Lessons in the Death of Style
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

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REMEMBER Pennsylvania Station? McKim, Mead and White, 1903-07. Imperial Roman gateway to New York in travertine and granite. Demolished 1965-66. Removed in truckloads to New Jersey where noble column fragments and cornice pieces turned the Secaucus meadows into a Roman ruin. Later bulldozed into a pit and buried by a real estate company to entice commercial or industrial construction on the "prepared" site. (The real estate company got a Chamber of Commerce award for its efforts.)

One of the eagles that capped the station's Doric architrave stands in front of the office building that replaced it, a touch of ironic esthetic distinction. At least one other has become a marker on a Long Island green. The rest, according to Theodore Conrad, the New Jersey modelmaker who prepares the scale models of many of the country's monumental new buildings while he keeps an anguished eye on the monumental old ones, "are safe from all acts of future vandalism for eons of time."

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Penn Station may have been the shortest lived of all of the grand railroad structures of the 19th and early 20th centuries. This international body of unique artistic and engineering production that was the response to the age of steam has been superbly documented in Carroll L. V. Meeks's definitive study, "The Railroad Station: An Architectural History" (New Haven, 1965).

The solid marble and masonry splendor of the great terminals was wedded to the revolutionary iron and steel technology of the great train sheds for an architecture, according to historian James D. Van Trump, that "aspired to heights of Classical gigantism that were positively Roman and Piranesian." The development of the railroad station, one of the genuinely distinguished chapters in building history, grew out of the assumption that the traveller, and even the lords of the railroads, had some kind of sensibility and some sort of corporate soul.

In New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh and cities too numerous to list, Piranesian grandeur has been reduced to rubble. The Railroad Age is over. Imperial attitudes are dead. Urban economics are relentless. Grandeur is expendable. And even monuments become obsolete.

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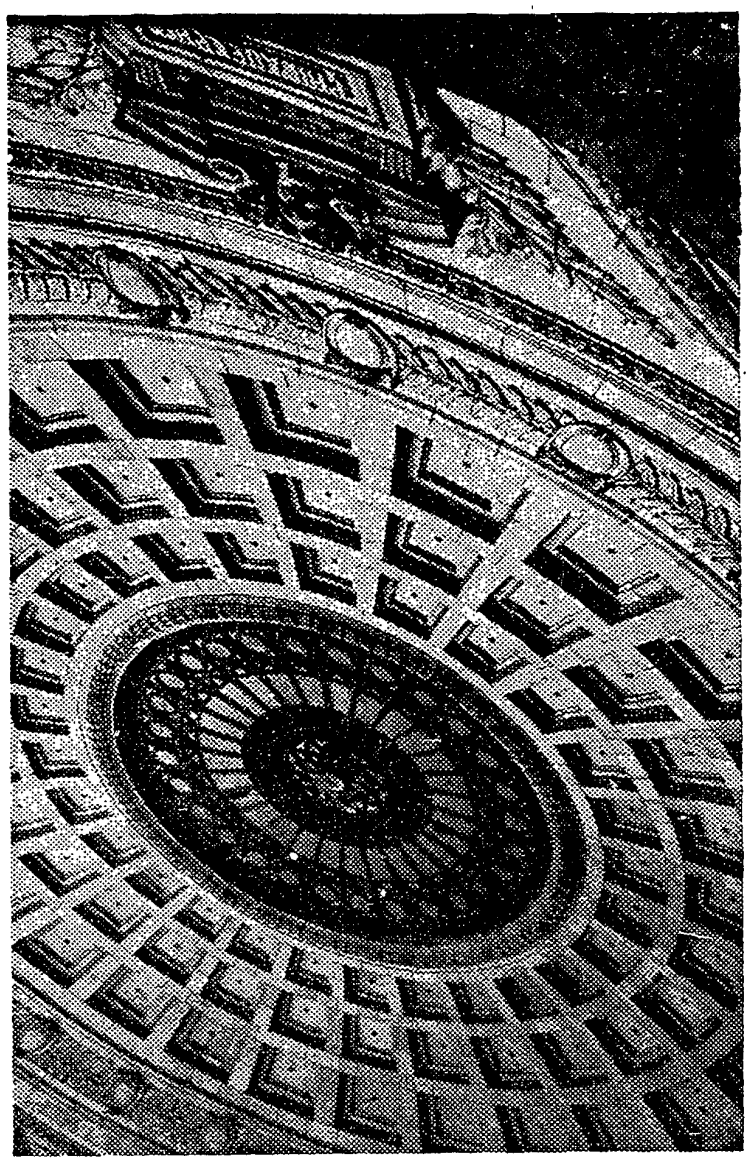
But it is essential to realize that more has been buried in Secaucus than stones. It is quite a terrible thing for a civilization to scuttle its sense of history and even its inherited knowledge of significant achievement; losing the standards that such achievement teaches is one sure way to move man back to the apes. Today's billion dollar investments are notably devoid of the excellences, refinements and intrinsic enrichment essential to quality and style. Construction is rarely raised from speculation to art.

