

The Art of Listening: Shaping Transportation Planning and Management

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At first glance, the field of transportation may seem uncondusive for artists, but I've found artistry has an important role to play. On the train, on the bus, and during my first and last-mile journeys, I am constantly taking in what the traveling public is experiencing. In my background as a visual artist, I observe first and create second. As a manager and planner, I take action after I have stopped to really listen. This intersection, buoyed by credentials and knowledge gathered through the MSTM program and ten years working at Metro, and with decades of experience as a graphic designer and visual artist with an MFA from CalArts, has fueled my interdisciplinary approach to my role as Senior Manager in the Office of Strategic Innovation at [LA Metro](#).



*Eileen Hsu at the 2023 Annual Awards Banquet & Convocation Celebration.
Photo by Claire S. Burke.*

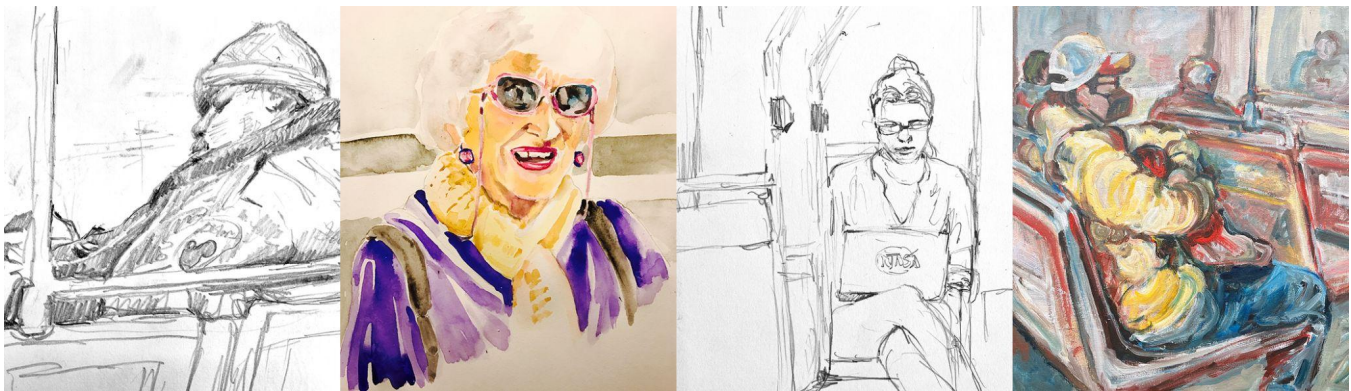
Many of the project management skills I use to contribute to the transportation sector stem from SJSU's Master of Science in Transportation Management ([MSTM](#)) program. The projects I'm advancing include agency-wide strategic planning, the Traffic Reduction Study, and open streets for the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Getting LA County residents to enrich our transportation habits to include not just driving alone, but also transit and active transportation modes requires strategic policymaking as well as a shift in our culture — and to get there, we need to hear and see what LA communities need. Additionally, as California is a policy trendsetter and LA is a cultural capital for the U.S., in my mind, it goes without saying that

strategies on both the technical and social fronts are what it takes to earn LA County's embrace of a truly multi-modal future.

Any effective strategy necessitates depth of understanding from the breadth of stakeholders, from diverse circumstances—which comes from listening and observation. Much of my studies at MTI revolved around honing listening skills in a variety of critical contexts for transportation planning and management: stakeholder engagement, interviews with subject matter experts, and leadership training and project management skills. My capstone project was on interview research design and deployment with community members, for the goal of jumpstarting civic engagement programming. Such insights can help you zero in on the heart of the issue, build trustworthy partnerships, avoid misunderstandings, and design solutions that meet multiple needs.

