

The Fall and Rise of Pennsylvania Station

Changing Attitudes Toward Historic Preservation in New York City

by

Eric J. Plosky

S.B. Planning
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

In 1910, the Pennsylvania Railroad constructed Pennsylvania Station, its New York City terminal. Built and designed as a “monumental gateway,” an important civic structure as well as a transportation hub, the station became an important part of New York’s urban fabric. Its success inspired the United States government to construct the adjacent Farley Post Office as an architectural and functional complement to Penn Station.

By 1963, changing economic conditions and the evolving nature of passenger transportation prompted the Pennsylvania Railroad to announce plans to sell development rights on the Penn Station site. The station would be demolished and replaced with a new Madison Square Garden complex; the railroad would create a new underground “Penn Station” beneath the Garden.

These plans prompted tremendous public and editorial outcry on a scale never before seen, thus beginning the historic-preservation movement in New York City. Although in 1963 the city had no authority to intervene, and Penn Station was indeed demolished as planned, Mayor Robert Wagner in 1965 signed New York City’s Landmarks Law, establishing the Landmarks Preservation Commission. The Commission had the power to protect designated landmarks from demolition.

By the 1990s, the city’s attitude toward historic preservation had come full circle, as vividly illustrated by new plans to renovate a portion of the Farley Post Office as a new Penn Station waiting area and concourse.

This thesis uses the example of Penn Station’s fall and rise to chronicle and analyze New York’s change in attitude toward historic preservation.

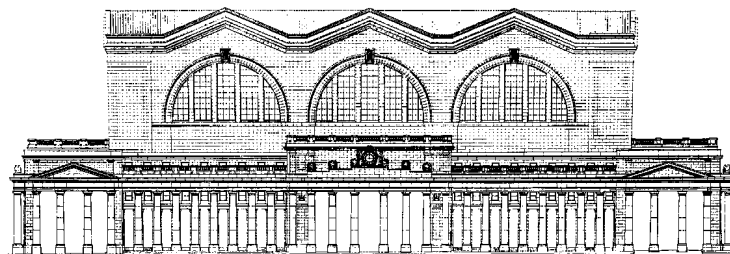
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Contents

Introduction.	5
Entrance.	9
Construction of the first Penn Station in 1910.	
Plans.	17
The new Madison Square Garden design; advocates for Penn Station's demolition.	
Preservationists.	31
The fight to preserve Penn Station; editorialists and activists.	
Fall.	47
Destruction of Penn Station; the preservation battle lost.	
Changes.	51
A new attitude toward historic preservation.	
Rise.	59
"Righting a wrecking ball wrong" — design for a new Penn Station.	
Conclusions.	69
Sources.	73
Acknowledgments.	81
Biographical Note.	83



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

The Landmarks Preservation Commission protects the City’s architectural, historic, and cultural resources. The Commission identifies, designates, and regulates buildings, districts, sites, and interiors; surveys potential landmarks and historic districts; evaluates proposals for landmark designations; and regulates alterations to designated sites and structures.

Web site of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1999

In 1961, the financially troubled Pennsylvania Railroad announced plans to demolish Pennsylvania Station, its New York terminal. Penn Station, a four-square-block colonnaded colossus built in 1910, would be replaced by a sports and entertainment complex bearing the name Madison Square Garden; the station itself would continue to exist, but as a new underground facility. In exchange for the valuable development rights, the railroad would receive one-quarter ownership in the new Garden venture as well as a hefty long-term rental.¹

The proposed demolition of Penn Station ignited a firestorm of protest. Architects, artists, writers and ordinary citizens declared the station an important public and civic place, an architectural and cultural landmark, and insisted that it be preserved. The *New York Times* and several leading architectural magazines concurred, demanding that New York City intervene to save Penn Station. Suddenly, New York, a city infamous for its ceaseless replacement of old with new, was at the forefront of a national historic-preservation movement.

In the early 1960s, there were no federal, state or municipal historic preservation laws that permitted government to intervene. Despite the best efforts of protesters, therefore, the station was eventually demolished as planned. But the loss of Penn Station served a greater purpose — the resulting public outcry led to New York City's Landmarks Law, signed by Mayor Robert Wagner on April 19, 1965. Furthermore, the battle over Penn Station heightened national interest in historic preservation; in 1966, the National Historic Preservation Act was enacted. Attitudes were changing.

Nowhere more so than in New York. By the 1990s, New Yorkers had come full circle on historic preservation. In early 1998, plans were announced to renovate a portion of the Farley Post Office — built in 1913 as an adjacent companion to the old Penn Station — as an Amtrak waiting concourse. In effect, a

¹ “‘62 Start Is Set for New Garden.” *New York Times*, July 27, 1961.

new Penn Station would be reincarnated inside the body of its twin, right across the street. In contrast to 1963, when developers couldn't wait to demolish the original station, the present-day reconstruction plans embrace the opportunity to recreate the old Penn Station, in the process thus glorifying the original. No other single case so strikingly illustrates New York's changed attitude toward historic preservation.

Penn Station's rise, fall and reconstruction paint a clear picture of postwar historic preservation in New York. Examining the Penn Station saga from the early 1960s to the late 1990s allows a detailed understanding of the change in attitude toward historic preservation. Of course, to truly understand the story of Penn Station, we must start at the beginning.

Entrance.

