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COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE

## *In Depths of Columbus Circle, a Retail Hub Blooms*

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A rendering of the grab-and-go eating area at TurnStyle. Architecture Outfit

### **Square Feet**

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As long as there have been subways in [New York City](#), there have been subway shops. But for much of the last century, they have largely been confined to newsstands, shoe shine booths, florists and the occasional churro or bootleg video vendor.

Yet how many New Yorkers must peer down the tunnel for the next train while craving gourmet cupcakes, some falafel or maybe even a new handbag?

Susan Fine says there are thousands, and her instincts have been right before. After all, she led the transformation of [Grand Central Terminal](#) in the 1990s, helping turn it into one of the most irresistible retail hubs in the city.

“People used to laugh when we talked about cleaning up Grand Central, and look at it now,” Ms. Fine said during a recent tour of the Columbus Circle concourse where she will open more than 30 storefronts next year, a project called [TurnStyle](#). “And Grand Central was easy. At least there, we had good bones.”

Still, Ms. Fine says she is convinced that she can bring that same mini-mall magic to Columbus Circle — or rather four feet below Columbus Circle. And if all goes well, her next stop may be a subway station near you.



Susan Fine will open more than 30 storefronts in the Columbus Circle concourse next year.

Tina Fineberg for The New York Times

Ms. Fine has already secured lease commitments for nearly 60 percent of the storefronts she is building out just steps from the busiest turnstile in the entire system. Filling the spaces will not be the standard subterranean fare of Nathan's hot dogs and Sbarro pizza, but some of the city's most delectable establishments: Magnolia Bakery, Joe Coffee, Dylan's Candy Store and MAC Cosmetics.

"Tokyo, Hong Kong, Singapore, all these cities we say we're competing with in Asia — they've all got underground retail," Ms. Fine said. "I see no reason it can't be a success here. And

then it's on to the other stations, and the other cities. D.C., Madrid, Moscow. You could have these amenities in any subway in the world."

The Columbus Circle project began in 2012, when the Metropolitan Transportation Authority decided to explore a master lease for the concourse running from 57th to 59th Streets. The agency had spent the last five years and \$108 million renovating the 110-year-old station, which included installing new storefronts on the concourse. There were discussions within the M.T.A. about operating the facility on its own, but it decided that a master lease with a private developer would be best.

In November, it selected Ms. Fine's four-person firm, Oases Real Estate, over three competing bids. A 30-year deal for the 15,000-square foot space will net the agency at minimum \$1.25 million annually through a mix of rents and revenue sharing.

"This is about putting together the right mix of tenants and making the most of a challenging space while maximizing the profits for the rest of the system," said Jeffrey Rosen, director of real estate at the M.T.A. "The private sector has a particular expertise that is beneficial to us and frees us up to focus on running the system."

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For the private sector, the appeal was obvious, even if the space was unappealing. Beyond low ceilings and dingy, gum-smearred floors, the subways have a certain unshakable stigma, an immutable lifeline that so many love to hate. Whether it is rats or those prehistoric-looking stalactites, the challenge of getting New Yorkers to linger underground is about as difficult as completing the Second Avenue subway.

Still, as one of the seven busiest stations in the system, with 70,000 commuters a weekday and 22 million a year, Columbus Circle offers the one thing that matters more than anything to retailers: foot traffic. Being steps from the popular mall at the Time Warner Center, Central Park and a crop of Midtown offices, including the Hearst building, only adds to the attraction. But really, it comes down to a numbers game.

“Subways are a part of our lives,” said Steve Abrams, owner of Magnolia Bakery. “Part of the reason we don’t like them is the crowds, but that’s exactly what a retailer likes to see, and at Columbus Circle, you can’t argue with those numbers.”

Preferential rents of \$275 to \$425 a square foot, about one-third the going rate above ground, don’t hurt.

Even so, Ms. Fine is determined to make TurnStyle an inviting destination. To help achieve this, she has enlisted the up-and-coming firm Architecture Outfit and the celebrated design and branding consultancy Sagmeister & Walsh to devise a \$5 million renovation.



A rendering of the street-level sign inviting pedestrians down to the TurnStyle shops.  
Architecture Outfit

“The trick was really figuring out strategies to slow people down,” said a partner, Jessica Walsh, who grew up frequenting the station. “If we can make it an interesting space with its own identity, we’re pretty confident we’ll not only catch commuters, but tourists and even people on their lunch break. Deep down, we all love the subway.”

The space is part of the original IRT station, the city’s first subway, and thus challenging, full of beams and pillars to be worked around. Among the clever interventions is lighting the coffered ceilings, making eight-foot ceilings look twice as high. Bar-height tables will wrap some pillars, creating dense eating areas along the corridor, while others will have kiosks for flowers or even a smartphone-enabled automat. Peppy orange trim lines the space, alongside eye-catching screens meant to waylay passers-by. Ms. Fine is looking for a light artist to do installations, as well.

The concourse has been broken down into three sections. The northern end, closest to the trains, will be for grab-and-go eating, to be the home of Dylan’s, Magnolia and Vegan Diva, a bakery specializing in vegan treats. In the middle, are hardgoods, including Bluwire Electronics, Weekday Wines, souvenirs at Studio [Manhattan](#) and A.T.M.s. Among the deals that Ms. Fine is still trying to nail down are a Kate Spade Saturday outlet and an eyebrow bar for quick treatments.

The southern end will include the most contemporary of urban retailing specimens, a food hall. With wider storefronts, it has room not only for upscale fast food, like Ignazio’s Pizza, Gelato Te Amo and fancy tacos, but also for tables and chairs.

“I think they’re going to make it really look good, so you won’t even feel like you’re in the subway,” said Fernanda Capobianco, the owner of Vegan Diva.

If the formula seems familiar, that is because Ms. Fine largely helped write the urban retailing playbook of the last few decades.

Having started her career at Battery Park City in the 1980s, she became director of real estate at the M.T.A. in 1992, where she was charged with revamping Grand Central’s dowdy spaces. Thanks to the foundation she built there, homeless encampments have been replaced by customers who line up for Shake Shack fries and shiny Apple products.

In between, she worked for a who’s who of the city’s development kingpins, including Olympia & York, Fisher Brothers and Tishman Speyer, where Ms. Fine focused on improving the retail at Rockefeller Center.

Should TurnStyle succeed, the M.T.A. hopes to follow the model in other stations or enter into new public-private partnerships, as it has done with the Australian mall operator Westfield Group at the Fulton Center downtown, which is to open soon. Other promising locales include West Fourth Street and Times Square, with smaller concourses a possibility in other stations. All of these funds are dedicated to the subways, rather than financing other agency projects.

“The more money we can generate for the system from space we already own and control, the better the experience will be for our riders, without the need to raise fares, tolls or taxes,” Mr. Rosen of the M.T.A. said.

Gene Russianoff, director of the Straphangers Campaign, fondly recalls when a Nedick’s diner used to operate at the end of the Broadway line platform inside the Times Square station.

“New Yorkers are chronically in a hurry, which might make them reluctant to stop, but if it means you don’t have to go out of your way to grab that coffee, it seems like the perfect idea,” he said.