The observation skills for creating visual art is not unlike listening. Making visual art relies on careful seeing, discernment, and heartfelt caring. When I am drawing on Metro, I get so focused, time feels suspended. Through mark-making on paper (drawing, painting, sketching, etc.), I interpret observations into a visual language. Drawing is a form of experience-based mark-making, an innate activity that each of us did before we even learned how to write. To that end, when we consume art, we connect with it on an instinctive and visceral level. I aspire for my artwork to touch people deeply in this way.



A few of Eileen's sketches.

Photo courtesy of the author.

On Metro, I draw riders because they are fascinating, diverse, and serendipitously available right before me. I have drawn an elderly lady wearing layers of sweaters and stabilizing her shopping cart carrying her life's belongings, her fingers extending out of the worn tips of her gloves. I have drawn a security guard deep in slumber in his Disneyland uniform on an early morning train heading to Union Station. I have drawn commuters, pivoting their laptops precariously on their knees as they tapped away. I have drawn high school students, giggling as they travel in flocks. As much as listening has helped me conduct better stakeholder engagement, drawing has helped me empathize for the people and places Metro threads together.

Once in the office, when I examine ridership demographics, my mind does not see only statistics by location, race, gender, income level, etc. For each data point, I recall someone I've observed in the Metro system. Through the numbers, real people, the ones I've drawn, come to mind.

My peer in the Center for Urban Pedagogy, Design for Civic Change program, and Senior Advisor in the NYC Department of City Planning, Annisha Davis, once said that compassion is empathy in action. We, transportation workers, make many decisions every day for the betterment of our users. In this way, we have the chance to activate our empathy and make compassionate planning and design decisions.

This “visual listening” enables me to activate that empathy for external, customer-facing initiatives as well as for internal, organizational flows. I intuitively see Metro travelers who need help, connect them with their needs, and identify areas for improvement. Likewise, internally, I can better collaborate with colleagues. Strong internal interstitial relationships and handoffs help Metro deliver the seamless and smooth journeys that characterize our customer experience aims. In this way, artful sensitivity can help us deliver compassionate support to team members and service to the public.

Honestly, I am still refining my own contribution to the field. Fortunately, giants before me have already carved trails. I was heartened to discover that Seleta Reynolds, our departmental chief and transportation trailblazer, is also a collage artist. Esteemed artist Mark Bradford has created map-like collages from old poster curls fallen from billboards in South LA. Last year, in this same neighborhood, LA Metro opened the Leimert Park station on the new K Line, working closely with nearby businesses and leaders to better ensure that this new resource benefits the local community. A few paces from the new station is Art + Practice, the center that Mark established for the parallel goal of helping the community—through art and access to social services. As much as artmaking is a kind of listening, sharing art can be a kind of explaining that helps people more easily access resources to improve their lives.

While reports, planning documents, and plans present analytical, fact-driven, and discursive cases to advance policy and decision-making, art—in all its forms—excels at winning hearts. Creative expression can highlight the community-oriented and convivial wonders of the LA Metro system. LA may have a torrid romance with the customizable single occupancy vehicle (SOV), but the mass transit ride supports the ultimate customization; it is designed to just transport us while empowering us to maintain our individual and authentic uniqueness. For a brief ride, our lives fatefully converge, and, upon arrival at destinations, we separate to chart our own distinctive narratives and to fulfill our own life stories. In this way, efficiency and poetry unite in transportation planning and operations. In this interdisciplinary field, as many of my MTI professors have described it, there is room and need for both rationalism and humanism.

Together, we can realize the vision of superb regional mobility by working to connect with both the hearts and minds of LA County stakeholders and community members.



About the Author

[Eileen](#) is a Senior Manager in the Office of Strategic Innovation at LA Metro. Her work focuses on agency strategic planning, leadership and workforce development, and systems for continuous improvement. With a previous career in graphic design and as a practicing visual artist, Eileen is particularly interested in the intersection of policy and culture in shaping people’s mobility choices. Eileen graduated from the MTI MSTM program in 2021 and was a recipient of the 2020 APTF Raymond C. Miller Scholarship.