

## Kawasaki's New Breed of Subway Trains



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It's not often that you can talk about objects that both move through and contain public space. Conventionally, public space is any area in common use by converging groups of people. Only in vehicles does this convergence move, and whether on a skateboard or a motorbike, in a car or plane, one of our most sublime sensations is the feeling of being at rest at a point in space that is in motion, a thrill that is accentuated when we position our bodies in such a way as to become at one with our vehicle. As such, vehicles present a great opportunity for looking at the relationship between new products and human behavior, and how innovative design and the will of the people get played out in public space. Los Angeles is perhaps the pinnacle of this kind of play, a free-flowing, kinaesthetic agora of vehicular identities that I love to look at but to which I cannot relate.

I'm much better at relating to subway cars, because, well, that's where I get my oneness. That's why I'm so excited that the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority is getting a new car. In fact, there are two: the R110A designed by Kawasaki Heavy Industries (Japan) and the R110B, designed by Bombardier Transit Corporation (Quebec), both of which are being used on a trial basis and from which an "ultimate" subway car will be designed. Superficially both the R110A and the R110B are cold and impermeable-looking, yet their petroleum composite floor, plastic seats, brushed aluminum fixtures and stainless steel shell all evoke an accommodating,

low-level cyborg kind of charm—a charm enhanced by center-hung LED information boards and a computer-automated female conductor’s voice. The fact that there is no longer a human being announcing stops or working the doors is even more efficient than would be expected, and only underscores the material impression that, over time, these cars will not be cleaned so much as pasteurized.

This icy seduction is epitomized by the R110A’s seating arrangement, which is as conceptually beautiful as it is psychologically appropriate. Unlike European subway cars, which are arranged in cozy, inward-facing booths, or New York’s older cars with their two opposing rows of seats like a gauntlet, those of the R110 A are arranged so that only four seats in the entire car face each other. Eye contact, which is practically mandatory in older subway cars, has been averted; for the first time, a design feature ensures you no longer have to lower your eyes or raise your newspaper to avoid being faced. In practice, it turns out that the seats along the wall fill up first because those are the only ones where your back is covered; the most provocative are the two seats nearest the door, the first being parallel to the exit and the second perpendicular to it.

When you sit in the second seat you face the profile of the person sitting in the first who in turn faces the person on the other side of the aisle, like three people demonstrating a Feng Shui concept or posing for an Obsession ad.

It is impressive when such keen human insight gets built into the body language of a product, but especially when these insights are not entirely flattering. The R110A is the first subway car design that not only recognizes but encourages our avoidance of each other and makes reasonable—even palpable—the human chess match we’re all in, ultimately creating a more fluid, co-existent kind of . . . courtesy? Mind Control? I’m not sure. I only know that it is slightly disturbing to enter one of these cars for the third or fourth time and begin to suspect that, no matter how full or empty it is, the car seems to anticipate and then coerce your move based on the structural logic of where it has placed everyone else. It is as if some new kind of information has influenced the layout of the car and that you personally have had something to do with that learning process. When? How? Is that creepy or what?

Alas, we live in democratic times, and the MTA has informed me that the R110A’s seating arrangement will revert to the former gauntlet style because too many riders complained about a lack of seats. I wonder: did people complain because they wanted to sit down or because, being Americans, they didn’t want even fewer people than usual to have something that they couldn’t? Once again we regress to the familiar, not on the basis of its merits but because it puts the most people at ease. I guess George Clinton was right when he said “give the people what they want, when they want, and they want it all the time.” However vexed we were by modernist ideology, the products resulting from the current consensus-based, consumer-driven service economy are really starting to depress me. I miss having to accept something whether I like it or not, if only for the bits of stunning genius that that single-mindedness made possible. OK, the R110 prototype is no Citroën DS or Salk Institute, but it is a pleasure I didn’t request or have to submit for committee approval. Consumer culture, where is thy victory? Product, where is thy sting?