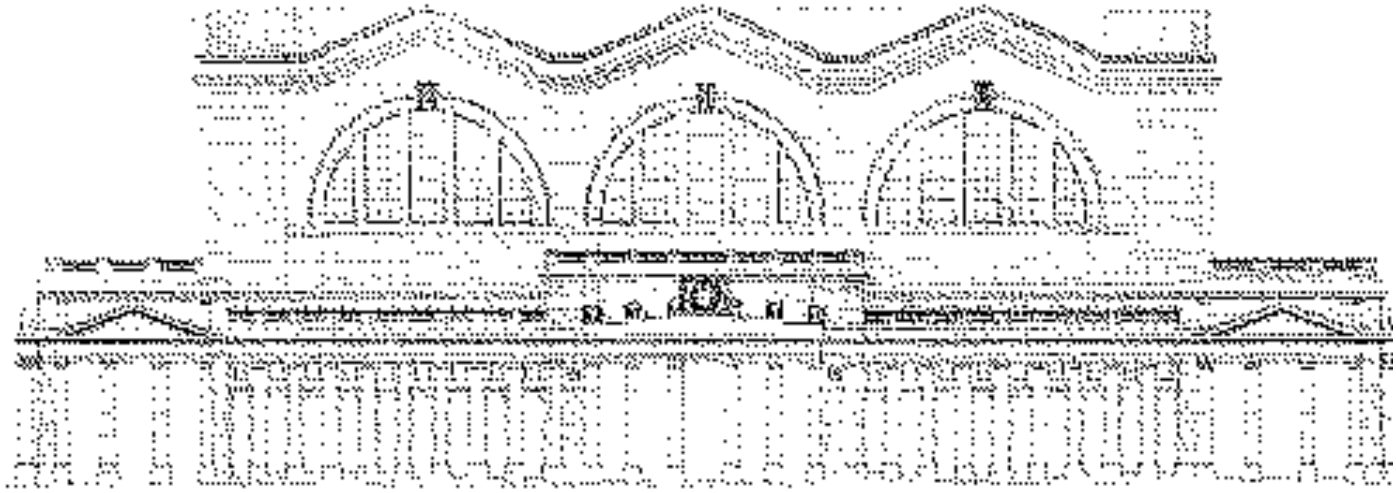
Monumental Sacrifice



The Destruction of Pennsylvania Station and the Creation of New York City Landmarks Preservation

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Introduction.

> If a giant pizza stand were proposed in an area zoned for such usage, and if studies showed acceptable traffic patterns and building densities, the pizza stand would be "in the public interest," even if the Parthenon itself stood on the chosen site.
>
> Ada Louise Huxtable, *New York Times,* May 5, 1963

In 1961, the financially troubled Pennsylvania Railroad entered into an agreement with the investment firm of Graham-Paige to redevelop the site in Manhattan occupied since 1910 by Pennsylvania Station. The unprofitable station would be demolished and replaced by an underground facility; at ground level, a new sports and entertainment complex, bearing the name Madison Square Garden, would rise. In exchange for development rights, the railroad would receive 25 percent ownership in the new Garden venture as well as a hefty long-term rental.[1]

The project would be extremely challenging. In addition to all the usual construction permits, the developers would need to obtain zoning variances, since the plans called for a 25,000-seat arena that could snarl traffic in the area. Also, demolition of the existing station and construction of the underground replacement would have to be carried out without disrupting the flow of Pennsylvania Railroad and Long Island Rail Road trains, which brought some 200,000 passengers daily to Penn Station.[2] Simultaneous construction of the Garden complex atop all of this would be a further challenge.

But the greatest challenge faced by the developers would eventually turn out to be a vociferous and well-coordinated protest campaign organized by architects, artists, and writers opposed to the demolition of Penn Station, which they felt should be preserved as an architectural and aesthetic landmark. As the controversy

[1] "'62 Start Is Set for New Garden." *New York Times,* July 27, 1961.
[2] Condit, Carl. *The Port of New York.* Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1981. Vol. 2, p. 278.

ensued, the *New York Times* and several leading architectural magazines joined the fray by printing sympathetic and encouraging editorials. Norval White founded the Action Group for Better Architecture in New York (AGBANY), which called for the Port of New York Authority[3] to purchase Penn Station and operate it as it did New York City's bridges, tunnels, airports, and seaports. The whole affair soon rose to national prominence.

Protesters were seriously compromised in their efforts, however, because they had no legal basis to demand that Penn Station be maintained. The station was private property, and as long as the redevelopment plans met the city's zoning regulations and building codes, the owners had no obligation to consider objections stemming from architectural or aesthetic concerns. Despite the protesters' best efforts, therefore, demolition began on October 28, 1963, and by the end of the decade redevelopment of the site was complete.

The story only begins there. Although the protesters lost the battle over Penn Station the day demolition began, they ultimately won what became a war over all redevelopment in New York. On April 19, 1965, Mayor Robert Wagner signed New York City's Landmarks Law, establishing a permanent Landmarks Preservation Commission to "safeguard the city's historic, aesthetic, and cultural heritage" and "foster and enhance civic pride in the beauty and noble accomplishments of the past."[4] The Commission was given the power to protect from redevelopment buildings it deemed landmarks. Its authority was, after years of legal wrangling, upheld in 1978 by the United States Supreme Court. Redevelopment in New York would — could — never be the same again.

[3] This agency is today known as the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.
[4] New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *www.ci.nyc.ny.us/html/lpc/home.html*.

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I. Life and Death of a Railroad Station

> The station building, a mammoth structure than which but three larger buildings exist, is located in the heart of the city one block from Herald Square. There is no question when approaching the station that it is aught else than a railroad terminal although the entrance has the aspect of a monumental gateway. … One has but to glance about to realize that emphasis has been placed entirely on results—strength, safety, permanency—rather than upon the money it cost to attain them.
>
> *History of the Engineering Construction and Equipment of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company's New York Terminal and Approaches,* 1912

> Does it make any sense to attempt to preserve a building merely as a "monument" when it no longer serves the utilitarian needs for which it was erected? It was built by private enterprise, by the way, and not primarily as a monument at all but as a railroad station.
>
> A. J. Greenough, President of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, Letter to the *New York Times,* August 23, 1962

Pennsylvania Station opened on November 26, 1910, a four-square-block replica of the Roman Baths of Caracalla designed by the prestigious firm of McKim, Mead and White. A celebrated architectural and engineering achievement in and of itself, the granite and travertine colossus was part of the Pennsylvania Railroad's hundred-million-dollar expansion and electrification program, consisting of new tunnels, rolling stock, signals, and switching yards, designed to bring its trains and those of the Long Island Rail Road onto Manhattan Island without the use of ferries.[5]

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[5] Couper, Wm., ed. *History of the Engineering Construction and Equipment of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company's New York Terminal and Approaches*. New York: Isaac H. Blanchard Co., 1912.

(Previous page: Advertisement from the New York Times, *November 20, 1910.)*
(Next page: Two photos of Pennsylvania Station — a 1937 view of the Seventh Avenue facade and a view from the main waiting room into the concourse.)


LONG ISLAND TRAINS

Charles Follen McKim was Penn Station's chief designer. He had studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris in the late 1860s and was, according to one art historian, "an enthusiastic backer of and participant in the great 'World's Fair,' the Columbian Exposition in Chicago of 1893."[6] His classical training and background meant that Penn Station, much like earlier McKim, Mead and White projects such as the Boston Public Library, would be as purely monumental as possible. McKim wanted no commercial development adjacent to or atop Penn Station; plans for such, as proposed by Pennsylvania Railroad president A.J. Cassatt, would therefore not be realized.[7]

The architectural press praised the new station. The British *Architectural Review* declared that Penn Station "may justly be termed monumental" and even went so far as to say that "nothing in Great Britain can compare."[8] *Architecture,* in March and October, 1910, printed a series of full-page celebratory photographs. Even the relatively critical *Architectural Record,* which poked fun at the station's severity ("A stranger set down before [the station], and told to guess what it was all about, would be apt to guess it a good substantial jail, a place of detention and punishment of which the inmates were not intended to have a good time"), grudgingly admitted that "Whatever abatements and qualifications we may be moved to make, it is securely one of our public possessions, and liberal owners and sensitive and skilful designers are entitled to the public gratitude for so great and grave an example of classic architecture."[9]

The *New York Times* also ran an enthusiastic editorial, calling the station "splendid" and heaping compliments upon the Pennsylvania Railroad's "great" and

[6] Parissien, Steven. *Pennsylvania Station; McKim, Mead and White.* London: Phaidon Press, 1996.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] "The New Terminal Stations at New York and Washington." *Architectural Review*, August 1911.
[9] "The Pennsylvania's New York Station." *Architectural Record*, June 1910.

"modern" management for seeing past the bottom line:

> In a sense it is proper to speak of the Pennsylvania's terminal as a gift to the city. It would be very difficult to show that the road will receive a direct return for its expenditure, that is, that the fares paid by new passengers attracted to its lines by reason of this terminal will suffice to pay the interest upon its cost.[10]

(Fifty years later, a new generation of managers focused squarely on the bottom line would propose to demolish Penn Station for precisely this reason.)

