**First Writing Assignment: Engaging with Documents**

**"**In former years railway stations were almost noted for being in the poorest and dirtiest parts of the communities which used them. The realization of the importance of the railway station as an element of civic pride and the railway's attempts at cooperation in this respect have certainly effected a great improvement.**"**[1]

--John Droege, 1916

**"**The station represented as much as any other architectural form the megolomania of American capitalism in the first two decades of this century…The railway companies built stations to accommodate passengers who never materialized, to flatter a vanity which was shortly to meet its fall…**"**[2]

--Richards and Mackenzie, 1986

*On December 27, 1913, railroads in Detroit began operating out of a new structure: a "Beaux Arts masterpiece, a four-story colonnade dominated by a sequence of ornate arches and glittering chandeliers."*[3] *This structure, Michigan Central Station, grew out of the "City Beautiful" reform movement that characterized architectural thought around the turn of the twentieth century.*[4]

Between 1870 and 1920, American cities "flourished as never before." Not only did urban population grow exponentially in this period, but per capita income and free time expanded as well, making cities into places of leisure and tourism as well as industry and labor.[5] Urban rail terminals were closely associated with this trend. George Douglas claims that "Americans came to think of the railroad as the tool of these great urban centers. The railroads had made these cities possible."[6] Urban stations "were pregnant with meaning…and they did much to fix the quality of city ambience," serving as a symbolic gateway for newcomers to a city. [7] In designing and building their city terminals, railroad corporations attempted to reflect the importance of urban space and the nationalism associated with the rise of the United States as an

[1] Droege, John A, *Passenger Terminals and Trains* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1916), 260.
[2] Jeffery Richards and John M. MacKenzie, *The Railway Station: A Social History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 37.
[3] Kevin Boyle, *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights and Murder in the Jazz Age* (Detroit: Macmillan, 2004), 5.
[4] Blashfield, Mickey. Interview by Maureen Kellett. September 9, 2008.
[5] David Nassau, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), 3.
[6] Douglas, *All Aboard,* 288.
[7] Douglas, *All Aboard: The Railroad in American Life* (New York: Paragon House, 1992), 293.

urbanized, imperial power.[8] Intersecting with the "golden age of railroads" that occurred between 1890 and 1915, city stations also symbolized the economic might of railroad companies themselves.

The extent to which these motivations mattered in Detroit is seen through a collection of letters written between 1911 and 1915 by Henry B. Ledyard, Vice President of the Detroit River Tunnel Company—a subsidiary of the Michigan Central Railroad Company charged with building the new station. The project required years of daily communication between Ledyard and architects, contractors and other executives. The volume of this correspondence speaks to the scale of the project—a massive urban terminal meant to accommodate every active railroad in Detroit.[9]

George Douglas contends that the primary function of such great urban stations was "human adaptation and amusement." [10] Indeed, the MCRC records indicate that station designers aimed to create an embodiment of human comfort and convenience, as well as a covert assertion of corporate wealth. Through his letters, Ledyard advanced a comprehensive vision for the terminal as a great urban space. He hired famed station architects Reed & Stem and Warren & Wetmore, frequently consulted executives of other large railroad companies, and encouraged fierce competition between building firms bidding for contracts—all in a seeming effort to ensure that his station rivaled those of other urban centers, both in function and splendor.

Ledyard pushed architect Charles Reed to include a drug store and a "tea room for women" to make the station more attractive.[11] In a 1916 guide to the construction and maintenance of rail stations, John Droege praised the "modern idea" of a men's dressing room at

[8] Richards and Mackenzie, *The Railway Station,* 44.
[9] MCRC outgoing letters, May 1913
[10] George H. Douglas, *All Aboard,* 298.
[11] MCRC outgoing letters, August 11, 1911

Michigan Central.[12] Company executives did have modern changes in mind when dressing rooms were included in the plans "to permit people traveling from suburban trains…to change their clothing."[13] Ledyard recognized the increased use of trains to connect cities to suburbs—a relatively new concept in this period. The addition of six dressing rooms, three for men and three for women, addressed the comfort and satisfaction of suburbanites, a new and distinctly important group of rail passengers. This special consideration illustrated Droege's guiding principle of superb customer service, dictating that even "children, foreigners, and the ignorant should be given every attention" [14]Other amenities in Michigan Central's design included a barbershop, newstand, men's smoking room, and library, illustrating Douglas' contention that "the great city terminals…were malls even before the word 'mall' was brought into use."[15]

In addition to offering modern amenities, railroad corporations used architecture to display their wealth and success. Richards and Mackenzie claim that American stations were 'overbuilt' in the early twentieth century, with a lavishness that "far exceeded strictly functional requirements."[16] In correspondence regarding building materials for Michigan Central Station, Ledyard certainly emphasized aesthetic as well as functional considerations. In a letter to chief engineer George Webb, Ledyard sought information about a certain marble's price and durability, but also its visual appeal and country of origin—qualities that could lend grandeur to the new station. Frequently throughout construction of the terminal, Ledyard and the MCRC Board approved additional expenditures on such aesthetic concerns as iron grilles for the ticket counter and copper cornices for the waiting room. Despite a professed interest in reducing his

[12] Droege, *Passenger Terminals and Trains*,
[13] MCRC outgoing letters, August 11, 1911
[14] Droege, *Passenger Trains and Terminals, 215.*
[15] Douglas, *All Aboard*, xviii.
[16] Richards and MacKenzie, *The Railway Station*, 42.

company's general expenditures, Ledyard encouraged his engineer and architects to devote resources to the new station's superficial characteristics.