THE NEW PENNSYLVANIA STATION

7th Avenue and 32d Street
NEW YORK

ONLY ONE BLOCK FROM BROADWAY

In the Heart of New York's Shopping, Theatre, and Hotel District

MIDWAY BETWEEN

TIMES
SQUARE

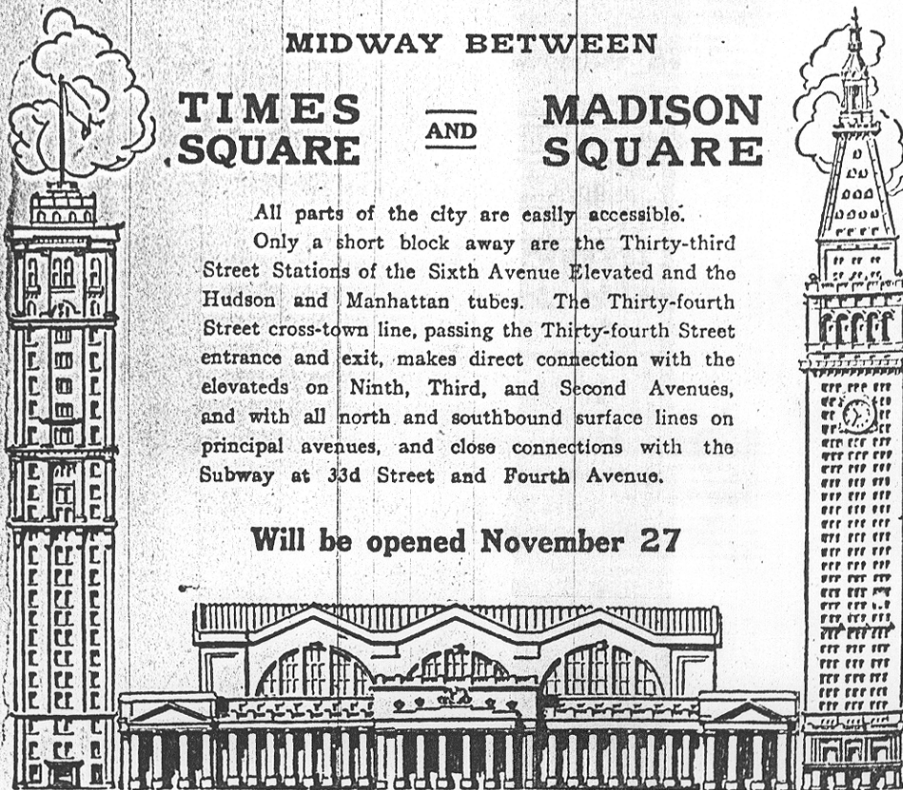
—
AND
—

MADISON
SQUARE

All parts of the city are easily accessible.

Only a short block away are the Thirty-third Street Stations of the Sixth Avenue Elevated and the Hudson and Manhattan tubes. The Thirty-fourth Street cross-town line, passing the Thirty-fourth Street entrance and exit, makes direct connection with the elevateds on Ninth, Third, and Second Avenues, and with all north and southbound surface lines on principal avenues, and close connections with the Subway at 33d Street and Fourth Avenue.

Will be opened November 27



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

The architectural design of Pennsylvania Station undoubtedly represented the largest, most difficult, and most rewarding commission for any architect of the time, or any other time in American architectural history, for that matter, and the firm chosen for this honor was with equally little question the one most fully qualified for the creation of the greatest civic works.

Carl Condit, *The Port of New York*

(Previous page: Advertisement from the *New York Times*, November 20, 1910.)

On December 12, 1901, the Pennsylvania Railroad announced a \$150 million expansion and electrification program that would bring Pennsylvania Railroad and Long Island Rail Road trains onto Manhattan Island without the use of ferries. The project would involve new tunnels, new rolling stock, new signals and switching yards — and a new station in Manhattan. Pennsylvania Station would be a monument to the Pennsylvania Railroad, a mighty symbol as well as a railroad terminal.²

In turn-of-the-century America, one architectural firm stood head and shoulders above all others in designing grand civic structures — McKim, Mead and White. Following the 1893 Columbian Exposition, McKim, Mead and White was the most prestigious and most highly regarded architectural firm in the United States, winning such important commissions as the Boston Public Library, the Rhode Island Capitol, and New York's Madison Square Garden. They were the obvious choice to design Penn Station; Pennsylvania president A.J. Cassatt, in fact, hand-picked the firm.

Charles Follen McKim was Penn Station's chief designer, the partner in charge of the project. He had studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris in the late 1860s, where he had been grounded in the sort of neo-classicism that would be much in vogue in the United States thirty years later. As the Penn Station project progressed, McKim's health deteriorated somewhat, and William Symmes Richardson, an MIT alumnus made a full partner in early 1906, assumed increasing responsibility.³

A.J. Cassatt first met with McKim to discuss the Penn Station design on April 24, 1902. Cassatt had envisioned a hotel over the station, a source of revenue that would help to offset the enormous construction and operating costs. McKim,

² Couper.

³ Condit.

however, had conceived of Pennsylvania Station as a purely monumental structure, a civic gateway free from commercial influence. At least, on the outside; McKim's and Richardson's interior design incorporated numerous retail spaces for shops, newsstands, restaurants and bootblacks — the station was intended to be a commercial hub on the inside, providing services usable by hundreds of thousands of daily passengers.

More importantly, Penn Station would be a civic structure, a public space open to all, part of the urban fabric of New York. The beauty of its design would inspire citizens and awe them by the prospects of sheer human possibility. The station would not only be the center of a new commercial district, it would be a new civic center, a nucleus for public activity. McKim envisioned Penn Station as a dynamic, popular facility, patronized by more than just harried commuters rushing to catch the evening local.

On January 28, 1906, the *New York Times* described the final design for Pennsylvania Station, and the first drawings appeared on May 20. McKim and Richardson had created on paper a breathtaking Beaux-Arts palace, a massive colonnaded replica of the ancient Roman Baths of Caracalla. The Doric Seventh Avenue façade was extremely dignified; the main waiting room had impressive, soaring travertine arches; the concourse and platforms were enclosed by a starkly beautiful glass-and-steel skylight that hinted at the state-of-the-art machinery underground. Richardson himself noted that

in designing the Pennsylvania Station, an attempt has been made, not only to secure operating efficiency for one of the largest railway stations in the world, but also to obtain an outward appearance expressive of its use, and of monumental character. ... [We] recognized the... importance of giving the building the appearance of a monumental gateway and entrance to one of the great metropolitan cities of the world.⁴

⁴ Couper.

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.” *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.”

The *New York Times* also called the station “splendid,” and heaped compliments upon the Pennsylvania Railroad’s “great” and “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.⁵

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.⁶

⁵ “The Pennsylvania Terminal.” *New York Times* (editorial), November 27, 1910.

⁶ “Pennsylvania Opens Its Great Station.” *New York Times*, November 27, 1910.



Top, a 1937 view of Penn Station's Seventh Avenue façade; above, a view from the main waiting room into the concourse.

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.⁷

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.⁸ In its first full year of operation, 1911, Penn Station handled an average of 39,200 passengers each weekday, and by 1929 its daily passenger count had climbed over 200,000.

McKim and Richardson had succeeded in designing a railroad station that was a monumental gateway, a public space that was also a powerful, though not outwardly obvious, commercial symbol. Richardson, in particular, according to Carl Condit,

was the first man to recognize what the architectural profession to this day has not adequately grasped—namely, that a terminal is not in fact a terminating element of the city, but a nodal point uniting all the modes of urban transportation, standard rail, light rail, rapid transit, automotive, and pedestrian. [He learned from Stanford White] how a big and sober industrial building could be given a full measure of monumental power.

After Penn Station opened, 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 Pennsylvania's tracks (which ran

⁷ “100,000 Visitors See New Penna. Station.” *New York Times*, November 28, 1910.