The general public, too, reacted positively to the new station. On the Saturday night the station's doors were first swung open, excitement was in the air:

> A little man ran through first and, running all the way, reached the first ticket booth to be opened… As the crowd passed through the doors into the vast concourse on every hand were heard exclamations of wonder, for none had any idea of the architectural beauty of the new structure.[11]

On Sunday, November 27, 1910, Penn Station's first full day of operation,

> 100,000 persons, in addition to the [25,000] passengers, visited the new station and admired its architectural, mechanical, and other wonders. … The crowds began coming early in the morning, and from then until night the throngs never diminished in size. Every one, seemingly, bore away the impression that the Pennsylvania's Manhattan Station represents the last word in that kind of structure.[12]

New Yorkers considered their new station an immediate success. In its first week of operation, New York through travel on the Pennsylvania Railroad increased by 15 percent.[13] In its first full year of operation, 1911, Pennsylvania Station handled an average of 39,200 passengers each weekday, and by 1929 its daily passenger count had climbed over 200,000.[14] Although the Great Depression

[10] "The Pennsylvania Terminal." *New York Times* (editorial), November 27, 1910.
[11] "Pennsylvania Opens Its Great Station." *New York Times,* November 27, 1910.
[12] "100,000 Visitors See New Penna. Station." *New York Times,* November 28, 1910.
[13] "New Penn. Station a Business-Maker." *New York Times,* December 5, 1910.
[14] Condit, Vol. 1, p. 348.

reduced ridership considerably (daily passenger flow dropped below 150,000 in 1933), the setback was temporary, and in 1945, at the height of the Second World War, nearly 350,000 passengers used Penn Station every day.[15]

Downfall

The Pennsylvania Railroad, at the time Penn Station opened, was one of the country's most powerful, prestigious, and profitable companies. It would, by the 1960s, lose those characteristics. As early as the 1910s, the Pennsylvania was experiencing massive financial problems (as a result of the federal government nationalizing the country's railroads for several years during and after World War I). The Roaring Twenties allowed the railroad an economic resurgence, but the onset of the Depression reddened its balance sheets once again. Business picked up during World War II, when railroads played an important role in troop and equipment transport, and the Pennsylvania seemed to recover from its problems.

The recovery did not last long into peacetime. Almost immediately after World War II, the Pennsylvania Railroad entered into an accelerating decline. During the prosperous 1950s, travel by automobile and airplane came within the economic reach of millions, and as a result the railroad, like others across the country, saw its ridership decline steeply. In order to survive, the "Pennsy" would need either to regain its riders by presenting a revamped, futuristic image to compete with cars and planes — or to dramatically cut costs in an attempt to maintain profitability on a smaller scale.[16]

By the mid-1950s, the Pennsy was considering both options at once. The railroad had long since ceased to consider Penn Station a monumental asset, by then regarding it as an expensive, unprofitable albatross that presented a negative public

[15] *Ibid.,* p. 349.

[16] This paper will not concern itself with a detailed financial analysis of the Pennsylvania Railroad or the specific reasons for its decline. Interested readers should refer to Condit, Vols. 1 and 2.

image. Mistreated during the Depression and the war years, and looking increasingly out of place in 1950s Manhattan, the station was losing popularity, and railroad officials began to talk of replacing it with a modernized underground facility. In 1955, James M. Symes, president of the Pennsy, announced an agreement to sell the station's valuable air rights to developer William Zeckendorf for a one-time payment of $30,000,000, about half of which would be used to construct a new underground Penn Station.[17] "'The station will not only be in 'the most modern decor,' Mr. Symes said, 'but for convenience, comfort and efficiency in operation will be unsurpassed in the world.'"[18]

This agreement, which would have involved Zeckendorf's firm constructing the "world's largest structure, [with] an international merchandise mart and a permanent world's fair," eventually fell through.[19] But the site on which Penn Station continued to operate, by then "said to be the largest single block of commercial property on Manhattan Island" (actually four contiguous square blocks, bounded by Seventh and Eighth Avenues and 31st and 33d Streets), would continue to grow more bankable in the Pennsy's eyes.[20] Soon, the development rights to the Penn Station site would be too valuable for the railroad, with its worsening financial problems, *not* to sell.

With Penn Station still in service, in 1957 the Pennsy commissioned architect Lester Tichy to design a new ticket counter for the main concourse. The railroad hoped that the brightly lit, futuristic-looking counter would spur ticket sales and improve its image. Instead, the counter, by standing in such stark and alien contrast to McKim, Mead and White's Roman sobriety, served merely to underscore the railroad's increasingly desperate situation. When the effect of the

[17] "New PRR Station Is Planned for New York." *Railway Age*, June 13, 1955, p. 65.
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] *Ibid.*

new counter was combined with that of the advertising and vending that had begun to appear on the station concourse, it began to appear as if the railroad was in dire straits indeed. Lewis Mumford, writing in 1958, railed against the changes:

> What on earth were the railroad men in charge really attempting to achieve? And why is the result such a disaster? Did the people who once announced that they were planning to convert the station property into a great skyscraper market and Fun Fair decide, finding themselves thwarted in that scheme, to turn their energies to destroying the station from the inside, in order to provide a better justification for their plans?[21]

Penn Station was clearly in its death throes as far as both Mumford and the Pennsy were concerned. Even Lester Tichy knew his ticket counter was only an interim strategy; "in the long run he expected that economics would tear the tall, tattered hall down."[22] In the August 1957 issue of *Architectural Forum,* in which his new ticket counter was discussed, Tichy's own plans for redeveloping the Penn Station site appeared — an office plaza at the surface and a new railroad facility below grade. "Every function of the station, except the glory, occurs below street level," he commented.[23]

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[21] Mumford, Lewis. "The Disappearance of Pennsylvania Station." *Journal of the American Institute of Architects,* October 1958.
[22] "Old Setting, New Gleam." *Architectural Forum,* August 1957.
[23] *Ibid*.
(Next page: Lester Tichy's ticket counter of 1957.)

A New Madison Square Garden, a New Penn Station

On November 4, 1960, a front-page article appeared in the *New York Times:* "Huge New Madison Square Garden Is Planned." The project, intended to replace the Madison Square Garden of 1925, was said to require three city blocks. The site was not named, although Irving M. Felt, president of Garden owner Graham-Paige, "when pressed, finally grinned and said: 'I think you can say it won't be far from [the present Garden on 50th Street and Eighth Avenue].'"

The name "Madison Square Garden" had been a fixture in New York since the 1870s. A succession of arenas bearing that name, each larger and more versatile than the next, had, over the years, hosted boxing, racing, professional and amateur sports, and special events of all types. The Eighth Avenue Garden of 1925, nowhere near Madison Square, had replaced the Garden of 1890 (which, incidentally, had been designed by Stanford White of McKim, Mead and White).[24] By 1960, in the eyes of Graham-Paige, it was time to replace the 1925 Garden with a modern, more flexible facility that could handle greater crowds, provide more unobstructed views, and project a futuristic image.

There was no public indication at this time that Graham-Paige had entered into negotiations with the Pennsy for the rights to develop on the site of Penn Station. Indeed, even six months later, the only indication that the Pennsy had again been considering the development of its air rights was a blurb in the May 10 *Times* about the railroad's annual meeting:

[24] "Huge New Madison Square Garden Is Planned." *New York Times*, November 4, 1960. Stanford White was actually shot to death on the roof of the 1890 Garden, according to this article, in "one of New York's most celebrated scandals."

> [It was] announced at today's meeting that the Pennsylvania had completed a detailed engineering study covering the use of the nine acres of air rights at Pennsylvania Station in New York City. … [S]everal proposals had been received by the railroad for utilization of this space and discussions were under way "with a highly competent developer for the construction of a group of modern buildings."[25]

The plans to construct the new Madison Square Garden on the Penn Station site were finally reported in the *Times* on July 25, 1961, in a front-page article entitled "New Madison Square Garden to Rise Atop Penn Station." Some details of the new Garden development were disclosed, but the fate of Penn Station itself, as indicated by the article's headline, remained unclear:

> The main waiting room of Pennsylvania Station will be left as is, and special facilities, such as ramps and arcades, will be built to permit ready access to the sports and entertainment facilities for persons using either the Pennsylvania Railroad or the Long Island Rail Road.[26]

That Penn Station would actually be demolished as part of the redevelopment was belatedly reported on July 27, along with details of the Pennsy's arrangement with Graham-Paige: "A new company has been formed, Madison Square Garden, Inc., to build and operate the project. Graham-Paige will control 75 percent of the stock of the new company and the Pennsylvania Railroad 25 percent." Further, the Pennsy would receive a "substantial rental" on a "long-term lease." The whole project was scheduled to be completed in time for the opening of the New York World's Fair in 1964.[27]

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[25] "Symes of Pennsy Tells Meeting Central Tries to Block Mergers." *New York Times*, May 10, 1961.
[26] "New Madison Square Garden to Rise Atop Penn Station." *New York Times*, July 25, 1961.
[27] "'62 Start Is Set for New Garden." *New York Times*, July 27, 1961.

