

communication

San Francisco: Stations win approval by reflecting their surroundings

WHEN A ROUTINE light-rail station rehabilitation project bogged down because of community opposition, San Francisco's Municipal Railway (Muni) turned to a pair of artists who not only broke the impasse but also designed an eye-catching addition to the city's landscape.



19th Avenue platform and canopy. Opposite: An undulating canopy reflects the surrounding hills.

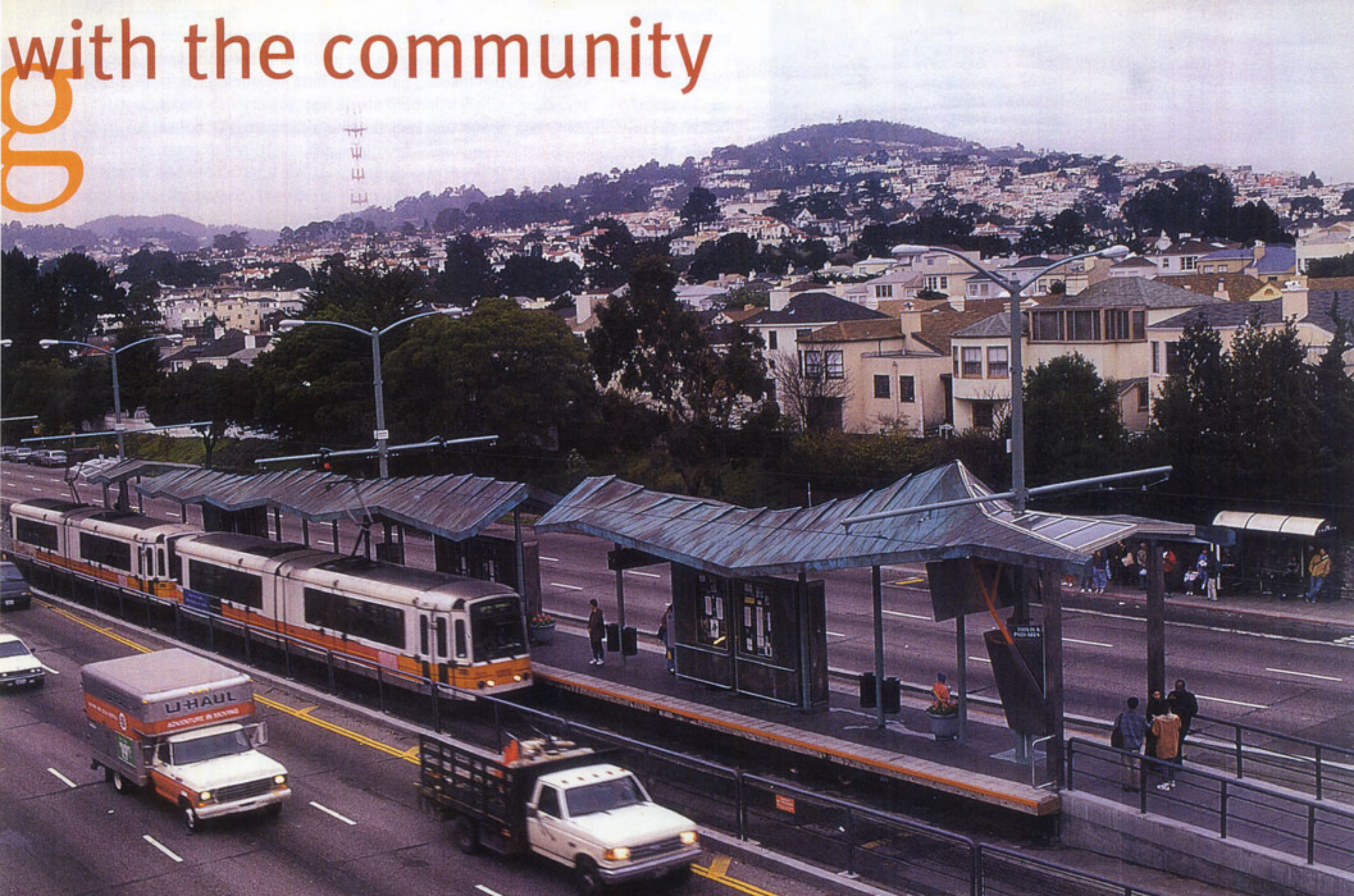
Muni's project seemed straightforward enough—rebuilding platforms at two stations in the Lakeside district so they would be wider, safer, and in conformance with Americans with Disabilities Act requirements, and adding a pocket track on which trains could lay over.