⁸ “New Penn. Station a Business-Maker.” *New York Times*, December 5, 1910.

underground all the way to Twelfth Avenue) would be efficient.⁹

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 post office, initially called the "Pennsylvania Terminal," was completed in 1913; its Corinthian columns faced Penn Station's Doric ones from across Eighth Avenue.¹⁰ In 1918, the building was renamed the General Post Office, and in 1982, honoring a U.S. Postmaster General, it became the James A. Farley Post Office. Whatever its name, eighty years after it opened, the Farley's similarity to Penn Station would suddenly take on a new importance.



The Pennsylvania Terminal, 1913 — in seventy years to be renamed the Farley Post Office.

⁹ Diehl, pp. 114–115.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Plans.

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

[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

In 1910, when Penn Station opened, the Pennsylvania Railroad was one of the country's most powerful, prestigious, and profitable companies. The next half-century, however, would present a series of critical economic problems that would determine Penn Station's future.

As early as the 1910s, the Pennsylvania experienced massive financial problems, due to nationalization of the country's railroads for several years during and after World War I. The Great Depression reddened its balance sheets even further. But 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 apparent recovery did not last long. 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 old 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.¹¹

By the mid-1950s, the Pennsy was considering both options at once. The railroad no longer considered Penn Station a monumental asset, by then regarding it as an expensive, unprofitable albatross that portrayed the railroad as hopelessly anachronistic. Mistreated during the Depression and the war years, and looking increasingly out of place in Modernist 1950s Manhattan, the station was losing popularity, and railroad officials began to talk of replacing it with a modernized underground facility. In 1955, Pennsylvania president James M. Symes announced an agreement to sell the station's valuable air rights to developer William

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of the Pennsylvania's economic decline, refer to Condit.

Zeckendorf for a one-time payment of \$30,000,000, about half of which would be used to construct a new underground Penn Station.¹² ““The [new] 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.’”¹³

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.¹⁴ But the Penn Station site continued to grow more bankable in the Pennsy’s eyes.¹⁵ The four-square-block area occupied by Penn Station — 31st to 33rd Streets between Seventh and Eighth Avenues — was “said to be the largest single block of commercial property on Manhattan Island.” 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 new counter was combined with that of the advertising and vending that had begun to appear on the station concourse, it appeared 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

¹² “New PRR Station Is Planned for New York.” *Railway Age*, June 13, 1955, p. 65.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

energies to destroying the station from the inside, in order to provide a better justification for their plans?¹⁶

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.”¹⁷ 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.



Tichy’s ticket counter; note the contrast with the columns and masonry in the background.

¹⁶ Mumford, Lewis. “The Disappearance of Pennsylvania Station.” *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, October 1958.

¹⁷ “Old Setting, New Gleam.” *Architectural Forum*, August 1957.

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).¹⁸ 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 usher in a glitzy new look to attract new audiences.

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:

¹⁸ “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."¹⁹

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 *Times* 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 vague 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.²⁰

That Penn Station would actually be demolished as part of the new Garden development 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 1964.²¹

¹⁹ "Symes of Pennsy Tells Meeting Central Tries to Block Mergers." *New York Times*, May 10, 1961.

²⁰ "New Madison Square Garden to Rise Atop Penn Station." *New York Times*, July 25, 1961.

²¹ "'62 Start Is Set for New Garden." *New York Times*, July 27, 1961.

Before Penn Station's demolition was linked to the Madison Square Garden project, the *New York Times* 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."²²

The new complex would also, certainly, 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 a more compact 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."²³ The railroad would also be able to use the opportunity to create a modern new image for itself. A.J. Greenough, Pennsy president, summarized the developers' view:

... [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.²⁴

Greenough also claimed 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.²⁵

²² "A New and Bigger 'Garden.'" *New York Times* (editorial), November 5, 1960.

²³ "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.*)

²⁴ "Redeveloping Penn Station." *New York Times* (letter), August 23, 1962.

²⁵ "New \$10,000,000 Penn Station to be Cooled and Landscaped." *New York Times*, September 28, 1962.



Madison Square Garden as constructed, 1968. Note the General Post Office at far right.

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.”²⁶ 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.”²⁷ He questioned the architectural value of Penn

²⁶ “Battle Over Future of Penn Station Continues.” *New York Times*, September 23, 1962.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

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.”²⁸ (Later, when outcry over the station’s demolition reached a fever pitch, Felt went even further, saying, “Fifty years from now, when it’s time for [the new Madison Square Garden] to be torn down, there will be a new group of architects who will protest.”²⁹)

The Madison Square Garden Corporation received some public support for its development plans. Two letters 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 Caligulæan invasion.”³⁰ 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.”³¹

Further support came from the Midtown Realty Owners Association, whose president 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.”³² Following this example, thirteen days later the New York Board of

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ “Penn Pals,” *Time*, August 10, 1962.

³⁰ “Penn Station To Give Way To Madison Square Garden; Great Space in Peril; RR To Go Underground.” *Progressive Architecture*, September 1962.

³¹ “Penn Station’s Value Queried.” *New York Times* (letter), August 18, 1962.

³² “Penn Station Plans Backed.” *New York Times* (letter), September 6, 1962.

Trade expressed its qualified support.³³

These organizations saw in the development of the Penn Station site a way to revitalize the midtown area, which had been begun to languish as postwar suburban construction diverted attention from the city. This fact, coupled with the unparalleled transportation facilities of midtown and the central location of the huge Penn Station parcel, meant that the Madison Square Garden plan would not, in the eyes of the developers, make 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 officials within the New York City government. Chief among these supporters was Parks Commissioner Newbold Morris. Seizing upon the opportunity to appear as a savior, Morris, who had not otherwise been involved with the project, announced in early 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 1964.³⁴

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.

³³ "Penn Station Project Backed." *New York Times* (letter), September 19, 1962.

³⁴ "84 Penn Station Doric Columns May Be Moved to Flushing Park." *New York Times*, February 20, 1962.

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*.³⁵ One year later, though he had not yet raised any of the \$200,000 necessary for construction of the colonnade, Morris was, apparently, working with Charles Luckman, the Madison Square Garden architect, on "plans and specifications for the transportation and installation of the columns in Battery Park."³⁶

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 Jersey," according to the *Times*, in the swampy Secaucus Meadows. The *Times* sadly quoted the head of the wrecking firm: "If anybody seriously considered it art, they would have put up some money to save it."³⁷ 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.³⁸

³⁵ "Morris Approves Plan to Move Penn Station Columns to Battery." *New York Times*, September 10, 1962.

³⁶ "Work Opens Soon on Penn Station." *New York Times*, September 18, 1963.

³⁷ "Penn Station Columns Dumped in Jersey," *New York Times*, October 9, 1964.

³⁸ "Redeveloping Penn Station." *New York Times* (letter), August 23, 1962.

* * *

The replacement of Penn Station by 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.