The Controversy Begins

The announcement that the Pennsylvania Railroad had settled on a plan to redevelop the Penn Station site was intended as nothing more than a routine notification of private redevelopment. However, it sparked a controversy that surrounded Penn Station until, and even after, its last days. The new Madison Square Garden Corporation found itself having to justify its plans to a largely hostile public and press that did not want to see Penn Station, a building perceived as having architectural and aesthetic merit, lost. A tremendous battle — between developers and protesters — was about to begin.

II. Advocates for Redevelopment

> [Penn Station] is surely one of a few examples we have of a great space in this country. Naturally, I contemplate the destruction of this great hall with nostalgia and romantic regret. On the other hand, I have hardly ever traveled by train in the last thirty years. I am more interested in promoting a space as meaningful for the air traveler today than in obstructing the contemplated re-use of the Penn Station site.
>
> Robert E. Alexander, Robert E. Alexander and Associates,
> Letter to *Progressive Architecture,* September, 1962

> Fifty years from now, when it's time for our Center to be torn down, there will be a new group of architects who will protest.
>
> Irving M. Felt, Chairman of the Madison Square Garden Corporation,
> "Penn Pals," *Time,* August 10, 1962

The *New York Times,* before it learned that the new Madison Square Garden was to replace Penn Station, applauded the construction plans. "A new Madison Square Garden, with considerably enlarged seating capacity, makes a constructive contribution to New York City above and beyond its obvious attraction for sports and entertainment."[28]

Surely the new complex would make a constructive contribution to the balance sheets of the Pennsylvania Railroad. By selling its air rights to the Madison Square Garden Corporation and replacing Penn Station with an underground facility, the Pennsy would "collect $2.1 million per annum in rent, plus some $600,000 in yearly savings on maintenance and operating costs of the terminal."[29] The railroad would also be able to use the opportunity to create a new, modern, futuristic image for itself.

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[28] "A New and Bigger 'Garden.'" *New York Times* (editorial), November 5, 1960.

[29] "Pennsylvania Station's Last Stand." *Architectural Forum,* February 1963.

(Previous page: The completed Madison Square Garden complex, 1968. View from the corner of Seventh Avenue and 33d Street.)

A.J. Greenough, president of the Pennsy, wrote to the *Times* in response to repeated criticisms of the Garden plans:

> … [T]he fact is that the redevelopment of the Pennsylvania Station into a $90 million building complex will transform the area from a static uneconomic burden on the railroad into a viable commercial and recreational center of benefit to the entire West Thirty-fourth Street neighborhood and the public at large. The railroads that use the station have a grave responsibility to the public, their stockholders and their employees to operate as efficiently as possible. No private enterprise … can operate at a continuing loss.[30]

Greenough also said, according to a slightly sarcastic *Times* article, that "the new underground Pennsylvania Station would be airier and more convenient to travelers than the monumental marble building that is to be replaced," and that the new facility would be air-conditioned.[31]

Irving M. Felt, Madison Square Garden Corporation president, also publicly sang the praises of the proposed development, perhaps in an attempt to dismiss "the image sometimes created of him as a greedy despoiler of his city's historical heritage."[32] In addition to bringing new tax revenue to New York City, Felt "said that the plans would … revitalize an area that hasn't seen a new commercial building started in more than 35 years; pump $120,000,000 into the construction industry; provide the city with two new and modern sports arenas it needs, both easily convertible into convention halls that could attract major political conventions to this city again."[33] He questioned the architectural value of Penn Station, going as far as to say that "he believed that the gain from the new buildings and sports center would more than offset any aesthetic loss."[34]

[30] "Redeveloping Penn Station." *New York Times* (letter), August 23, 1962.
[31] "New $10,000,000 Penn Station to be Cooled and Landscaped." *New York Times,* September 28, 1962.
[32] "Battle Over Future of Penn Station Continues." *New York Times,* September 23, 1962.
[33] *Ibid.*
[34] *Ibid.*

The Madison Square Garden Corporation received some public support for its redevelopment plans. Two letters printed in the September 1962 issue of *Progressive Architecture* were from architects not in the least bit sorry to see Penn Station go. "The basic question is whether the Baths of Caracalla have ever been appropriate as a railroad ticketing center," posited one. The other harshly condemned the station as a "neoclassic behemoth" and insisted that it "…negates almost 1500 years of architectural progress. As was the vogue of that era, majesty could only be achieved by bastardizing a Greek or Roman temple; ergo, a multitude of our banks, libraries, and museums look like residue from a Caligulaean invasion."[35] Another architect, writing to the *New York Times,* called the station "grimy," "old," and "an eyesore," claiming that "today we know that a railroad station need not look like a Roman bath in order to be good architecture."[36]

Further support came from the Midtown Realty Owners Association, whose president, in a letter to the *Times*, announced his organization's support for the Madison Square Garden development, lamenting that "Not one new commercial building has been erected between Seventh and Eighth Avenues in the [midtown] area for more than thirty-five years."[37] Following this example, thirteen days later a letter of qualified support from the president of the New York Board of Trade was published.[38]

These organizations saw in the redevelopment of the Penn Station site a way to revitalize the midtown area, which had been languishing for some time. This fact, coupled with the unparalleled transportation facilities of midtown, meant that the Madison Square Garden plan would not, in the eyes of the developers, make

[35] "Penn Station To Give Way To Madison Square Garden; Great Space in Peril; RR To Go Underground." *Progressive Architecture,* September 1962.
[36] "Penn Station's Value Queried." *New York Times* (letter), August 18, 1962.
[37] "Penn Station Plans Backed." *New York Times* (letter), September 6, 1962.
[38] "Penn Station Project Backed." *New York Times* (letter), September 19, 1962.

economic sense on any other site. The Madison Square Garden Corporation and its supporters were therefore quick to dismiss suggestions that the Garden complex be constructed elsewhere in Manhattan.

In addition to the formal support by New York's developers and businessmen, the Madison Square Garden Corporation counted on the tacit cooperation of certain individuals within the New York City government. Newbold Morris, Parks Commissioner, was one. Seizing upon the opportunity to appear as a savior, Morris, who had not otherwise been involved with the project, announced on February 19, 1962 that he had begun to formulate a plan to save some of Penn Station's 84 Doric columns. "He envisaged … a rectangular colonnade, surrounded by tall trees, with perhaps a fountain in the middle," to appear in Flushing Meadow Park, where the New York World's Fair would open in 1964.[39]

Morris believed that saving some of the building's columns would placate those who did not want Penn Station destroyed. Since his was the only specific plan for saving at least part of the station, he did succeed in generating some support for the idea. But Morris never advocated saving the building. His plan seemed calculated to capture popular support for himself and for the Parks Department, not for Penn Station.

Some months later, no doubt inspired by Morris's Flushing Meadow plan, students at the Pratt Institute drew up plans to construct a colonnade at Battery Park. Morris endorsed this plan, and on September 10, 1962, a photograph of a scale model of the colonnade appeared in the *Times*.[40] One year later, though he had not yet raised any of the $200,000 necessary for construction of the colonnade, Morris was working with Charles Luckman, the Madison Square Garden architect,

[39] "84 Penn Station Doric Columns May Be Moved to Flushing Park." *New York Times,* February 20, 1962.
[40] "Morris Approves Plan to Move Penn Station Columns to Battery." *New York Times,* September 10, 1962.

on "plans and specifications for the transportation and installation of the columns in Battery Park."[41]

Nothing eventually came of Morris's plans. No money was raised for construction of the colonnade. When Penn Station was demolished, the columns, just like the rest of the station, were unceremoniously dumped in the swampy New Jersey Secaucus Meadows. "Penn Station Columns Dumped in Jersey," announced the *Times* (on October 9, 1964), sadly quoting the head of the wrecking firm as saying "If anybody seriously considered it art, they would have put up some money to save it." It is apparent that Morris did not "seriously consider" the columns, or the station, art; he merely used the occasion to enhance his profile by playing the part of Penn Station's knight in shining armor.

The developers were pleased to have him play that role, because they could then respond to protesters who didn't want Penn Station demolished by referring them to Morris. A.J. Greenough, president of the Pennsy, did just that in his August 23, 1962 letter to the *Times:*

> True, there are esthetic values in the Pennsylvania Station. If plans now being considered are realized, some of the station's eighty-four Doric columns may be transferred to Flushing Meadow Park or Battery Park or some other suitable location.[42]

Another city official on whom the developers depended for tacit support was James Felt, head of the City Planning Commission and brother of Irving M. Felt, chairman and president of the Madison Square Garden Corporation. Although James Felt said publicly he would distance himself from the entire project because Irving Felt was his brother, he also stated that the City Planning Commission could

[41] "Work Opens Soon on Penn Station." *New York Times*, September 18, 1963.
[42] "Redeveloping Penn Station." *New York Times* (letter), August 23, 1962.

have a say not on Penn Station's demolition, but only on new construction.[43] If someone else had been commission head, someone more willing to consider the notion that Penn Station was a landmark worth saving, the Planning Commission would not have ducked the demolition issue.