Perhaps worst of all, we have lost not only the understanding of style; we have lost even the expectation of style—in virtually everything we touch. Style supports man's sense of his surroundings and his sense of self, and is what every great age produces. There is a magnificent 20th-century style, but it is not a commodity dealt in by the small men who make large fortunes building our cities.

All of which leads to Pittsburgh, and the battle to preserve the Rotunda of the Pennsylvania, now Penn Central, Railroad Station there.

Penn Central plans a mammoth, 148-acre office building and multiple dwelling complex covering not only the railroad station site but a 40-square block section of the city. Called Penn Park, it will be carried out as privately financed urban renewal. The architect is Vincent G. Kling of Philadelphia. The train shed is gone, the office building-terminal will go, and so will the Rotunda, an architecturally independent unit that is part of the complex and has served as entrance and cab stand.



Ceiling of the Penn Central Rotunda, Pittsburgh
No room on 148 acres for the Imperial Age

The Rotunda is a grace note; one of those civilizing structures rich in cultural references, profligate with expensively gratuitous (by today's faulty standards) qualities of architectural art. It does not present the imperial-size preservation problems of the huge terminals.

Built from 1898 to 1902 with the rest of the railroad complex, the Rotunda is the work of one of the most famous architects of the American Imperial Age, Daniel H. Burnham.

Its form is a circle in a square; a wide, low dome with splayed pendentives set within four corner turrets. The material is an ornamental light brown terra-cotta, over steel. The style is more catholic than Meeks's apt designation of "Burnham Baroque" — here elaborated with deep ceiling coffers and late 18th-century details of cartouches, garlands, guilloche bands and urns.

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Mr. Van Trump, in his monograph published by the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, which is also leading the preservation fight, points out that "the flowing interplay of interlocking arcs and long, curving arches" suggests, in addition, the influence of Art Nouveau. In less scholarly reference, he calls it "a pavilion of enchantment and light and a grotto of contrived curvilinear shadows."

The developers of Penn Park are evidently leery of history and art. No one has worked out investment percentages on enchanted pavilions or grottos, or figured a predictable return on the environmental enrichment of a landmark of officially acknowledged historical and esthetic value. The Rotunda has been recorded by the Historic American Buildings Survey and is listed in "Landmark Architecture of Allegheny County." But it is simpler for the investors to level and "prepare" the whole site, including the rise on which the Rotunda stands.

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It has been made quite clear that the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation will not only have to sell the railroad on the benefits of saving the Rotunda, but is also expected to come up with an airtight solution for its preservation. Evidently the combined resources of the Penn Central and the architect's office are not up to the job. Translate: they do not want to do it. Nor will the enormously expensive construction package, representing huge allotments of funds, include anything for the Rotunda. One thing that has not changed from the business practices of the Imperial Age is the-public-be-damned.

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Maybe, since we are considering investment, it would be a good one to give the developers a trip to London's Euston Station. There a comparable fight to preserve the monumental, freestanding, classical Euston Arch was lost when the railroad complex was leveled for new construction. The resulting sterility is summed up with chilling finality in the British professional journal, the Architectural Review.

"The Euston Arch was murdered. The grandiose piazza—a senseless space more often than not windswept—was robbed of the one thing that could have given it meaning." Even money says that the Penn Park sponsors would like it fine.