

By Ada Louise Huxtable

Thirty-one years ago, the shattered marble, travertine and granite columns, caryatids, gods and eagles of Penn Station — modeled after the monuments of ancient Rome by McKim, Mead and White and built for eternity in 1910 — were carted off to the Secaucus meadows, giving New Jersey undisputed title to the world's most elegant dump. Of the eagles that crowned the station's walls, a few tokens were reinstalled in front of the new Madison Square Garden, making the contrast between classical and cheesy terminal-ly (pun intended) clear.

Because what goes around comes around, usually so that you want to laugh or cry, there are plans for a new Penn Station. The proposal is part of a program in which all of the facilities for Amtrak, New Jersey Transit and the Long Island Railroad will be coordinated for what is now fashionably called intermodal transportation but looks more like a railroad revival and great train station renaissance.

In addition to vastly improved and expanded services, each rail unit will be given a "presence" — something Stanford White and his partners knew a thing or two about. And since what goes around comes around in curious ways, the new Penn Station will be created in another classical building by McKim, Mead and White: the James A. Farley Post office, a designated New York City landmark just behind the present station, which has been declared obsolete by the Post Office and semi-surplus property by the Federal Government.

Central to the project is the creation of a large new concourse, reminiscent of the scale of the bulldozed terminal. Because the rail yards continue beneath the Post Office building, the conversion is practical. But it is just as much about lost glory as future needs.

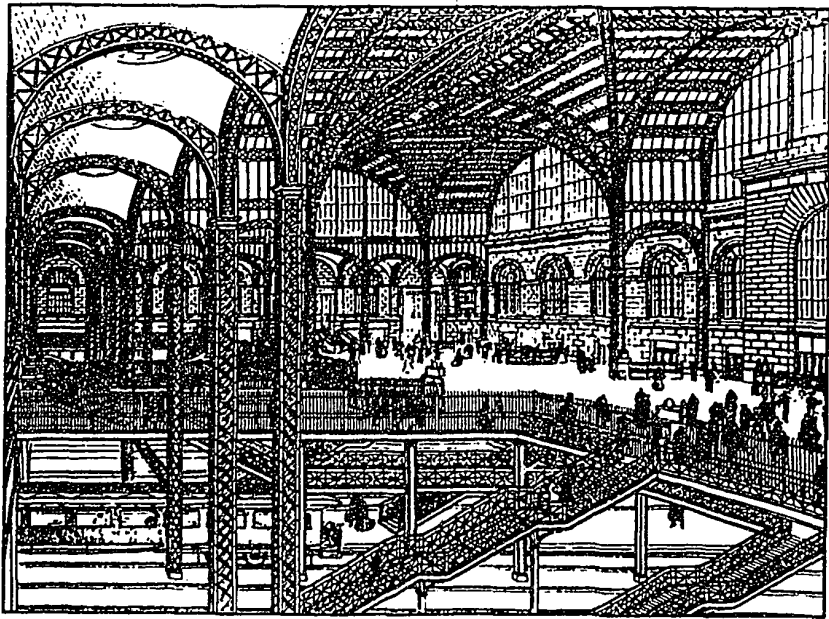
The Post Office is a gargantuan box of die-stamped classicism that occupies the two full blocks between 31st and 33d Streets and Eighth and Ninth Avenues. It was built in two stages: the first, in 1913, extended halfway to Ninth Avenue; an annex, added in 1935, filled out the enormous double block.

The original facade's nonstop 53-foot-high Corinthian columns and anthemion cresting topping a two-block sweep of granite steps was repeated and wrapped around the addition for what must surely be the most redundant colonnade in architectural history. This competent piece of Beaux Arts boiler-plate isn't in the same league as the old Penn Station. But today its acres of space and irreplaceable materials and details are solid gold.

The Post Office will keep the arcade along Eighth Avenue, where 7,000 people a day come through bronze doors under an arched ceiling

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# On the Right Track



An architect's drawing of the Pennsylvania Station concourse, 1907 (above). A computerized drawing of Grand Central, 1990 (below).

decorated with the seals of the countries belonging to the postal union. One hopes that the nicely browned W.P.A. murals of the city at the north and south ends will remain.