As it happened, Felt resigned as commission chairman in December 1962; a new city charter had given some of his power to Mayor Robert F. Wagner, whose ear Felt "seemed to have lost" by late 1962 (two of his recent proposals had been "squelched" by Wagner).[44] Felt remained on the commission, though; he still could have helped his brother with the Garden complex's many applications, permits, and variances. These were all finally approved in January 1963 — according to *Architectural Forum*, "to the surprise of few people (but the disappointment of many)."[45]

Summary Analysis

The redevelopment of Penn Station into Madison Square Garden was an ideal business solution for both the Pennsylvania Railroad and Graham-Paige. The railroad, by replacing Penn Station with an underground facility and selling its air rights, achieved both of its objectives — it significantly cut its overhead and fashioned a modern new image for itself. Graham-Paige, for its part, obtained the largest single building area in Manhattan, which, as a bonus, was in accessible midtown. The plans also resulted in an extra benefit for each company: the railroad would make it possible for more people to attend Garden events than if the Garden were located elsewhere, and, likewise, the presence of the Garden would induce more Manhattan-bound travelers to ride the railroad.

[43] "Felt Gives View on Penn Station; Says City Can Affect Zoning but Not Demolition." *New York Times,* August 26, 1962.
[44] "Felt Steps Down." *Architectural Forum,* February 1963.
[45] "Pennsylvania Station's Last Stand." *Architectural Forum,* February 1963.

The support the Madison Square Garden Corporation received from realtors, tradesmen and businessmen anxious to see new commercial development take place was a welcome bonus in terms of public relations; the developers needed all the help they could get in their ensuing war of words with protesters. In the end, however, the developers didn't need to justify their plans to the public. The Madison Square Garden Corporation owned the site, and as long as the developers met all of the city's building requirements and zoning codes, they could build and/or demolish whatever they wanted. "The present station, handsome though it is, cannot cope with modern-day demands. What is required is a newly designed, efficient terminal that recognizes both the convenience and the requirements of the day," was Pennsy president A.J. Greenough's final word[46], and, despite vigorous protests, no law could be invoked to contradict him.

[46] "New $10,000,000 Penn Station To Be Cooled and Landscaped." *New York Times,* September 28, 1962.

III. Advocates for Preservation

> Until the first blow fell no one was convinced that Penn Station really would be demolished or that New York would permit this monumental act of vandalism against one of the largest and finest landmarks of its age of Roman elegance. … It's not easy to knock down nine acres of travertine and granite, 84 Doric columns, a vaulted concourse of extravagant, weighty grandeur, classical splendor modeled after royal Roman baths, rich detail in solid stone, architectural quality in precious materials that set the stamp of excellence on a city. But it can be done. It can be done if the motivation is great enough, and it has been demonstrated that the profit motivation in this instance was great enough. … Any city gets what it admires, will pay for, and, ultimately, deserves. Even when we had Penn Station, we couldn't afford to keep it clean. We want and deserve tin-can architecture in a tin-horn culture. And we will probably be judged not by the monuments we build but by those we have destroyed.
>
> "Farewell to Penn Station," *New York Times* editorial, October 30, 1963

Lewis Mumford, first critic to realize that Penn Station's death was in the cards, lamented its "bungling destruction" three years before the plans for the new Madison Square Garden development were disclosed.[47] Other critics, lacking Mumford's foresight, were inspired to voice their support of Penn Station only after the Garden proposal had been announced. In the fall of 1961, only a few months after that announcement, architects, artists, and writers began weighing in with their opinions.

Although some architects supported the new complex, many early objectors echoed Mumford in their gloom. "First Tichy ruined the main space [with his ticket counter of 1957], now Luckman & Associates will complete the wreck," complained one architect.[48] A second agreed: "The 'present Baths-of-Caracalla

[47] Mumford, Lewis. "The Disappearance of Pennsylvania Station." *Journal of the American Institute of Architects,* October 1958.

[48] "Penn Station To Give Way To Madison Square Garden; Great Space in Peril; RR To Go Underground." *Progressive Architecture,* September 1962.

space' has been dead for years. The space never survived the sweeping intrusion of the canopy over [Tichy's] ticket counter, and the hawking diversions of advertising displays."[49] "It seems to me," concurred a third, "that the station suffered three strikes against it when they put that overgrown pterodactyl [Tichy's counter] in the concourse — thoroughly ruining the wonderful space, baths, railroad station—whatever it is."[50] Aline Saarinen, noted architectural critic and widow of architect Eero Saarinen, proposed action to preserve the station: "Although the interior has been almost entirely ruined, its great space and nobility are still visible. … I would do everything possible to urge its restoration and imaginative re-thinking in order to make it again functional."[51]

Others agreed. Some believed that the building's monumental character should make it invulnerable to demolition. "[The] only buildings and monuments which can be expected to survive are those which, like the pyramids of Egypt and Central America, are too much trouble to take down," pronounced one letter.[52] Many were angered that Penn Station was being taken down to make way for commercial development. "New Yorkers will lose one of their finest buildings, one of the few remaining from the 'golden age' at the turn of the century, for one reason and one reason only: that a comparatively small group of men wants to make money," wrote the news editor of *Progressive Architecture* in a letter to the *New York Times* printed on September 17, 1962. One architect complained that designers beholden to commercial interests threatened the integrity of his profession and offered a suggestion to avoid disputes among architects:

[49] *Ibid.*
[50] *Ibid.*
[51] *Ibid.*
[52] *Ibid.*

> Frequently, when we are fighing an avaricious interest, we also have to fight with our own colleagues who conspire with the predators for a fast buck. Perhaps we should have an oath of the type doctors take, which would make it at least hazardous for an architect to conspire against our cultural domain.[53]

Several others advocated relocating the new Madison Square Garden complex to another, underutilized site in Manhattan — perhaps to one of the city's urban-renewal areas.[54] (As noted earlier, these proposals were quickly dismissed.)

Some recognized that saving Penn Station would require resuscitation. "It is of minor importance that it is a full-scale replica of the Baths of Caracalla but of major importance that it is a grand and noble room. … [Penn Station is] sufficiently worth preserving to justify seeking a use for it somehow compatible with its size and character and location," proclaimed one architect.[55] Wrote another, "The real fight is not as architects, but as citizens of a city, the public owners of open spaces. We must work for public action to maintain and give continued life and activity to these great spaces. For without continued life, perhaps new kinds of life, they will be dead and gone anyway."[56] Architect Robert C. Weinberg offered a plan to keep Penn Station's facade as the base of a new office-building development.[57] Execution of Charles Follen McKim's original design for an office tower atop Penn Station, which McKim himself had resisted, was urged by Henry Hope Reed, Jr., in lieu of developing the Madison Square Garden complex.[58]

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[53] *Ibid.*
[54] *Ibid.*
[55] *Ibid.*
[56] *Ibid.*
[57] "Future of Penn Station; Suggestion Offered to Preserve Facade for New Buildings." *New York Times* (letter), May 7, 1962.
[58] "Youthful Art Critics Voice Hope Penn Station Will Not Be Razed." *New York Times*, November 5, 1962.

Institutional Support

Art and architecture institutions almost uniformly called for Penn Station to be preserved. In September 1961, two prominent organizations indicated their opposition to the Garden redevelopment plans. The Municipal Art Society, a civic-minded group rooted firmly in Beaux-Arts and City Beautiful ideals, had been active in New York since before the turn of the century, introducing "the laissez-faire city to a new sense of civicism"; the National Trust for Historic Preservation, a non-profit organization chartered in 1949 by Congress, had begun to champion the cause of landmarks preservation.[59,60,61] Letters from the heads of both organizations were published the following month in *Architectural Forum.* "Have the railroads so completely capitulated to the airlines that a series of low-ceilinged, concession-strewn rat mazes is the best gateway to New York which they now can offer?" demanded Harmon Goldstone, President of the Municipal Art Society. New York City "has already been extremely reckless with its architectural monuments and can ill afford to sacrifice another," charged Robert R. Garvey Jr., the Executive Director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.[62]

The American Institute of Architects opposed the razing of Penn Station; several of its members, as well as the editor of the Institute's *Journal*, objected loudly during the controversy.[63] *Oculus*, the A.I.A.'s New York chapter magazine, bitterly reported that "New York seems bent on tearing down its finest buildings… No opinion based on the artistic worth of a building is worth two straws when huge

[59] Gilmartin, Gregory. *Shaping the City: New York and the Municipal Art Society.* New York: Clarkson Potter, 1995.
[60] "Penn Station To Give Way To Madison Square Garden; Great Space in Peril; RR To Go Underground." *Progressive Architecture*, September 1961.
[61] National Trust for Historic Preservation, *www.nthp.org.*
[62] "Penn Station Demolition Deplored." *Architectural Forum*, October 1961.
[63] "Wagner Confers on Penn Station; Promises to Study Artistic Objections to Razing Plan." *New York Times*, September 11, 1962.

sums and huge enterprises are at stake."[64] The Fine Arts Federation of New York, a non-profit alliance of art and architecture groups established in 1895, also protested the plans for demolition, preferring instead "that a study should be made 'with a view to preserving those qualities of spaciousness and monumentality for which the station is justly famous.'"[65,66]

Editorial Support

Architectural publications, the popular press, and the *New York Times* supported Penn Station vigorously throughout the controversy. Editorials condemning the station's demolition appeared frequently, but just as frequently, the press indicated more subtly its support for the station's preservation.

