A Vision of Rome Dies

Shorn of Its Proud Eagles, Last Facade Of Penn Station Yielding to Modernity

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Pennsylvania Station succumbed to progress this week at the age of 56, after a lingering decline. The building's one remaining facade was shorn of eagles and ornament yesterday, preparatory to leveling the last wall. It went not with a bang, or a whimper, but to the rustle of real estate stock shares.

An Appraisal

The passing of Penn Station is more than the end of a landmark. It makes the priority of real estate values over preservation conclusively clear. It confirms the demise of an age of opulent elegance, of conspicuous, magnificent spaces, rich and enduring materials, the monumental civic gesture, and extravagant expenditure for esthetic ends. Obsolescence is not limited to land use and building function in New York.

Completed in 1910

It was still the Gilded Age in 1910 when the building was completed by Charles Follen McKim of McKim, Mead & White, one of the turn-of-the-century's most gilt-edged architectural firms. There was plush in the Pullmans, crisp damask in the diners, silver bud vases on tables, and the New York-bound traveler debouched into a Roman tepidarium.

Modeled after the warm room of the Baths of Caracalla, the station's concourse was longer than the nave of St. Peter's in Rome. Its vaulted ceilings were 138 feet high, and its grand staircase was 40 feet wide.

The soot-stained travertine of the interiors, reputed to be the first used in this country, was from quarries in Tivoli employed in building the Eternal City. Its mellow, golden-cream was used in the Coliseum in the first century A.D. and St. Peter's 15 centuries later. New York could be called the Mortal Metropolis.

Six murals by Jules Guérin, huge topographical maps of Pennsy territory in sky blues, pale browns and yellow, high in the reaches of the massive walls, gradually disappeared under layers of the same soot. Generous deposits turned the exterior Massachusetts granite from warm pink to dingy gray. Now marble pomp has been reduced to rubble; stone to dust.

Symbols of New Age

Today, there are new symbols for a new age. The modern traveler, fed on frozen flight dinners, enters the city, not in Roman splendor, but through the bowels of a streamlined concrete bird, as at Trans World Airlines' Kennedy International airport terminal. Classic columns are replaced by catenary curves.

Architects' conceits may change, but businessmen remain the same. Alexander Cassatt, an extremely astute businessman and head of the Pennsylvania Railroad when the station was designed, wanted to build a hotel on the valuable air rights over the terminal.

His architect dissuaded him, arguing that the railroad owed the city a "thoroughly and distinctly monumental gateway."

As Lewis Mumford has observed, "Professional and civic pride won out over cupidity."

It was a shaky victory that

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lasted only 50 years. A soiled, symbolic gateway has been carted to the scrap heap and its replacement will be the Madison Square Garden sports and entertainment center connected to a 29-story office building. Land values and air rights will push the main concourse completely underground. The style will be not Roman Imperial, but Investment Modern.

The station's decline began long before demolition. As time passed and grime gathered, life and architecture became noticeably less grand.

The Great Depression made the once-elegant terminal a home for the homeless, its increasing shabbiness and sense of inert time and the stale chill of hopeless winter nights immortalized by William Faulkner, when he wrote:

"In the rotunda, where the people appeared as small and intent as ants, the smell and sense of snow still lingered, though high now among the steel girders, spent and vitiated and filled with a weary and ceaseless murmuring, like the voices of pilgrims upon the infinite plain, like the voices of all the travelers who have ever passed through . . ."

With the return of prosperity, and the traveler, demolition by commercialization began. Colored ads appeared like blasphemous utterances in the marbled halls; automobiles revolved on turntables; shops and stands were added in jazzy cacophony.

In 1958, a huge, lighted plastic clamshell was hung on wires from the Corinthian columns, hovering over a saw-tooth arrangement of new ticket booths The result, according to Mr. Mumford, was sabotage, a "masterpiece of architectural and visual incongruity."

By 1963, when a group of prominent architects and citizens picketed the building to protest the announcement of the decision to demolish, it was hard to realize, with Philip Johnson, "that man can build nobly," in the light of the esthetic debris.

Functionally, the station was considerably less than noble. The complexity and ambiguity of its train levels and entrances and exits were a constant frustration. Except for its great glass and iron waiting room, it was a better expression of ancient Rome than of 20th-century America.

But its great spaces and superb materials were genuinely noble, in a sense that architecture can no longer afford, in cubage costs alone. The new terminal will have 9-to-22-foot ceilings, against the original 138, all below grade. And the concept was noble, in a sense that society now tragically undervalues.

In 1906, when the $25-million hole was dug in the old Tenderloin district for the $112-million terminal and landmark, the city's and the railroad's sights were high. Now dreams of urban glory and broken Doric columns lie shattered in the Secaucus meadows.