Historic preservation simply wasn't a concern. In the early 1960s, it had not yet occurred to most New Yorkers that certain private structures might be worthy of public protection. As in the past, private owners were regulated only by building laws and zoning codes, and when economic considerations dictated the replacement of a particular structure, the wrecking balls swung. Even the fate of Penn Station — built by McKim and Richardson an eternal, monumental gateway, a center of commercial and of public life — was ultimately in the hands of its owner, the Pennsylvania Railroad. Pennsy president A.J. Greenough summed up: “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.”³⁹

³⁹ “New \$10,000,000 Penn Station To Be Cooled and Landscaped.” *New York Times*, September 28, 1962.

Preservationists.

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

Lewis Mumford, the 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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ A second agreed: "The 'present Baths-of-Caracalla 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."⁴² "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."⁴³ 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."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Mumford, Lewis. "The Disappearance of Pennsylvania Station." *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, October 1958.

⁴¹ "Penn Station To Give Way To Madison Square Garden; Great Space in Peril; RR To Go Underground." *Progressive Architecture*, September 1962.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

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 architect.⁴⁵ 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* 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:

Frequently, when we are fighting 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.⁴⁶

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.⁴⁷ (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.⁴⁸ Wrote another, "The real

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

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.”⁴⁹ Architect Robert C. Weinberg offered a plan to keep Penn Station’s façade as the base of a new office-building development.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹

Art and architecture institutions almost uniformly called for Penn Station to be preserved. In September 1961, two organizations voiced their opposition to the Garden development plans. The first was the Municipal Art Society, a prominent civic-minded group, rooted firmly in Beaux-Arts and City Beautiful ideals, that had been active in New York since before the turn of the century, introducing “the laissez-faire city to a new sense of civicism.” “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, the Society’s president.^{52,53,54}

The second organization, a non-profit chartered in 1949 by Congress, was the fledgling National Trust for Historic Preservation. The Trust had begun, somewhat ahead of its time, to champion the cause of landmarks preservation.

Executive Director Robert R. Garvey Jr. charged that New York City “has already

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ “Future of Penn Station; Suggestion Offered to Preserve Facade for New Buildings.” *New York Times* (letter), May 7, 1962.

⁵¹ “Youthful Art Critics Voice Hope Penn Station Will Not Be Razed.” *New York Times*, November 5, 1962.

⁵² Gilmartin, Gregory. *Shaping the City: New York and the Municipal Art Society*. New York: Clarkson Potter, 1995.

⁵³ “Penn Station To Give Way To Madison Square Garden; Great Space in Peril; RR To Go Underground.” *Progressive Architecture*, September 1961.

⁵⁴ National Trust for Historic Preservation, www.nthp.org.

been extremely reckless with its architectural monuments and can ill afford to sacrifice another.”⁵⁵

Other art and architecture institutions passed judgment as well. 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.⁵⁶ *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 sums and huge enterprises are at stake.”⁵⁷ 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.’”^{58,59}

More importantly, 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. Sometimes subtle support was expressed, as in this headline from a September 1961 article in *Progressive Architecture*: “Penn Station To Give Way To Madison Square Garden; Great Space in Peril.” 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

⁵⁵ “Penn Station Demolition Deplored.” *Architectural Forum*, October 1961.

⁵⁶ “Wagner Confers on Penn Station; Promises to Study Artistic Objections to Razing Plan.” *New York Times*, September 11, 1962.

⁵⁷ “City Acts to Save Historical Sites.” *New York Times*, April 22, 1962.

⁵⁸ “Fine Arts Unit Asks Delay in Penn Station Demolition.” *New York Times*, September 18, 1962.

⁵⁹ Fine Arts Federation, www.anny.org/orgs/0085/001p0085.htm.

“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 began referred to Penn Station almost reverentially: “A Proud City Landmark, Now Broken and Somber, Awaits the Steel Ball Coup de Grace.”⁶⁰

Many of the editorials 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.”⁶¹ *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*.”⁶² *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.”⁶³

But 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,

⁶⁰ “A Proud City Landmark, Now Broken and Somber, Awaits the Steel Ball Coup de Grace.” *New York Times*, January 25, 1964.

⁶¹ “Penn Pals.” *Time*, August 10, 1962.

⁶² “Pennsylvania Station: Finis.” *Progressive Architecture*, December 1963.

⁶³ “The Grandeur that was Penn Station.” *Architectural Forum*, December 1970.

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 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 the 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. ... 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.⁶⁴

Individual criticisms, harsh editorials, and the loud anger of art and

⁶⁴ "Architecture: How To Kill a City." *New York Times*, May 5, 1963.

architecture institutions were powerful weapons in the fight to save Penn Station. Still, none of these protests made use of the nascent historic-preservation movement that had already begun in New York City.

Alarm over the ceaseless replacement of iconic New York structures by private, profit-seeking owners 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 postwar landscape, 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.⁶⁵

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.⁶⁶

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

⁶⁵ "City Acts to Save Historical Sites." *New York Times*, April 22, 1962.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

detailed legislative program for the effective protection of public landmarks.⁶⁷

Mayor Wagner appointed the Commission's unpaid twelve members on April 21 and its executive director, MIT alumnus James Grote Van Derpool, on June 30.⁶⁸

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."⁶⁹ No champion of preservation, Wagner realized the economic benefits of continued commercial construction. His new Commission would endure the political and popular opposition to development, 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 about Penn Station. But the Commission 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.⁷⁰ 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.

⁶⁷ "City Sets Up Commission," in "President to Seek 3 Shrines In State." *New York Times*, February 9, 1962.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* and "City Asks to Save Landmarks; Names Scholar to New Agency." *New York Times*, July 1, 1962.

⁶⁹ "City Acts to Save Historical Sites." *New York Times*, April 22, 1962.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Nevertheless, the Landmarks Preservation Commission would soon find itself taking a more central role in the Penn Station controversy. On May 26, 1962, Norval White, architect and assistant professor of architectural design at Cooper Union, proposed a new solution to the Penn Station:

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.⁷¹

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 — until August 2, 1962, when they placed an unusual advertisement in the *New York Times* (following page).

⁷¹ "Future of Penn Station; Placing Railroad Terminals Under Port Authority Suggested." Letter to the *New York Times*, May 26, 1962.

Over 175 members (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 historic preservation in general. From that moment on, Penn Station would be the symbol of the historic-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.⁷² 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.⁷³

⁷² "Penn Station Ruin Protested." *Progressive Architecture*, September 1962.

⁷³ 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 and civic-minded. 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.”⁷⁴ *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.⁷⁵

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.⁷⁶

Mayor Wagner agreed to grant AGBANY a meeting, and conferred with a

⁷⁴ “Saving Fine Architecture.” *New York Times* (editorial), August 11, 1962.