The phrasing of a headline in *Progressive Architecture*'s September 1961 issue — "Penn Station To Give Way To Madison Square Garden; Great Space in Peril" — showed that magazine's desire to see the station preserved. Further, two pictures appeared aside that article. "World War II view of station interior gives feeling of great space," read the caption to the first picture, a view of McKim's expansive concourse. The second picture, a rendering of Charles Luckman's new underground facility, had a caption that read "Proposed Pennsylvania concourse differs radically, to say the least," referring sarcastically to the modernized station's low ceilings (among other design elements). Similarly, a *New York Times* headline that appeared after demolition had begun referred to Penn Station almost reverentially: "A Proud City Landmark, Now Broken and Somber, Awaits the Steel Ball Coup de Grace."[67]

[64] "City Acts to Save Historical Sites." *New York Times,* April 22, 1962.
[65] "Fine Arts Unit Asks Delay in Penn Station Demolition." *New York Times,* September 18, 1962.
[66] Fine Arts Federation, *www.anny.org/orgs/0085/001p0085.htm.*
[67] "A Proud City Landmark, Now Broken and Somber, Awaits the Steel Ball Coup de Grace." *New York Times*, January 25, 1964.

Many of the editorials that appeared throughout the controversy were strongly worded. After describing Penn Station in glowing terms, *Time* addressed the stark reality: "All of this is going to be torn down because it no longer makes economic sense."[68] *Progressive Architecture*, after demolition had begun, mourned the station's passing: "The great hall will go, the great concourse will fall, the traveler will be mashed into subterranean passageways like ancient Christians while the wrestler and the fight promoter will be elevated to the vast arena. The Decline and Fall of the American Empire — *sic transit gloria mundi*."[69] *Architectural Record* and *Architectural Forum* each printed a number of anti-demolition pieces; as late as 1970, with the publication of three drawings of the old Penn Station, *Architectural Forum* was still speaking of "the drama of destruction wrought by modern-day Vandals. While we can celebrate the richness of these drawings… we continue to mourn the poverty of civic imagination implicit in [their] subject."[70]

No publication attacked the Madison Square Garden Corporation more harshly than the *New York Times*. On March 21, 1962, the *Times* responded to Parks Commissioner Newbold Morris's plan to save some of Penn Station's columns with a scathing editorial entitled "Kill Him, but Save the Scalp":

> … As tragic as the loss of an important municipal landmark must inevitably be, how much sadder is the thought of those eighty-four disembodied Doric columns banished to Flushing Meadows, as the well-intentioned Commissioner proposes. With what smug, sentimental self-deception we assume that by making some pleasant, picturesque arrangement of left-over bits and pieces, after razing the original, we are accomplishing an act of preservation! Nothing could be further from the truth. Once the total work of architecture is destroyed, it is gone forever. Even more regrettable than the demolition of a notable landmark is the

[68] "Penn Pals." *Time*, August 10, 1962.
[69] "Pennsylvania Station: Finis." *Progressive Architecture*, December 1963.
[70] "The Grandeur that was Penn Station." *Architectural Forum*, December 1970.

> substitution of commercial structures of no particular distinction or style. It is another tragic truth that it is much too expensive today to construct or maintain monuments of the spaciousness, solidity and scale of McKim, Mead & White's magnificent adaptation of the Roman Baths of Caracalla for Pennsylvania Station or the great glass and steel train room that so superbly expressed the impressive technology of the beginning of our century. The ultimate tragedy is that such architectural nobility has become economically obsolete, so that we must destroy it for shoddier buildings and lesser values.

Ada Louise Huxtable, architectural critic for the *Times* who would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1970, also expressed her outrage at the proposed demolition of Penn Station. She lashed out at James Felt's City Planning Commission for saying that it could only rule on new construction, not demolition:

> What few realized, and this made all of the impassioned pleas for the cultural and architectural values of the city fruitless, was that however much the commission might be moved in the area of its civic conscience by such arguments, it was totally without power to act on them. … The decision [to approve construction on Madison Square Garden] rested entirely on whether congestion would be increased by issuing the variance. The joker here, and it is a terrifying one, is that the City Planning Commission was unable to judge a case like Penn Station's on the proper and genuine considerations involved.[71]

Huxtable also excoriated society as a whole:

> It's time we stopped talking about our affluent society. We are an impoverished society. It is a poor society indeed that can't pay for these amenities; that has no money for anything except expressways to rush people out of our dull and deteriorating cities.[72]

[71] "Architecture: How To Kill a City." *New York Times*, May 5, 1963.
[72] *Ibid.*

Summary Analysis

Individual criticisms, harsh editorials, and the loud anger of art and architecture institutions were powerful weapons in the fight to save Penn Station. But these protests were uncoordinated, severely limiting their effectiveness. While they succeeded in gaining some public sympathy for Penn Station, the Madison Square Garden Corporation faced more formidable opposition — a group of influential architects, artists, and writers who had organized to try to save the station. This group, using more sophisticated methods of protest, would be responsible for the landmarks preservation movement that ultimately changed the way redevelopment took place in New York. The group's name was AGBANY.

SAVE OUR CITY

Nobody seems to care about New York—except for those of us who live and work here. And we, who do care, believe that the time has come to put a stop to the wanton destruction of our greatest buildings, to put a stop to wholesale vandalism.

Penn Station, one of our finest structures, completed in 1910 by the great architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White, is about to be demolished—just as the Ritz, the Murray Hill and the Margoery were destroyed to make more room for still more profit-making square footage.

It may be too late to save Penn Station; next month the wreckers will move in for the kill. But it is not yet too late to save New York.

We, the undersigned—architects, artists, architectural historians, and citizens of New York—serve notice upon present and future would-be vandals that we will fight them every step of the way. New York's architecture is a major part of our heritage.

We intend to see it preserved.

Charles Abrams, Joseph Addonizio, Samuel Aldendorf, Harry Alper, Stewart Alsop, Wayne Andrews, Jeffrey Aronin, Victor Barth, Albert Barach, Edward Barnes, Frank Battipede, Howard Battin, Ruth Bauser, John Bayley, S. Brian Baylinson, David Beer, Hildegarde Bevrim, Alister Bevington, Neal Birby, Peter Blake, Hyman Bogatsky, Max Bond, Jr., John Brady, John Briggs, Samuel Brody, Roberts Bujar, James Burns, Margaret Cain, Giorgio Cavaglieri, Chicago Heritage Comm., Patrick Clark, Jr., Gino Cofacci, Wm. Conklin, John Cooke, Martha Crawford, Thos. Creighton, Curtis & Davis, Lewis Davis, John Dixon, Robert Dyck, Harold Edelman, Donald Egbert, Joseph Ehrlich, Ferdinand Eiseman, Eugene Ewen, Roger Feinstein, Ida Ferguson, Jose Fernandez, James Fitch, Jay Fleishman, Irwin Flemenger, Lloyd Foote, Ulrich Franzen, Jerome Freedman, F. G. Frost, Nesbit Garmendia, Andre Girardo, Romaldo Giurgola, Muriel Goldblatt, Allen Gowans, Warren Gran, Paul Grotz, Jordan Gruzen, Leon Haft, August Heckscher, David Helpern, Esther Hesse, William Hesse, Joshua Hufterland, Wm. Huff, Ryuman Ide, Ara Ignatius, Jane Jacobs, John Johansen, Philip Johnson, Ray Johnson, Frances Jones, Harley Jones, Carl Josephsen, Anne Kaback, Gerhard Kallman, Harold Kellog, Burnham Kelly, Kelly & Gruzen, David Kendig, Diane Kirsch, Norman Klein, Edward Knowles, Otto Kolb, Thad Kusmierski, Panos Kyritsis, Rollin LaFrance, Doreen Landau, Victor Lenzo, Norman Lebowitz, Thos. Lehrecke, Martin Leon, Richard Lippold, Eric Lofberg, Costas Machlouzarides, Norman Mailer, Sanford Malter, Edward Mathews, Stanley Maurer, Thos. McCormack, Margaret McCormick, Chas. McKinney, Thomas Mitchell, Donald Moe, Richard Moger, John Molloy, Chas. Moore, Leon Moscovitz, Lewis Mumford, Rolf Myller, Natl. Trust for Historic Preservation, George Nemeny, Julian Neski, Frederick Neuwirth, Herbert Oppenheimer, R. H. Osmer, J. J. P. Oud, Giovanni Pasanella, Mindy Patchen, Wm. Pedersen, I. M. Pei, Carol Penchol, Nicolaus Pevsner, Chester Rapkin, Bernard Rader, Henry Hope Reed, Jr., Chas. Robinson, Phyllis Rodinsky, Ernesto Rogers, Walter Rooney Jr., Abe Rothenberg, Jan Rowan, Paul Rudolph, Raymond Rubinow, Joseph Russo, Aline Saarinen, Janet Sachs, Stanley Salzman, Peter Samton, Prentice Sanger, Glenn Schmidt, Fred Schoenwald, John Schulz, Michael Schwatzel, Alan Schwartzman, Howard Sefton, Arlene Seymour, Arnon Shaw, Wm. Shellman, Wm. Shopsin, William Short, Lloyd Siegel, Nathan Silver, Linda Simmons, Clifford Slavin, F. Ray Smith, Henry Smith, Richard Snyder, Bernard Spring, Hugh Stubbins, Edgar Tafel, Monique Tessot, Allen Temko, Bradford Tilney, Gordon Tully, Christopher Tunnard, Robert Venturi, Konrad von Appen, Ralph Walker, Ben Weese, Harry Weese, Irving Weiner, Helge Westermann, Benham Whinston, Norval White, Elsa Wiedl, Chester Wisniewski, Elliot Willensky, Estelle Wolf, Jane Working, Basil Yurchenco, Bruno Zevi, Michael Zimmer.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Every one of you can help us save what is left of New York's great architectural past. Here are some of the things you can do:

Join us TODAY, August 2nd, at 5 P.M., in front of the Seventh Avenue colonnade of Penn Station, where we will hold a peaceful demonstration of affection for this great and threatened building.