Ledyard had a vision of corporate growth in mind throughout his letters. He referred to the construction project as the "new station *and* office building," viewing MCRC's office space as significant as the station itself. Architects planned and executed a fifteen story office building set behind the passenger terminal, though Ledyard predicted that the company would not need more than nine or ten stories "for many years to come."[17] MCRC equipped the office tower with modern conveniences—a temperature-regulating system and pneumatic tubes for telegrams—befitting the company's self-image as an advanced corporate power.[18]

Though the office tower was never fully utilized, even at the height of the station's operations,[19] Ledyard wrote to Reed predicting that at least 250,000 square feet would be necessary "to take care of the general offices of this company for many years to come." In his response, Reed apparently wanted to reduce this square footage and Ledyard agreed--so the office tower would have been even bigger if following the executive's vision. Still, Ledyard's use of "for many years to come," here and repeated throughout his letters expresses the company's optimism surrounding the new station. Evident in this is the implicit belief that railroads would continue to prosper, dominating industry and commerce and necessitating ample office space for the Michigan Central corporation. Beyond confidence in the railroad itself, the planners of MCS demonstrated a faith in the settled workings of society in a larger sense. Ledyard's strong advocacy for the inclusion of a separate waiting room for women, for example,

[17] MCRC outgoing letters, September 6, 1912
[18] MCRC outgoing letters, August, 1912.
[19] Blashfield

indicated his willingness to enforce established gender divisions. So too did the men's smoking and reading rooms: "Women were not, apparently, expected to read," at Michigan Central.[20]

Despite their apparent trust in the status quo, Michigan Central executives did allow for the potential of limited change. Ledyard proposed adding a garage for automobiles because he believed that, "in proportion to the population, there are more automobiles in Detroit than any other city."[21] This came as a perceptive statement, as Detroit had already begun to establish itself as the center of the auto industry, significantly reflected in 1908, when Woodward Avenue became the first paved road in the nation to extend past municipal limits and Henry Ford's Model T rolled out of the Piquette Avenue plant. Though American manufacturers began to market automobiles to the general public as early as the 1890s, the massive changes that autos would initiate were not yet apparent, even in Detroit. Primitive roadways ensured that railroads continued to dominate cars in speed and comfort of passenger transport. Though automakers and others campaigned for better roads, no real discussion of a transcontinental highway system occurred until 1912—when plans for Michigan Central were well underway.[22] Even in 1914, despite the popularity of Ford's Model T, the automobile was still a "rich man's toy."[23] Thus, the planners were able to view a parking garage as an incidental novelty—like the barbershop or dressing rooms, no more than a modern convenience that would attract passengers to the station. Ledyard and his contemporaries could not know that lack of adequate parking would ultimately play a principal role in the station's steady decline.[24]

In the station's later years, parking proved a particularly problematic issue because of Michigan Central's position over a mile away from central Detroit. Ledyard admitted that the

[20] Richards and Mackenzie, *The Railway Station*, 287.
[21] MCRC outgoing letters, August 11, 1911.
[22] Douglas, *All Aboard*, 316-318.
[23] Douglas, *All Aboard*, xi.
[24] Blashfield

location "being so much further from the center of the city as is the present station has raised a good many questions." Still, the executive seemed confident that the problems of location would solve themselves after "the station has been in operation for some little time."[25] "Droege, too, expressed optimism about the station's position "about 1½ miles from the center of the city but readily accessible from all the city's car lines."[26] However, the streetcar lines that Droege referred to were obsolete by 1956, overtaken by bus and automobile transport. Without any provision for parking, access to the station would wither along with the streetcar system.[27]

Like many Detroiters in 1913, Michigan Central's planners believed that the city's central business district would expand and ultimately encompass the new station.[28] Though aware that the station's surroundings were "not very attractive, and will not probably be for some time to come," Ledyard trusted that the station would attract business—"saloons," to the land surrounding it. He perhaps had in mind the historic tendency of railroads to build into uninhabited areas, "creating civilization from nothing--" as Douglas explains, the city of Chicago was no more than a muddy village before rail lines plowed through it in the early nineteenth century.[29] However, unlike past successes, Michigan Central Station did not pull city life to it, but remained an "island of isolation" up to the present day.[30]

[25] MCRC outgoing letters, August 11, 1913.
[26] Droege, *Passenger Trains and Terminals,* 79.
[27] Kelli B. Kavanaugh, *Detroit's Michigan Central Station,* "Images of America" Series (Chicago: Arcadia, 2001), 7.
[28] Blashfield
[29] Douglas, *All Aboard*, xv.
[30] Blashfield