⁷⁵ “Architects Want Penn Station Saved, Their Picket Lines Have Proved It.” *Architectural Record*, September 1962.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

group of representatives, led by White, on September 10, 1962. 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.”⁷⁷

But AGBANY’s platform, that Penn Station should be bought and operated by the Port 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.”⁷⁸ By January of 1963, the battle was officially over; AGBANY had lost. The Landmarks Preservation Commission had done nothing; the City Planning Commission granted the Madison Square Garden 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.⁷⁹ Demolition of Penn Station began on October 28, 1963; AGBANY picketers were again present, this time wearing black armbands.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ “Wagner Confers on Penn Station.” *New York Times*, September 11, 1962.

⁷⁸ “Battle Over Future of Penn Station Continues.” *New York Times*, September 23, 1962.

⁷⁹ “Pennsylvania Station’s Last Stand.” *Architectural Forum*, February 1963.

⁸⁰ “Demolition Starts at Penn Station; Architects Picket.” *New York Times*, October 29, 1963.

Fall.

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

One entered the city like a god... one scuttles in now like a rat.

Vincent Scully, *Architecture and Urbanism*, 1969

The demolition of Pennsylvania Station took three years — even as 600 trains and 200,000 passengers continued to pass through each day. Even by 1966, when the “ugly work” was done, attitudes toward historic preservation had changed enough that the station was already missed — Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan refers to Penn Station’s razing as the greatest act of civic vandalism in New York’s history.

Carl Condit notes that the \$116 million Madison Square Garden complex is a “prime candidat[e] for the most poverty-stricken architecture in New York — indeed, it is questionable whether the structures and enclosures can be regarded as architecture at all.” The Garden complex never inspired the sort of reverence that did Penn Station; Madison Square Garden was designed to be profitable, not monumental. The new Penn Station, “dwarfed and misshapen,” was even more unloved:

The interior space consists essentially of two parts, a large ticket lobby embracing a much greater area than is necessary for the moving traffic, and a combined waiting room and concourse that is an insult to the user: it is too small, too low, contains too few seats, and provides access to all train gates in such a way as to guarantee conflict and confusion. The decor might be described as men’s room modern, and the food available in the restaurants ranges from unappetizing to unspeakable.⁸¹

In 1968, the Pennsylvania Railroad, still struggling, merged with the New York Central Railroad, its old arch-rival, to form the Penn Central Railroad. The Penn Central’s investment in Madison Square Garden failed to help the railroad, as the Garden would not turn a profit until the 1980s. By then, even the merged Penn Central was long since bankrupt; on April 1, 1976, reorganization of the railroad’s assets resulted in the ownership of Penn Station being transferred to Amtrak.⁸²

⁸¹ Condit, Vol. 2, pp. 253–255.

⁸² Federal Railroad Administration, *Environmental Assessment: Pennsylvania Station Redevelopment Project*.

Nonetheless, Penn Station continued to be a vital transportation hub. 1960s predictions that rail traffic would continue its postwar decline — the annual passenger count at Penn Station dwindled from more than 109 million in 1945 to only about 55 million in 1960 — turned out to be incorrect. Rail travel in New York experienced a tremendous resurgence; by 1998, nearly half a million passengers used Penn Station each weekday, and that number is expected to increase dramatically. By 2005, according to the Federal Railroad Administration, Amtrak expects a 17 percent increase in ridership; the Long Island Rail Road⁸³ and New Jersey Transit expect a 26 percent increase.

Recognizing that the underground Penn Station needed modernizing to keep up with the resurgence in rail traffic, the Long Island Rail Road commissioned a renovation of the facility in the early 1990s. A new entrance to Long Island platforms and the Seventh Avenue subway — a glass-and-steel canopy and tower — was constructed on 34th Street in 1994 by the architectural firm of R.M. Kliment & Frances Halsband; a contemporary architectural guidebook expressed wonder that “Penn Station is re-emerging into the world of daylight.”⁸⁴

While Penn Station evolved between the 1960s and the present day, while architects and writers vilified the Madison Square Garden development, two major developments were underway as outcry over Penn Station’s demolition caused New York’s attitude toward historic preservation to continue its about-face. Landmarks preservation became a permanent part of city development, and, as the ultimate expression of the change in attitude, a new project was in the works for Penn Station itself — a project that would aim to set to rights the destruction of McKim’s monumental gateway.

⁸³ Reorganized as an operating agency of New York’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority after the Penn Central’s bankruptcy.

⁸⁴ Sirefman, pp. 118–121.

Changes.

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

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*, 1992

Although it failed to avert Penn Station's destruction, the Action Group for Better Architecture in New York, AGBANY, succeeded in raising historic preservation as a significant political issue. Congressman John V. Lindsay, who in 1966 would succeed Robert Wagner as 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.)⁸⁵ 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."⁸⁶

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."⁸⁷ 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 never actually asked the Landmarks Commission, as AGBANY had requested, whether it considered Penn Station worth saving — was now presented with the landmarks legislation.⁸⁸ Wagner decided to support it. After the bill was passed, Robert Wagner signed, on April 19, 1965, 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."⁸⁹

⁸⁵ "Felt Gives View on Penn Station." *New York Times*, August 26, 1962.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* and "People in the Arts Support Congressman John V. Lindsay Because He Supports the Arts." *New York Times* (advertisement), October 30, 1964.

⁸⁷ "Bid Made to Save 300 Old Buildings." *New York Times*, July 21, 1963.

⁸⁸ "Battle Over Future of Penn Station Continues." *New York Times*, September 23, 1962.

⁸⁹ New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, www.ci.nyc.ny.us/html/lpc/home.html.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission was now a permanent city agency, with the authority to designate structures official “landmarks.”⁹⁰ In the wake of Penn Station’s demolition, the Commission was pressured to declare a host of buildings landmarks, and also several whole neighborhoods, such as Brooklyn Heights, which 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 May 1997, the Commission had declared 964 individual building landmarks, 69 historic districts, 98 interior landmarks, and 9 scenic landmarks.⁹¹

Demolition of designated landmarks was, of course, strictly prohibited; even minor alterations to landmarks would be scrutinized by the Commission. However, the Landmarks Law contained a number of sophisticated 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.⁹² 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 alter or demolish them.⁹³

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:

⁹⁰ Landmarks Preservation Commission web page, www.ci.nyc.ny.us/html/lpc/home.html.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

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.

The hardship provision was soon challenged in court. In 1967, the New York Central Railroad, the Pennsylvania's 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.⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵ (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.⁹⁶)

In the early 1960s, the New York Central, like the Pennsylvania, was in dire financial straits and in desperate need of new revenue. 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 tower's largest tenant, Pan American World

⁹⁴ Condit, Vol. 2, p. 250, and "New York City's Landmarks Commission Gives Grand Central Station a Reprieve." *Architectural Record*, October 1969.