Join us in writing to Mayor Robert Wagner, to Governor Nelson Rockefeller, to Senator Jacob Javits, and to Congressman John Lindsay, demanding that they help us preserve Penn Station and other important buildings like it, and demanding that they make the preservation of our heritage an issue in the forthcoming campaign.

Join us in demanding that the Port of New York Authority acquire Penn Station from the Pennsylvania Railroad, and restore and maintain it as an important gateway to our city. The Authority now operates the Bus Terminals, Airports, Bridges, Docks and Tunnels—why not Penn Station, the finest gateway of them all.

ACTION GROUP FOR BETTER ARCHITECTURE IN NEW YORK

33 East 61st Street/New York 21, N. Y./Templeton 2-8605

Checks to support our cause will be appreciated, endorsed and mailed to the above address.

(AGBANY)

IV. Organized Opposition and Landmarks Preservation

> One of the city's strangest and most heartening picket lines appeared in New York recently. It wound its way around Pennsylvania Station led by upper-echelon architectural professionals carrying signs of protest against the impending destruction of McKim, Mead & White's classic monument to make way for a $90-million-dollar redevelopment scheme of dubious grandeur. The marchers were members of Action Group for Better Architecture in New York… They call themselves AGBANY, which sounds something like agony, the state of mind of many over current changes on the New York scene. The public demonstration was joined by about two hundred leaders in the architectural field, including the designers of some of the city's best new buildings. What they were protesting at the moment was the increasing, irreplaceable loss of New York's architectural past through irresponsible speculative building. What they plan to protest in the future is the inferior quality of much new work.
>
> "Saving Fine Architecture," *New York Times* editorial, August 11, 1962

> Nothing makes a New Yorker happier than the sight of an old building rich in memories of the past — unless it is tearing the damn thing down and replacing it with something in chromium and plate glass, with no traditions at all.
>
> "Faceless Warrens," *Time*, January 23, 1950

The urban fabric of New York has always been dynamic to an extent unequaled by any other city in the world. Especially in the second half of this century, with its profusion of huge glass, steel, and concrete skyscrapers, New York's physical landscape has constantly changed, with old structures yielding to newer, more profitable ones.

Proponents of this longstanding building arrangement point to the seeming economic efficiency with which profits are pursued as justification for the frenzied rebuilding of the city, and New York definitely owes a large part of its success and stature to its dynamism. But critics charge that the city compromises its civic

(Previous page: Advertisement from the New York Times, *August 2, 1962.)*

spaces as a result, and that its public structures and facilities are bereft of notable architecture, art, or tradition. Indeed, alarm over what some have called the city's soullessness prompted the creation, around the turn of the century, of organizations such as the Municipal Art Society and the Fine Arts Federation.

Concern over preservation of the city's architectural landmarks intensified after the Second World War, when commercial building and redevelopment in New York increased at a dizzying pace. Criticism of the emerging Radiant City, characterized by huge monolithic skyscrapers, eventually mounted to such an extent that in June of 1961, Mayor Robert Wagner was compelled to organize a Committee for the Preservation of Historic and Esthetic Structures.[74]

This was one month before the Madison Square Garden Corporation announced its intention to demolish Penn Station. Outcry over the proposed demolition (on the part of individual architects, writers, and publications) imparted greater political urgency to the cause of landmarks preservation, and on November 27, 1961, the Committee recommended the formation of a permanent commission to address the situation.[75]

On February 8, 1962, the city's Board of Estimate "created a Landmarks Preservation Commission [and] appropriated $50,000 to staff it":

> The commission was established to "provide a permanent mechanism to assure the preservation of structures of historic and esthetic importance to the city." It will designate buildings and monuments considered to be important historically or "uniquely valuable," recommend appropriate action to city agencies on questions concerning the preservation of buildings, and prepare for the Mayor a detailed legislative program for the effective protection of public landmarks.[76]

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[74] "City Acts to Save Historical Sites." *New York Times*, April 22, 1962.
[75] *Ibid.*
[76] "City Sets Up Commission," in "President to Seek 3 Shrines In State." *New York Times*, February 9, 1962.

Mayor Wagner appointed the Commission's twelve unsalaried members on April 21 and its salaried executive director, MIT alumnus James Grote Van Derpool, on June 30.[77]

In creating the Landmarks Preservation Commission, Wagner found an ideal solution to the political issue of landmarks preservation. A pragmatist, Wagner framed the vexing problem in down-to-earth terms, saying (perhaps with unintentional irony) that "while New York was always looking to the future, it must never forget that it was always building on the past."[78] No champion of preservation, Wagner realized the economic benefits of continued commercial construction. His new Commission would endure the political and popular opposition to redevelopment, while Wagner himself, as he continued to quietly encourage construction, would be able to claim that he had in fact advanced the cause of landmarks preservation.

Sure enough, the Landmarks Preservation Commission soon found itself listening to protests on the subject of Penn Station. But the Commission, as only a mayoral agency, was essentially powerless. The unsalaried chairman, architect Geoffrey Platt (previously chairman of the Committee for the Preservation of Historic and Esthetic Structures), said that he regretted the Commission would not be able to save Penn Station.[79] The Commission had only administrative and advisory responsibilities; it was without legislative authority. This arrangement struck a balance, for Wagner, between making a token gesture and taking up the cause of landmarks preservation.

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[77] *Ibid.* and "City Asks to Save Landmarks; Names Scholar to New Agency." *New York Times,* July 1, 1962.
[78] "City Acts to Save Historical Sites." *New York Times,* April 22, 1962.
[79] *Ibid.*

AGBANY

Norval White, architect and assistant professor of architectural design at Cooper Union, proposed a new solution to the Penn Station problem in his May 26, 1962 letter to the *New York Times:*

> The motorist is greeted by the grandeur of the George Washington Bridge; the air traveler by the spaces and structures of Idlewild; the seafarer by the splendor of New York Harbor, the Statue of Liberty and its piers. All of these basic systems of symbolic arrival are controlled and owned by the Port of New York Authority: bridges, tunnels, piers, docks, airports, heliports, et al. Why not, therefore, place the great railroad terminals (including Grand Central) and their spaces under the same ownership, to complete the structure of transportation portals to our city, and maintain them under a proper public authority? The Pennsylvania Railroad should not be made to suffer from the economic exploitation of an important monument and symbol, an important gateway to the nation.

White's idea turned the whole Penn Station debate on its head. The question was no longer whether the Madison Square Garden Corporation should be permitted to demolish the station, but whether the city should offer the railroad a viable alternative by buying and operating Penn Station. Coming when it did, before the wave of public rail takeovers that could still not be foreseen in 1962, White's proposal was revolutionary.

White soon banded together with five other prominent architects (Norman Jaffe, Peter Samton, Jordan Gruzen, Diana Kirsch, and Elliot Willensky) to form the Action Group for Better Architecture in New York (AGBANY). Through their professional associations and contacts, the AGBANY members quietly built the membership of their organization. In an unusual advertisement AGBANY placed in the August 2, 1962 *Times* to attract attention to its cause[80], over 175 members

[80] AGBANY's *Times* advertisement appears on page 31 of this paper.

(mostly architects, artists, and writers) were listed alphabetically by name, including such notables as Philip Johnson, Aline Saarinen, August Heckscher, Lewis Mumford, Norman Mailer, I.M. Pei, and Jane Jacobs.

AGBANY's advertisement called for volunteers to join in a protest picket at Penn Station that very afternoon. The ad repeated White's Port Authority ownership proposal, but conceded that "it may be too late to save Penn Station." Nevertheless, the ad declared, "it is not too late to save New York," and boldly "serve[d] notice upon present and would-be vandals that we will fight them every step of the way." Readers were urged to demand that politicians make "the preservation of our heritage an issue in the forthcoming campaign."

AGBANY thus broadened the Penn Station issue to include landmarks preservation in general. From that moment on, Penn Station would be the symbol of the landmarks preservation movement, and the fight to save the station would be clearly perceived as part of a larger struggle to save landmarks throughout New York City.