The plans for the new station, which will incorporate the redesigned present facility, have been under study since the 1980's by an alliance of railroad, postal service, real estate, construction and Government interests, led by Amtrak and the Tishman Urban Development Corporation. The architects are Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum, a large firm experienced in the kinds of major undertakings with which such consortiums feel com-

nals, too expensive to operate and functionally obsolete, were abandoned to decay or demolished as prime sites "ripe for redevelopment" — the real estate mantra of the times.

The decline of the railroads paralleled the rise of the shopping mall, the growth of the preservation movement and the birth of the "festival marketplace." Recycled railroad stations, once left for dead, became filled with shops and restaurants and a notable preservation success. But this was an odd triumph in which the tail wagged the dog: retailing was the prime use and purpose, and train service was peripheral, if it existed

## Penn Station and Grand Central are coming back.

fortable, working with a consultant on historic architecture, Jan Pokorny.

The cost is budgeted at an optimistic \$300 million — one-third Federal, one-third

at all.

For years, Washington's Union Station rained debris from its magnificent barrel-vaulted ceiling ringed with heroic statues into a hole in

the ground meant for a visitors' center that came to nothing. Train service was relegated to a kind of out-house in the rear. Today this is one of the country's most successful indoor malls, but the trains are still out back.

Real change came in the 1970's, when Government action to save the railroads brought grants and subsidies for operation and terminal upgrading. As ridership increased, station renovations put the trains up front again. Concourses were no longer treated as real estate opportunities. And while retail has become an important source of revenue, it is now supportive rather than primary. After a spectacular century of highs and lows, the great railroad station is being redefined.

That redefinition recognizes and restores the tradition of public space

— the "waste space" of bureaucrats and bean counters. The early, published proposal for Penn Station's new central concourse covering the area of the Post Office's huge, skylit mail-sorting court was more Buck Rogers than McKim, Mead and White; it has gone back to the drawing board.

The future roof will rise as high as cautious preservation agencies permit, but height is essential here. The court's original skylight never soared, in any sense. The Post Office is more like a classical corset for new construction than a creative inspiration. (For that, one should see Rafael Moneo's stunning and sympathetic additions to the superbly restored railroad station in Madrid.)

Meanwhile, at Grand Central a restoration and revitalization plan of exemplary quality by the architects Beyer, Blinder, Belle is forging ahead. New York's other great terminal has survived its own threats, including a traumatic proposal to build a gargantuan tower of aggressive vulgarity on top, the cruelest of jokes on its Beaux Arts splendor. This was fought up to the Supreme Court, winning a substantial victory for the city's landmark designation.

Over the years, grime and neglect obscured the constellations of the 125-foot-high concourse ceiling, light ceased to filter through the immense arched windows and the bulbs of the mammoth chandeliers disappeared and dimmed. Government money, the return of rail travel and the upgrading of revenue-producing commercial space have contributed to the ongoing and outstanding restoration and improvements by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and Metro North Railroad.

With the east balcony free of Kodak's full-color sabotage, a new stair is planned to match the existing stair to the Vanderbilt Avenue balcony on the west, for access to restaurants in the underused balconies and mezzanine. The addition is in the spirit and letter of Warren and Wetmore's brilliant 1903 to 1913 classical design, and has been approved by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. But only a faithful replica of the present stair will do.

To sit at the one small restaurant on the west balcony is to long for more. Rising into those vast heights is the buzz of all the voices of travelers and transients mingling in the upper air. Shafts of sunlight pierce long shadows, spotlighting the moving figures on the floor. The soft, susurring sound transforms activity and motion into a shared experience; it contains the timeless promise of the city's, and the world's, pleasures and adventures. This is the essence of urbanity.

In Penn Station, the traveler will never set foot again in the Tepidarium of the Baths of Caracalla. To the architect charged with creating the new Penn Station's symbolic center, lots of luck; he has a long way to go. Grand Central is right on track. These are some of the best and most beautiful social spaces anywhere, and the more use we make of them, the better. □