But several factions in the community circled in opposition: students and officials at nearby San Francisco State University (SFSU), the manager of an adjacent shopping mall, civic leaders in the surrounding neighborhood, senior citizens, and teachers at a local school. They came with an earful of concerns—Muni's poor track record in maintaining facilities, the inconvenience construction would create, and the visual impact of the new platform and the trains that would park near the station.

Muni had hit a dead end. Then it asked San Francisco's Art Commission, which manages the city's percent-for-art program, for help. (The city's art program only covers buildings, so the platform project was not required to include public art.)

While Muni's offer was startling—get the community behind the project, and we will support whatever design you come up with, as long as it can be built safely and maintained easily—the conditions the agency set were formidable. Only \$100,000 had been budgeted for each platform's shelter and amenities. And Muni gave the Art

with the community



Commission barely two months, from June to August 1993, to turn the entire project around.

To save time the commission suspended its normal artist selection process, which includes advertising projects and peer reviews of proposals. Instead, commission staff nominated Leonard Hunter, head of SFSU's sculpture department, and Sheila Ghidini, a visiting professor there, for the job. The commissioners, pleased that Hunter and Ghidini had connections to the community, approved.

Hunter and Ghidini held weekly meetings with the various groups opposed to the project. They began with a presentation that surveyed boarding platforms used in other transit systems, explored the area's architectural history, and reviewed the history of transit in that part of the city. They fostered a discussion about the community's attributes and its most recognizable visual characteristics.

Then the artists helped establish the process by which design decisions would be made, a simple majority vote. They helped the community define basic criteria for the design of the stations and identify issues of concern, such as the impact of sunlight patterns and prevailing winds.

Week after week, the artists returned with ideas, explaining how the design responded to the group's concerns. Covering the walls with tiles, for example, would make it easier to clean graffiti. An undulating canopy would reflect San Francisco's hilly cityscape and anticipate the sun's movement. This patient design process broke the logjam. The artists won the group's trust and their proposals won the community's support.

Other problems loomed. The cost of the canopies, seating, lighting, and other amenities was now estimated at \$600,000 per platform. In August 1993, when preliminary designs were complete, the Art Commission applied through Muni for Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) enhancement funding. That October, the commission was told the project would likely be given \$400,000,

which would cover much, but not all, of the gap.

The Public Utilities Commission (PUC), which oversaw Muni and had to approve the project, was

unaware of this design process and was stunned by the new and different look that was proposed. The project stalled again while politicians debated issues of neighborhood equity and design precedents. Now the same community that had been resistant to Muni came out in droves to support the project. Ultimately, the PUC increased its funding to \$200,000 per canopy and the city agreed to provide the required match for the ISTEA money from transportation sales tax revenues.


The next snag occurred during construction. The artists had developed a conceptual design, but Muni asked its in-house engineering staff to prepare construction documents. The Art Commission insisted the artists be given oversight, but there were disagreements between the artists and engineers over construction details. Ultimately, during construction, costly change orders were issued to undo unnecessary structural work.

The stations, opened for service in November 1994, are clearly some of the most distinctive features of San Francisco's transit landscape. There is no better evidence of the community's support than SFSU's agreement to maintain the station near its campus, at a cost of \$50,000 per year. As a result, the station is free of ads, adorned with flower boxes and announcements about cultural events on campus.



LESSONS LEARNED

- Early in a project, establish liaison with all parties that will have to approve the project.
- Be flexible in the process used to select artists; consider the timing and political demands of the situation.
- For collaborative design projects, involve artists in all aspects of the work, from preparing specs and construction documents to reviewing mock-ups and attending construction meetings.
- Listen to the community; give people background so they can serve as educated participants.



The station
is maintained
by the adjacent
university.
Opposite: The
station design
makes waiting
more pleasant.