On the afternoon of August 2, 1962, the media descended on Penn Station, where AGBANY's picket was held as advertised. Over 250 protesters, including most of the members listed in the ad, were reported present.[81] The sight of so many white-collar intellectuals on a picket line was unusual:

> They must have seemed an odd lot to the commuters who walked past them in the heat of an August afternoon. Men with rolled-up shirt sleeves suspiciously eyed the group, with their elegant suits and smart dresses, their artistically designed red-and-blue placards. In 1962 people picketed for better wages or shorter hours; they gathered at rallies to protest segregation and to ban the bomb. It was not a time when well-dressed professionals fought for art or principle.[82]

[81] "Penn Station Ruin Protested." *Progressive Architecture*, September 1962.
[82] Diehl, Lorraine. *The Late, Great Pennsylvania Station.* New York: American Heritage, 1985.

AGBANY, as it had hoped, captured the media spotlight. Its members gave interviews to newspaper, magazine, and television reporters, and succeeded in portraying themselves as determined Davids opposing a soulless corporate Goliath. Perhaps more importantly, they drew the attention of hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers, who were finally induced to take a long, hard look at the station slated for demolition.

Predictably, the *Times* staunchly supported the protesters. In an editorial the following week, the newspaper called for "the newly appointed Landmarks Preservation Commission [to] take clear and immediate positions on threatened buildings of historic or artistic value," and declared that "progress and change involve more than profit and loss. The city's investors and planners have esthetic as well as economic responsibilities." The *Times* also observed that "New Yorkers do not lack civic pride," and confidently predicted that "if AGBANY springs to the barricades the public will not be far behind."[83] *Architectural Record*, too, took note of the picket, labeling it "a most remarkable public demonstration," and commented favorably on the feasibility of Norval White's Port Authority plan.[84]

Several hours after the picket, Mayor Wagner returned to New York from a one-month European vacation. AGBANY members, flush from their success earlier in the day, met him at the airport to deliver a letter

> asking him to enlist in the crusade. The letter urged him to call for a report from the Landmarks Preservation Commission that he appointed last April on the architectural and historical importance of Pennsylvania Station, and asked him for a meeting with a delegation next week to discuss the matter.[85]

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[83] "Saving Fine Architecture." *New York Times* (editorial), August 11, 1962.
[84] "Architects Want Penn Station Saved, Their Picket Lines Have Proved It." *Architectural Record*, September 1962.
[85] *Ibid.*

Mayor Wagner agreed to grant AGBANY a meeting, and conferred with a group of representatives, led by White, on September 10, 1962.[86] The meeting lasted only half an hour, and at its conclusion all AGBANY had obtained from the mayor were assurances that they "would have a chance to discuss their objections with the city agencies concerned"; namely, the City Planning Commission, which had not yet issued the necessary permits and variances, and the Landmarks Preservation Commission, whose chairman had already declared his impotence as far as saving Penn Station was concerned.

But in meeting with the mayor, AGBANY also increased its stature considerably. The *Times* the next day described AGBANY as the group "leading in the fight to save the station."[87] In the future, the Penn Station drama would be seen as having only two major players — the Madison Square Garden Corporation and AGBANY.

Losing a Battle, Winning a War

AGBANY's official platform, that Penn Station should be bought and operated by the Port of New York Authority, was dealt a major setback only days after the group's meeting with Wagner. "The Port of New York Authority, which owns and operates other gateways to the city — bridges, tunnels, airports — does not believe it has the authority to take over and operate the station, as [AGBANY] propose[s]," reported the *New York Times* on September 23, 1962. "In any case, its officials have indicated they have no desire to do so."[88]

In January of 1963, the battle was officially declared over; AGBANY had lost. The City Planning Commission granted the Madison Square Garden

[86] "Wagner Confers on Penn Station." *New York Times*, September 11, 1962.
[87] *Ibid.*
[88] "Battle Over Future of Penn Station Continues." *New York Times*, September 23, 1962.

Corporation all the necessary permits and variances necessary to begin demolition and new construction. "In reaching their decision, the Planning Commission deliberately shied away from considering the merits of Penn Station," noted *Architectural Forum* ruefully.[89] Demolition of Penn Station began on October 28, 1963; AGBANY picketers were again present, this time wearing black armbands.[90]

Although it failed to avert Penn Station's destruction, AGBANY succeeded in raising landmarks preservation as a significant political issue. Congressman John V. Lindsay, who in 1965 would be elected mayor of New York, was one of the most prominent politicians to identify and respond to the new sentiment toward landmarks preservation. (Penn Station was on the edge of his congressional district.)[91] As early as the 1962 campaign, Lindsay made an issue of Penn Station's proposed demolition; by the 1964 campaign, he was saying outright in political ads that "Lindsay is against destruction of the City's historical landmarks."[92]

AGBANY also prodded the Landmarks Preservation Commission into action. In July 1963, the Commission finally produced a list of 300 buildings in New York, selected on the basis of "inherent architectural or historic values that reflect the evolution of this city," as "worthy of preservation."[93] Soon after that, fulfilling one of its original tasks, the Commission finished drafting a legislation program to ensure the preservation of landmarks.

Pragmatic Mayor Wagner, who had established the Commission largely as a political expedient, was now in a difficult situation. He had dismissed the objections of AGBANY at their September 1962 meeting, and had never actually

[89] "Pennsylvania Station's Last Stand." *Architectural Forum,* February 1963.
[90] "Demolition Starts at Penn Station; Architects Picket." *New York Times,* October 29, 1963.
[91] "Felt Gives View on Penn Station." *New York Times,* August 26, 1962.
[92] *Ibid.* and "People in the Arts Support Congressman John V. Lindsay Because He Supports the Arts." *New York Times* (advertisement), October 30, 1964.
[93] "Bid Made to Save 300 Old Buildings." *New York Times,* July 21, 1963.

asked the Commission, as AGBANY had requested, whether it considered Penn Station worth saving.[94] Now the Landmarks Commission presented him with its proposed landmarks legislation. If Wagner sponsored it, secured its passage and signed it, the Commission would become a permanent, official city agency, independent of the mayor's office, and would have legislative authority to protect the landmarks it designated.

Mayor Wagner, a political realist above all else, supported the legislation. On April 19, 1965, he signed what became known as the Landmarks Law — "Section 3020 of the New York City Charter and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code."[95] The Landmarks Preservation Commission now had the power to prevent redevelopment based on architectural or aesthetic concerns. Developers were prohibited by law from endangering structures, sites or buildings designated landmarks by the Commission based on their architectural, aesthetic or historic character. A Penn Station case could never happen again. Any property owner wishing to redevelop or alter a declared landmark even in the slightest would have his plans scrutinized by the Commission.

Bestowing landmark status upon a building involved an official report from the Landmarks Preservation Commission following public hearings; the procedure was relatively uncomplicated. In the wake of Penn Station's demolition, the Commission was pressured to declare a host of buildings landmarks, including several whole neighborhoods it designated 'historic districts.' Additionally, the Commission was empowered to declare 'interior landmarks,' such as the Grand Central Terminal main waiting room and the Ed Sullivan Theatre, and 'scenic landmarks,' such as Central Park in Manhattan and Prospect Park in Brooklyn. By

[94] "Battle Over Future of Penn Station Continues." *New York Times*, September 23, 1962.
[95] New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *www.ci.nyc.ny.us/html/lpc/home.html.*

May 1997, the Commission had declared 964 individual building landmarks, 69 historic districts, 98 interior landmarks, and 9 scenic landmarks.[96]

Judicial Resolution: Penn Central v. City of New York

The Landmarks Law contained a number of provisions designed to respond to the opposition of property owners, developers and business interests. Special tax incentives, simplified permit and waiver application procedures, and other bonuses would be some of the benefits of landmark designation.[97] Also incorporated into the Landmarks Law was a clause requiring that designated landmarks be kept in good repair, lest owners allow their properties to deteriorate in the hope of getting permission to redevelop.[98]

Most controversial was the so-called "hardship provision." If an owner proved that a designated landmark was incapable of earning a "reasonable return," defined as "a financial return of less than six percent of the valuation of the land and building plus a two percent allowance for depreciation of the building," the Commission was obligated to intercede:

> The Commission may seek tax benefits for you, propose alterations to the building, recommend the use of special zoning permits (such as permits allowing the transfer of development rights), look for a buyer who would preserve the building, or try to find other ways to provide financial relief. If the Commission's plan would give you a reasonable return through the tax benefits alone, you must accept the plan. If the plan involves proposals other than, or in addition to, tax benefits, you may accept or reject the Commission's recommendations. If you reject the plan, the City of New York must either initiate condemnation to preserve the building or the Landmarks Commission must allow the [owner's redevelopment plans] to proceed.

