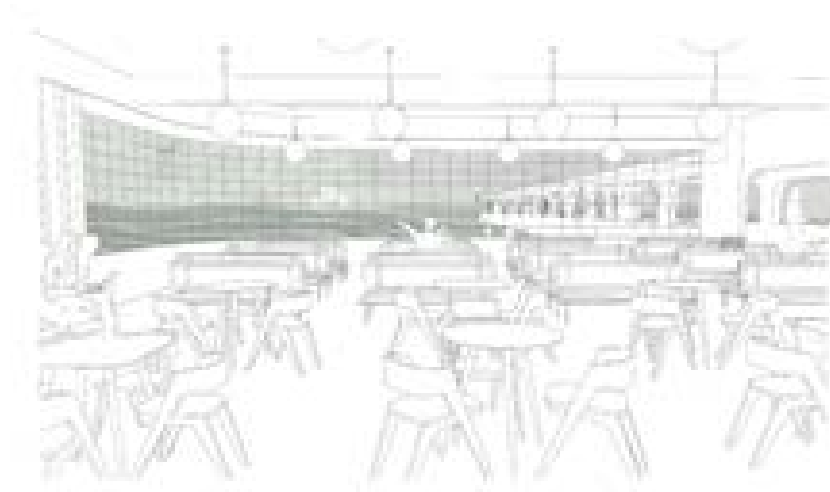


fig. 4. The smaller windowpanes create a comforting human scale.

In a place as unique as Bainbridge Island, the ferry terminal should be just as unique. By activating this transitional space, worth is given to the moments that exist in the in-between and joy is brought to an area of life that is often seen as necessary, but tedious. This redesign creates a space that is a nice place to begin and a nice place to come home to.

Works Cited

Carpenter, Jeff, P.E., and Nicole McIntosh, P.E. *WSF Terminal Design Manual*. Washington State Department of Transportation. 2016.

This manual is designed for engineers in Washington State who design ferry terminals and was published by the Washington State Department of Transportation. It is an extensive and astonishingly detailed manual outlining every aspect of terminal design, from the appropriate square footage for each piece of the program, to the types of plants that can be planted near the building. It also provides research on every ferry terminal in the Puget Sound region. This includes research on demographics, ridership levels, and average wait-time before boarding.

Dethier, Jean. *All Stations*. Thames and Hudson, 1981.

In addition to a wealth of photos, this book analyzes historic stations. It delves into detail about the societal use of stations as the hub of cities and the way this changed after WWII. It also analyzes the importance of stations in art and architecture as a type of grandiose testament to a bygone era. Furthermore, it questions the use of railway stations simply as a place of passage, suggesting that they act as an asylum for people who have nowhere to go.

Donaldson, Megan. *The 'Break' Space: Psychological Relief in Architectural Transitional Spaces*. 2014. Unitec Institute of Technology, Master Thesis Explanatory Document. *Unitec Research Bank*.

This thesis is similar to the Wellington Harbour Ferry Terminal dissertation in the fact that it also explores the importance of ritual in the life of a commuter. Donaldson suggests that the daily commute from work to home actually acts as a mental break, allowing travelers to feel a distinct separation from their home lives and work lives. Donaldson also explores this idea on a smaller

scale. How can a building be designed so its transitions provide the same psychological break as a commute?

Huang, Wei-Jue, Honggen Xiao, and Sha Wang. *Airports as Liminal Space*. Elsevier, 2018.

This article analyzes the psychology of travel, from the fear of the unknown to the excitement for the journey. It dissects the current trend of airport retail and finds that even with all of their conveniences, an airport is not a destination. In a series of interviews, the authors determine that even when users enjoy an airport, they don't want to be there longer than they have to be. They also discuss the breakdown of social barriers within an airport when everyone shares a common goal and the importance of people watching in these situations.

McCarter, Robert. *Aldo van Eyck*. E-book, Faculty Creative Activity Grants program, Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts, and Washington University in St Louis, 2015.

Aldo van Eyck was an architect who wrote about and explored liminality as it related to space. In particular, he wrote of liminality as it relates to thresholds in architecture between the exterior of a building and the interior of a building. In his perspective, every built space whether interior or exterior, should feel enclosed. This idea makes entering any space feel like a "homecoming."

Mitchener, Andrew R. *Commute as Ritual: Wellington Harbour Ferry Terminal*. 2012. Victoria University of Wellington, Master of Architecture Thesis. *Victoria University of Wellington Research Archive*.

This Master of Architecture Thesis is split into two major categories: theory of mnemonic and liminality, and the resulting design for a ferry terminal in Wellington. For the purpose of this project, the only use will be analysis of Mitchener's theory. The dissertation condemns the idea that transitional buildings should be constructed purely with efficiency of movement in mind without regard for user experience. The importance of a commute as a ritual experience is a main

point. Mitchener also delves into the psychology behind user modal choice and why people are more likely to want to own a car than to use public transportation.

Schofield, Hugh. "Gare Du Nord: Why Europe's busiest station needs a makeover fast." *BBC News*, 28 Dec. 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50643585>. Accessed 22 March 2020.

This article describes the "airport-isation" of stations around the world, but particularly the Gare Du Nord station in Paris. In a few words, this means that the station will be renovated to include commodities other than travel, like restaurants and shops and gyms. The article takes the position that this is an unnecessary act and detracts from the experience of a station which already has a set purpose.