⁹⁵ Condit, Vol. 2, p. 89.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

Airways), opened in the spring of 1963, as the Pennsylvania was making final preparations for Penn Station's demolition.⁹⁷ 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 Commission the right to rule on any future development. 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."⁹⁸

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 over 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."⁹⁹ The outcome of the "Penn Central v. City of New York" case, the first major challenge to the Landmarks Law, would definitively set the tone toward historic preservation in New York.

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."¹⁰⁰ This decision was reversed in December by the Appellate Division of

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 244–245.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁹⁹ "New York City's Landmarks Commission Gives Grand Central Station a Reprieve." *Architectural Record*, October 1969.

¹⁰⁰ Condit, Vol. 2., p. 250.

the State Supreme Court, which affirmed the validity of the Landmarks Commission's designation.¹⁰¹ 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.¹⁰²

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.¹⁰³ 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.¹⁰⁴

The final word was thus delivered — the Landmarks Commission had the authority to carry out its legislative mandate. New York City's attitude toward historic preservation would never be the same again. Outcry over the loss of Pennsylvania Station and the resulting Supreme Court decision marked a change in the way New York approached historic preservation — from then on, preservation would be a crucial consideration in weighing new development projects. Economic viability would no longer be private developers' only determining factor.

Nothing better illustrates New York's changed attitude than the next chapter in the life of Penn Station.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² "Penn Central v. City of New York," www.hellskitchen.net/develop/penn.html.

¹⁰³ "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.

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

Rise.



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

Since 1963, when Pennsylvania Station was torn down and Madison Square Garden erected in its place, the Farley [Post Office] has stood as the ghostlike twin of an intention the city first fulfilled, in the original station, and then defiled. Now that intention is revived. There is no rebuilding the original McKim, Mead & White Penn Station. But it is possible to re-embody something of its spirit, to make the sacrifice of the original station, which brought about the birth of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, almost tolerable. ... A moment will come when the new Penn Station, nearly finished in 2003, will stand opposite Madison Square Garden and the banal subterranean station that replaced McKim, Mead & White’s building. It will be one of those moments when two distinct paths through urban history become visible side by side. One path is essentially time-serving, a version of modernity in which the individual human experience of space is considered insignificant, irrelevant to the perception of the city as a whole. The other path, embodied by many buildings still standing in New York and by the plans for a new Penn Station, is one in which a person passing through them, or within their shadows, finds something unexpected being kindled. It does not happen to everyone every day. But it happens often to many people, to tourists and commuters alike, and when it does it makes a civic difference.

“Planning for Greatness to Come,” *New York Times* editorial, May 20, 1999

(Previous page: Rendering of the new Penn Station design, looking northwest. Eighth Avenue and Madison Square Garden are at right.)

During the 1980s and 1990s, passenger traffic at Penn Station increased so dramatically that the station's future was very much in doubt. Unless something was done, sheer human congestion would threaten to throw Penn Station into chaos every rush hour.

Penn Station's capacity simply had to be expanded in order to permit continued economic growth in New York City. New transportation plans — high-speed Amtrak service from New York to Boston, modernization of the Long Island Rail Road, extension of city transit services to Kennedy and La Guardia airports — meant that Penn Station, the transit hub of New York, was going to become that much more critical to the city's future.

In 1991, in recognition of the growing need to improve capacity, Amtrak began an assessment of its expansion options at Penn Station.

During this effort, Amtrak learned that space might be available within the Farley [Post Office], which shares platforms and rail access with Penn Station, and decided to evaluate the feasibility of moving its rail terminal facility to the Farley Building. ... In addition to renovation and correction of structural and capacity deficiencies, Amtrak proposed to create new and additional retail space ... to generate income to help support the operational costs of the facility.¹⁰⁵

Between the opening of the Farley Building and Amtrak's initial expansion assessment, the United States Postal Service had fundamentally changed its mail operations within New York City. The Farley Building's staff had been reduced by 40 percent, and Amtrak officials were convinced that some space within the building could be converted to a new Amtrak waiting area and concourse.¹⁰⁶ That would have the effect of removing tens of thousands of daily passengers from the crowded subterranean waiting area and concourse of Penn Station.

¹⁰⁵ Federal Railroad Administration, *Environmental Assessment: Pennsylvania Station Redevelopment Project*.

¹⁰⁶ "Deal Will Give a Grand Space to Penn Station." *New York Times*, March 5, 1998.

What began as Amtrak's needs assessment soon became a project with deep symbolic importance to New Yorkers. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, one of the most eloquent critics of the destruction of McKim, Mead & White's Penn Station, directed considerable attention to the Farley expansion project. Not just a way to improve transportation service in New York, transforming Farley would be a means by which to resurrect the old Penn Station, to rectify the "vandalism" of its demolition. In 1993, Moynihan and President Bill Clinton

attended an event at Madison Square Garden. "I pointed out the Farley Building to him then," Mr. Moynihan recalled[.] "He looked up and said, 'Would you look at that? There's nothing like that in Arkansas.'"¹⁰⁷

Both the city and state governments quickly became enthusiastic about the project, seeing a chance to finally bring closure to the Penn Station case. The change in attitude toward historic preservation had been so dramatic within a thirty-year period as to make Penn Station into something of a ghost that haunted development projects in New York; this was an opportunity to exorcise that ghost once and for all. In 1995, an organization of city and state officials called the Pennsylvania Station Redevelopment Corporation (PSRC) was formed, with the express purpose of overseeing the Farley project.

But the Farley project was not yet a reality in 1995; several problems remained. Chief among these was the Postal Service's reluctance to give up space in the Farley Building. Initially, the post office offered to release about three-tenths of the Farley's interior for use as an Amtrak waiting area and concourse. The PSRC insisted that it needed at least half of the Farley's 1.4 million square feet. "We really think we can both fit in here very well if we share the building," said Charles Gargano, PSRC chairman.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ "NYC Seeks Shiny New Train Station." *USA Today*, March 2, 1998.

Still, the Postal Service refused to offer more space, confounding the development corporation's plans — and the press, which had taken up the cause of the new station. In 1998, the *New York Times* urged that all postal operations be moved out of the building.¹⁰⁹ Even the *Daily News* concurred.¹¹⁰ “The Postal Service stubbornly held out; District Manager/Postmaster Sylvester Black said he thought the space the post office was offering was enough to house a train station and that if the agency gave more space, it would have a ‘severe negative impact to postal service in New York City.’”¹¹¹

Eventually, at Senator Moynihan's urging, the White House brokered a deal. The Postal Service would remain in the western half of the Farley Building; the eastern half would be turned over to PSRC for the Amtrak project.¹¹² The federal government would continue to own the building; Amtrak would be a tenant. ‘Landlord’ Bill Clinton, upon completion of the compromise space deal, contacted Moynihan — “The building is yours.”¹¹³

Funding was the next stumbling block, though relatively minor in comparison to the Postal Service's space holdout. The project was budgeted at \$484 million in mid-1999; it would be paid for by a combination of federal, state and city money, as well as private funds that would be dedicated to the retail and commercial spaces proposed for the new Farley Amtrak concourse.¹¹⁴ President Clinton himself lobbied Congress for \$180 million in funding for the Farley project, “as a tribute to Senator Moynihan and because it's the right thing to do.”¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ “A New Penn Station.” *New York Times* editorial, March 6, 1998.