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[96] *Ibid.*
[97] *Ibid.*
[98] *Ibid.*

The hardship provision was soon challenged in court. In 1967, the New York Central Railroad (the Pennsylvania's longtime arch-rival) announced plans to construct a 55-story office tower directly over the main concourse of Grand Central Terminal, the New York Central's Manhattan station.[99] Grand Central, which opened on February 2, 1913, was similar to Penn Station in many respects; part of the New York Central's massive electrification program around the turn of the century, Grand Central was also designed to be a monumental gateway to New York.[100] (McKim, Mead and White actually submitted a design for Grand Central to the New York Central's directors in 1903, before construction started on Penn Station, but were turned down.[101])

In the early 1960s, the New York Central had, like the Pennsylvania, experienced major financial problems. Instead of seeking to replace Grand Central Terminal, however, the New York Central, already involved in profit-seeking real estate operations, sought to construct a new office tower atop the rear half of the station. That tower, a 55-story structure that came to be known as the Pan Am building (for the airline that committed to be the tower's largest tenant), opened in the spring of 1963, as the Pennsylvania was making final preparations for Penn Station's demolition.[102] The glass-and-steel Pan Am Building was roundly attacked by architectural critics for its lack of character and absolute incongruity atop a classical railroad station. But it was profitable, leading the New York Central, beginning in 1967, to plan a companion that would sit atop the main concourse.

Unfortunately for the New York Central, building the second tower would not be as easy as building the first. In 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission had declared Grand Central Terminal a landmark, giving the

[99] Condit, Vol. 2, p. 250, and "New York City's Landmarks Commission Gives Grand Central Station a Reprieve." *Architectural Record*, October 1969.
[100] Condit, Vol. 2, p. 89.
[101] *Ibid.*, p. 64.
[102] *Ibid.*, pp. 244–245.

Commission the right to rule on any future redevelopment. Because in its opinion the new office tower would degrade the architectural and aesthetic qualities of Grand Central, the Commission in 1969 "refused to allow its construction."[103]

In 1968, the struggling Pennsylvania and New York Central Railroads merged. The new Penn Central Railroad decided to take the Landmarks Preservation Commission to court regarding the Grand Central case. The Penn Central attacked the Landmarks Law's hardship provision, claiming that the city had no right "to deprive the railroad of income from its land without compensation."[104] The outcome of the "Penn Central v. City of New York" case, the first major challenge to the Landmarks Law, would be the final word on landmarks preservation.

In early 1975, the State Supreme Court for New York County (Manhattan) ruled "that the designation of landmark status was invalid because it deprived the railroad company of the income it would rightfully earn from the proposed office building."[105] This decision was reversed in December by the Appellate Division of the State Supreme Court, which affirmed the validity of the Landmarks Commission's designation.[106] The Penn Central elected to continue court proceedings, and on April 27, 1977, the case was brought to the New York State Court of Appeals, which also decided, two months later, in the city's favor.[107]

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[103] *Ibid.,* p. 250.
[104] "New York City's Landmarks Commission Gives Grand Central Station a Reprieve." *Architectural Record,* October 1969.
[105] Condit, Vol. 2., p. 250.
[106] *Ibid.*
[107] "Penn Central v. City of New York," *www.hellskitchen.net/develop/penn.html.*

Finally, two years later, the case reached the United States Supreme Court. On June 26, 1978, the Supreme Court, by a vote of 6–3, upheld New York's Landmarks Law.[108] Justice William Brennan delivered the opinion of the Court:

> The Landmarks Law, which does not interfere with the Terminal's present uses or prevent Penn Central from realizing a "reasonable return" on its investment, does not impose the drastic limitation on appellants' ability to use the air rights above the Terminal that appellants claim, for, on this record, there is no showing that a smaller, harmonizing structure would not be authorized.[109]

The final word was thus delivered — the Landmarks Commission had the authority to carry out its legislative mandate. Over the years, the Commission would still be challenged by individual property owners, and indeed would be unable, due to legal loopholes and political maneuvering, to save several notable structures. But the landmarks-preservation war was effectively over.

[108] "Penn Central Transportation Co. v. the City of New York," *www.preservenet.cornell.edu/law/court007.htm,* and "Selected Historic Decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court," *supct.law.cornell.edu/supct/cases/historic.htm.*

[109] *Ibid.* (Excerpt from Penn Central Transportation Co. v. New York City, 438 U.S. 104, June 26, 1978.)

V. Results

> One entered the city like a god… one scuttles in now like a rat.
>
> Vincent Scully, *Architecture and Urbanism*, 1969

> At first glance, the mandate of the Landmarks Preservation Commission might appear to be limited to matters of brick and mortar, but in a broader sense it can be said to embrace a civic amenity not visible to the naked eye — the psychological good health of millions of New Yorkers. The densely woven fabric of a city, especially that of a city long settled and bearing the stamp of many generations of ambitious builders, is a source of emotional nourishment to its inhabitants. … It is not too much to say of the buildings, streets, parks, and monuments that we have inherited — and not merely the best of them, mind you, but the most characteristic — that they are indispensable to our well-being. Silently, as we dwell among them, they help to make us aware of ourselves as members of a community.
>
> Brendan Gill, Chairman Emeritus, New York Landmarks Conservancy,
> Introduction to *Guide to New York City Landmarks*[110]

New York City's Landmarks Preservation Commission, established as a permanent government agency independent of the mayor's office, owes its existence to the demolition of Pennsylvania Station. Were it not for public outcry, and especially organized protests, against the station's demolition, Mayor Wagner would not have felt the political pressure that compelled him to sign the Landmarks Law of 1965 — the law that gave the Commission power to protect landmarks from redevelopment based on architectural, aesthetic or historic concerns.

Penn Station was demolished as part of a redevelopment plan commissioned by profit-seekers uninterested in the building's architectural or aesthetic merit. The existence of the Landmarks Preservation Commission fundamentally changed the nature of redevelopment in New York. Property owners were no longer

[110] Dolkart, Andrew S. *Guide to New York City Landmarks*. New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, Preservation Press, 1992.

constrained only by zoning laws and building codes; the Landmarks Commission would now review all plans to redevelop buildings and districts it designated landmarks to ensure that nothing of architectural, aesthetic or historic value would be destroyed, damaged, or altered. The Supreme Court, in the 1978 Penn Central case, upheld the Commission's authority. The subject of that case, the second office tower atop Grand Central Terminal, was only one of many projects the Commission did not allow; by its own account, it prevented the demolition of, among other landmarks, Radio City Music Hall and the Parachute Jump at Coney Island.

One can only imagine what present-day New York would be like if the Landmarks Commission had not been created. As it is, the modern Pennsylvania Station, a low-ceilinged, architecturally unremarkable underground facility absent of sunlight, is a constant reminder of two things: the tragic demolition of the original, monumental structure that bore the name — and the fate that could have met many of New York's other landmark structures had the original's destruction not spurred the creation of the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Epilogue.

> Rare are the moments when mortals are allowed to reverse the mistakes of their past. New York City won such a reprieve last week, as an unlikely array of bureaucrats, politicians, and visionaries decided that, yes, they will rebuild the glory that was once Pennsylvania Station.
>
> "Righting a Wrecking Ball Wrong in New York City,"
> *Boston Globe*, March 8, 1998

When the Pennsylvania Railroad commissioned Penn Station in 1906, the United States government "took the opportunity to build a much-needed post office across the street on Eighth Avenue. The Pennsylvania's trains carried about 40 percent of the mail originating in New York City," so a post office directly over the Pennsy's tracks (which ran all the way to Twelfth Avenue) would be efficient.[111]

The government, pleased with McKim, Mead and White's Penn Station, awarded them the design contract for the new post office. The firm was ecstatic; according to historian Lorraine Diehl, "it is rare for an architectural firm to get the opportunity to design a building that will complement in appearance and function one they have just completed." The Farley Post Office opened in 1913; its Corinthian columns faced Penn Station's Doric ones from across Eighth Avenue.[112]

85 years later, in early 1998, the *Boston Globe* and *New York Times* reported that New York Senator Daniel P. Moynihan was lobbying to recreate the old Penn Station inside the post office, since the Postal Service no longer needed all of the building's 1.4 million square feet. On March 4, Moynihan announced that the Post Office had agreed to the use of 400,000 square feet for a new railroad station, and that financing for the project had been worked out between the federal

[111] Diehl, pp. 114–115.
[112] *Ibid.*
(Previous page: Farley Post Office, McKim, Mead and White, 1913.)

government, New York State, and New York City.

Pennsylvania Station, demolished in 1963, will thus be reincarnated across Eighth Avenue in the body of a post office. The new station will feature an interior "featuring the same high ceilings, glass-and-steel atrium, grand skylight, and, above all, the sense of vast space that older New Yorkers remember — still with a breath of awe — from the original."[113]

New York learned something since the 1960s. As a result, the beginning of the twenty-first century, like the beginning of the twentieth, will see the opening of a grand new Pennsylvania Station.

[113] "Righting a Wrecking Ball Wrong in New York City." *Boston Globe*, March 8, 1998.

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Can you afford to board the Chattanooga choo-choo?
I've got my fare, and just a trifle to spare.
You leave the Pennsylvania Station 'bout a quarter to four,
Read a magazine and then you're in Baltimore,
Dinner in the diner, nothing could be finer,
Than to have your ham and eggs in Carolina…

Glenn Miller, "Chattanooga Choo-Choo," 1941

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