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Press Release

June 4, 2015

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IMMEDIATE

New York Transit Museum Director to Retire

The New York Transit Museum announced today that its longtime director, Gabrielle Shubert will retire in September.

“This has been a dream job,” said Ms. Shubert. “We have never run out of topics to explore, revealing different aspects of New York City’s evolution through the lens of its mass transit systems. It’s the life blood of the city—New York would never have become the world’s center of commerce, culture and education without public transportation. These systems are complex and fascinating. To give visitors just a glimpse into how mass transit works has been a wonderful journey for me.”

The Transit Museum opened in 1976, the year of the U.S. Bicentennial, as the New York City Transit Exhibit. The original displays were organized by transit employees, wishing to demonstrate that the New York City subway is one of the country’s great engineering achievements. The Exhibit opened in the old Court Street subway station in downtown Brooklyn on July 4, intending to remain open only until Labor Day. It proved so popular that it’s been closed only once since then -- for a two-year renovation between 2001 and 2003.

The Old Court Street station has an interesting history. The station initially served local trains along the Fulton Line followed by a shuttle service between Hoyt-Schermerhorn and Court Street for about 10 years (1936 to 1946) before the station was closed. The Court Street station was used for film shoots and storage until the NYC Transit Exhibit opened in 1976.

When Ms. Shubert took over in 1991, the station had just narrowly escaped another attempt on its life. New York City Transit was in a cyclical phase of budgetary constraint and had proposed closing the Museum as a cost saving measure. The Museum staff mobilized everyone they knew to attend the public comment session at the MTA Board meeting. After a passionate outcry of support, the MTA Board agreed to allow the Museum to remain open, but required it to become financially self-sufficient. Ms. Shubert, then a manager in the MTA’s Art and Design program, was appointed the new director.

Starting out with a budget of \$367,000 and a staff of three, the Museum began a methodical course of expansion and rebuilding. When most museums were cutting back hours, the Transit Museum added Sunday hours to generate additional admission revenue. The Transit Museum organized a non-profit affiliate to help it raise funds, and worked with the MTA to establish an outpost for its retail store in Grand Central, just before the Terminal was renovated. This has now become the NY Transit Museum Gallery Annex & Store at Grand Central, welcoming almost 500,000 visitors per year with three exhibitions and a lively mix of subway-centric products in its trendy store.

“Gabrielle’s leadership has been integral over the past twenty-four years to the growth of the museum, and its continued ability to reach new audiences through innovative programming,” said Paul J. Fleuranges, Vice President, Corporate Communications, NYC Transit. “We wish her the best on her future endeavors. She will be missed.”

The Transit Museum’s subway station home in downtown Brooklyn has become a popular destination for New York City families and urban enthusiasts (to say nothing of an extremely loyal group of train buffs who eagerly await the Museum’s annual Nostalgia rides on the vintage cars in the collection), as well as tourists who increasingly find their way to the Transit Museum, despite the lure of NYC icons like the Statue of Liberty, the Met and MOMA. The Transit Museum now serves nearly 20,000 school children each year in group visits that sell out quickly. Where previously, groups received a volunteer-led tour, they now are guided by the Museum’s enthusiastic educators and have a hands-on learning experience as part of every visit.

The Transit Museum serves a diverse audience and offers a variety of programs for youth and adults with disabilities, including a program that teaches young adults with special needs to travel independently on the subway, and an after school program for children on the autism spectrum, many of whom have a deep interest in the city’s mass transit systems. Tours for seniors evoke memories of commuting on rattan-seated trains that have evolved into today’s sleek, stainless steel models, and a free writing workshop for seniors uses vintage subway cars to conjure bygone eras.

Young urbanists flock to the Museum’s After Hours series for lively discussions of arcane transportation minutiae such as how data is used in transportation planning, how historic transportation structures are preserved, and how the Montague Tube was rebuilt after Superstorm Sandy. The Transit Museum is one of New York’s best bargains, charging only \$7 for adults and \$5 for children and seniors. Many programs are free with admission.

As Ms. Shubert’s last project, the Museum will open an exhibition in September showing how employees of the MTA’s operating agencies plan for, respond to and restore service after citywide crises. The show will focus on 9/11, the Northeast Blackout of 2003, Hurricane Irene and Superstorm Sandy, revealing how every aspect of the transit agency’s operations are involved in “bringing back the city,” from pump operators to bus operators, signal maintainers to map makers, fleet managers to tunnel supervisors—all “first responders” who get the City moving again after a disaster.

“We’ve met the MTA’s mandate to become self-supporting,” Shubert said. “The Museum gets generous in-kind support from the MTA and has developed very strong earned and donated revenue streams on its own. Where other history museums have struggled, the Transit Museum has quietly built a very stable foundation of support. It will continue to thrive in the years ahead—mining its rich collections and exploring more topics relating to urban development and sustainability.”

The Transit Museum is located in downtown Brooklyn at the corner of Boerum Place and Schermerhorn Street and is open Tues. – Fri. 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.
Sat- Sun. 11a.m- 5p.m.