¹¹⁰ “Half a Station Won't Do.” *New York Daily News* editorial.

¹¹¹ “NYC Seeks Shiny New Train Station.” *USA Today*, March 2, 1998.

¹¹² Municipal Art Society, www.mas.org/new/current2.htm.

¹¹³ “Deal Will Give a Grand Space to Penn Station.” *New York Times*, March 5, 1998.

¹¹⁴ Press release, www.empire.state.ny.us/press/pennsta.htm.

¹¹⁵ “Clinton Backs NY Transportation Hub.” *New York Times*, May 19, 1999.

The last major problem faced by the PSRC was, ironically, convincing preservationists that the project would not endanger the historic character of the Farley Building, which was one of the first structures to receive official designation from the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. The Municipal Arts Society, which had plead for saving the original Penn Station, now expressed concern for the Farley Building:

“...The most important details [of the Farley project] are unclear,” said Philip K. Howard, the chairman of the Municipal Arts Society, which maintains that the Farley Building is such an important landmark that it should be turned over entirely for one well-coordinated renovation project. “It would be a tragedy to plan for the restoration of this grand landmark in pieces,” he said.¹¹⁶

Moynihan’s leadership convinced preservationists that the Farley project would be a success. For it was Moynihan who lobbied Congress in 1981 to pass the Union Station Redevelopment Act, which called for the federal restoration and commercial development of Washington, D.C.’s Union Station. Union Station had opened in 1907 and was nearly as prominent as Penn Station in the architectural press of the day — *Architectural Review*’s August 1911 issue featured an article with pictures of both stations (“The New Terminal Stations at New York and Washington”). By the 1960s, Union Station had also fallen on hard times, but it was protected by 1966’s National Historic Protection Act, passed in the wake of New York’s Penn Station experience. Several renovation schemes were proposed and failed, and by 1981, Moynihan said he could actually see a tree growing from Union Station’s roof. ““The building had literally “gone to seed,”” he wrote.” The Union Station Redevelopment Act transformed the station beyond even Moynihan’s expectations; by 1998, Union Station drew nearly 24 million passengers, including 8 million tourists — making it Washington’s biggest tourist attraction.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ “Deal Will Give a Grand Space to Penn Station.” *New York Times*, March 5, 1998.

¹¹⁷ “NYC Seeks Shiny New Train Station.” *USA Today*, March 2, 1998.

Finally, on May 19, 1999, a panoply of high-ranking government officials assembled within the Farley Building to officially inaugurate the project. Their remarks were heavy with symbolism — this wasn't just a simple transportation construction project, this was a chance to set things right, to atone for the destruction of the original Penn Station. The twenty-first-century Pennsylvania Station would be, as had been the original McKim station, not just a railroad station but a public place, a civic center, and it would benefit by utilizing the architecture of the Farley Building. Historic preservation had come full circle in New York.

President Clinton was there; he said that “while the new Penn Station cannot fully replace the majesty of the old one, its design is close enough to ‘take the best elements of the past and create a remarkable station for the future. ... We can honor one of the first great buildings of the twentieth century and create the first great public building of the twenty-first century. In so doing, New York can once again provide a model for the nation.’”¹¹⁸

United States Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater said, “This is not just a building. This is an historic place ... a gateway to this mighty city and this mighty nation.” New York Governor George Pataki waxed even more eloquent: “History will judge us by what we accomplish as we renew New York. Restoring the Farley Building as a world-class rail hub, while echoing the beauty and grandeur of the lost McKim, Mead and White Penn Station in a building designed by the same architects, will provide history a true sense of the heights we reached in the late twentieth century.”¹¹⁹

The closing remarks were delivered by Senator Moynihan himself, who was praised by all the other speakers for his “tireless” efforts at making the Farley project a reality.

¹¹⁸ “Clinton Backs NY Transportation Hub.” *New York Times*, May 19, 1999.

¹¹⁹ Senator Moynihan's web site, www.senate.gov/~moynihan/press/pennsta2.htm.

It used to be everything happened in the city. Then — a generation ago — nothing. We had all but succumbed to a form of entropy and were publicly enfeebled. Great public works were beyond us, even as we tore down what remained. I never gave up hope, however, that our desire and capacity for greatness would return. To a degree, they have. It is up to a new generation to renew our cities. Penn Station is the start, and we will find — when we complete this project — that suddenly all will seem possible. We are at the hinge of history, and you must push.¹²⁰

PSRC retained Skidmore, Owings & Merrill to design the Farley renovations. As in 1910, the press praised the new design. “*New York Times* architecture critic Herbert Muschamp call[ed] the design ‘superb’ with ‘a spectacular flow of space. ... The plan comes as proof that New York can still undertake major public works. This is the most important transportation project undertaken in New York City in several generations.’”¹²¹ *New York* magazine also called the design “spectacular,” and the Municipal Art Society finally pronounced the new design “striking”; chairman Philip Howard declared, “We are extremely excited to be involved in building a landmark for a new century.”¹²²

Chairman Gargano, of the PSRC, had the last word on the Farley project, scheduled (as of early 2000) to be completed in 2003. “Every so often, maybe every hundred years, the public sector has a chance to stand up and build what it believes in. How well we rebuild is going to say a lot about us and what our city will be like in the future.”

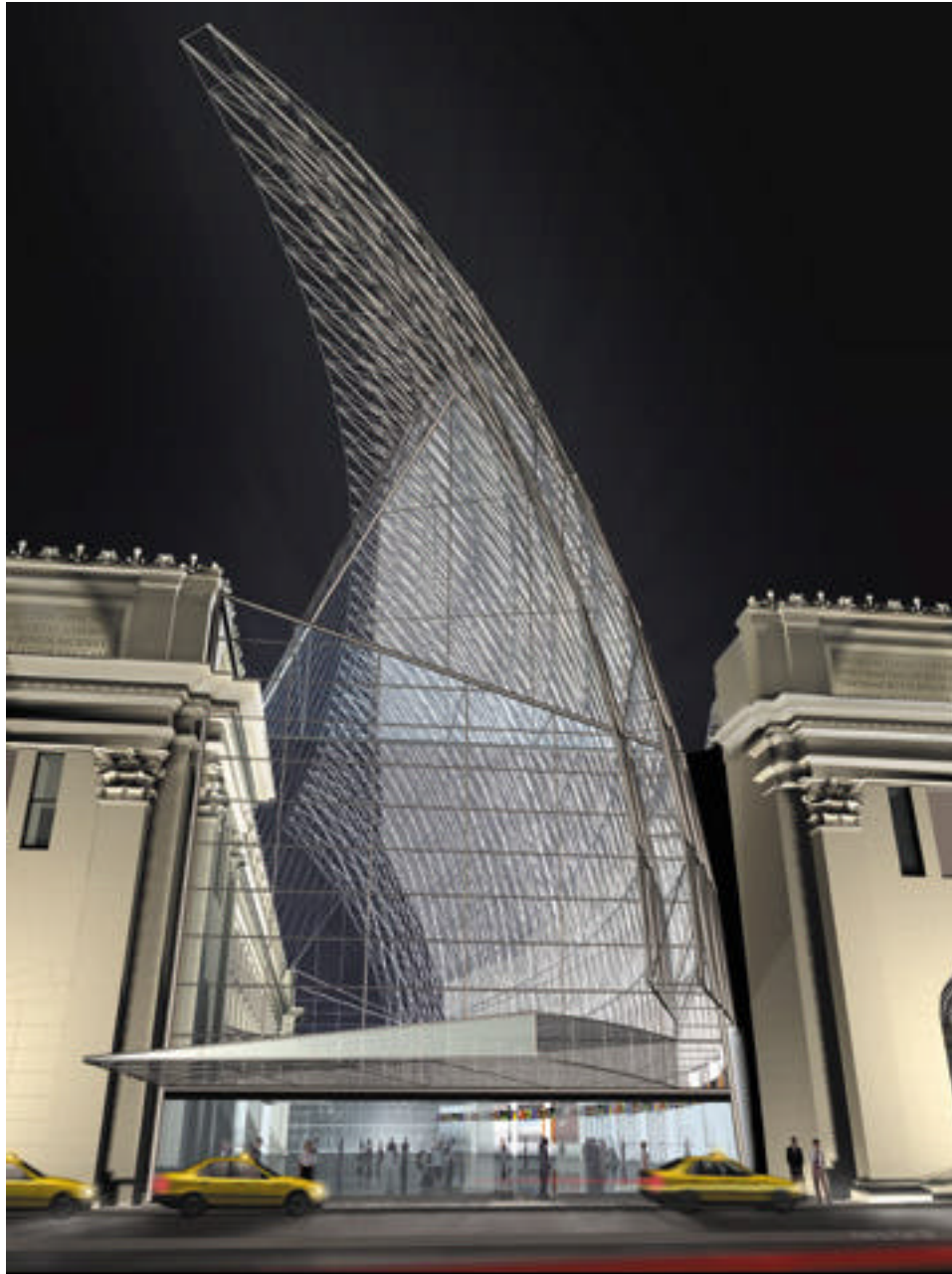
¹²⁰ Press release, www.empire.state.ny.us/press/pennsta.htm.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Municipal Art Society, www.mas.org/new/current2.htm.



The new Amtrak waiting area and concourse within the Farley Building, as proposed.



The new entrance to the Amtrak facility within the Farley Building, as proposed — 33rd Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. The combination of glass, steel and masonry is much as it was in the original Penn Station, but the new design spans two centuries.

Conclusions.

There are not enough names for the emotions that great architecture inspires, and as a result the names of buildings themselves become shorthand for the complex impressions they leave behind. Grand Central is one name for many feelings, and so, in a different key, is the United States Custom House and Rockefeller Center. These constructions are an homage to reason, to the constraints of site and the possibilities of engineering. But they also allude to the human susceptibility to space, to the way remarkable buildings remodel the emotional interior of the humans who pass through them.

The new Penn Station in Manhattan may well become such a building.

“Planning for Greatness to Come,” *New York Times* editorial, May 20, 1999

Pennsylvania Station's fall and rise illustrates more vividly and more completely than any other example New York City's change in attitude toward historic preservation between the 1960s and the 1990s. Penn Station was built as a civic monument in 1910, not just a train station but an enduring gateway to New York. It was demolished in search of profits in 1963, at a time when the idea of historic preservation held very little sway, and economic considerations were permitted to reign supreme. Now, Penn Station is to be reincarnated in the body of its nearly identical twin, the Farley Post Office, and will, in several years, once again fulfill the original, monumental hopes of architects McKim, Mead & White.

The meaning of the term "monument" has changed. In 1910, it was a glorious word, and bespoke importance, permanency, and the public realm. Penn Station was originally designed and built as a monument because the Pennsylvania Railroad believed that its desire to construct an impressive new station was compatible with enriching the urban landscape to the benefit of all. But by the early 1960s, to be a "monument" was a curse. Penn Station's monumental character made it more fit to be a cemetery decoration than a dynamic, ennobling civic center. Monumentality was no longer an asset; it was a liability.

Today, New York — the United States — has once again, as a result of the historic-preservation movement formed in the wake of Penn Station's destruction, come to regard monumentality with awe, even reverence. That the new Penn Station is not simply another construction project, but a deliberate, impassioned attempt to recreate the grandeur of McKim's original structure, speaks to a renewed sense not only that we can appreciate the monumental, but that we can and should aspire to it. New York's forty-year change in attitude toward historic preservation has been a wonderful adventure in civicism, a series of valuable lessons that are manifest as New York City prepares to open the twenty-first century, like the twentieth, with a grand new Pennsylvania Station.

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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...

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Biographical Note.

Eric J. Plosky received his Bachelor of Science degree in Planning from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in June, 1999. A predecessor to this paper, entitled “Monumental Sacrifice: The Destruction of Pennsylvania Station and the Creation of New York City Landmarks Preservation,” won the 1998 MIT Writing Prize (in the Boit Manuscript category, for best essay). Originally from Syosset, Long Island, New York, Eric developed a fascination with urban studies — in particular, with the New York City subway — very early on, thanks to his grandmother. Eric’s work within MIT’s Department of Urban Studies and Planning has led, among other things, to the fulfillment of at least one lifelong dream — in July 1997, he drove a Red Line subway train at the MBTA’s test track in South Boston. Despite his graduation, Eric was recently re-elected Opinion Editor of *The Tech*, MIT’s campus newspaper, in which capacity he expects to continue to rail against poor planning. Eric is currently an analyst at the United States Department of Transportation’s Volpe National Transportation Systems Center in Kendall Square, a brisk walk from his former residence at the East Campus dormitory; he now lives in North Cambridge. He should be reachable by e-mail on plosky@alum.mit.edu.

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