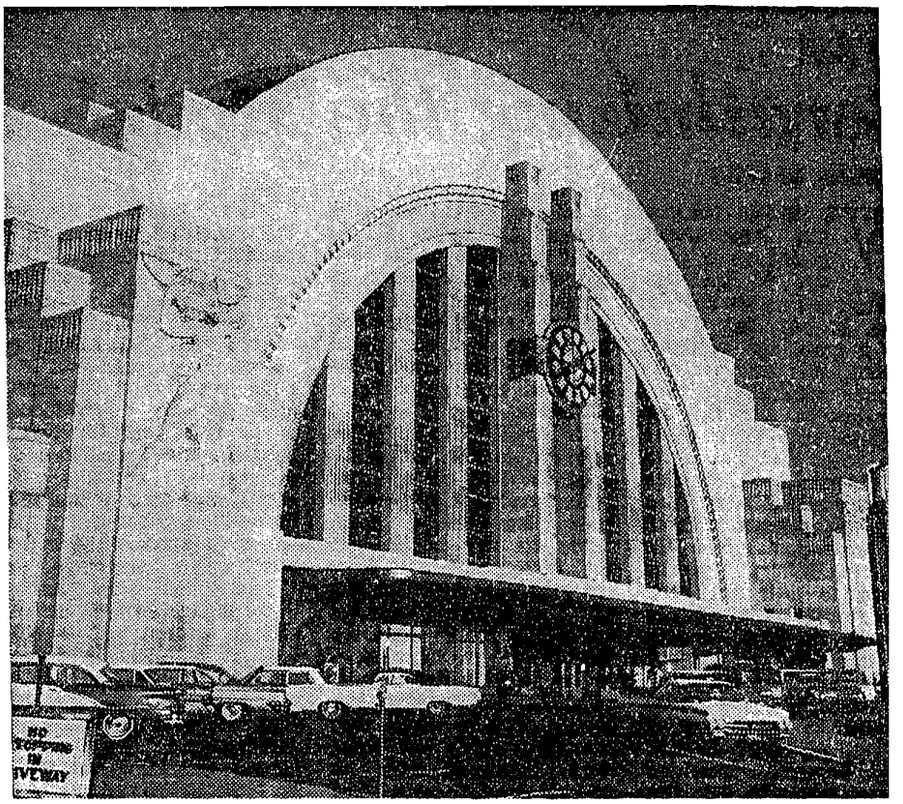
The Bigger They Are . . .
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
New York Times (1923-Current file); Nov 19, 1972; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D22

Architecture

The Bigger They Are...

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE



Cincinnati Terminal—Art Deco in 1933, piggyback freight in 1972
A crisis of existence in the air age

FORTY years can be forever. Today, it is the span between innovation and obsolescence; between dernier cri and last rites. Forty years is turning out to be a kind of magic number for buildings—the life span of a surprising number of them. They reflect, in their passing, traumatic social change.

Nothing was more up-to-date when it was built, or is more obsolete today, than the railroad station. In its day, it was a benchmark of civilization and style. These "gateways" to the cities of the United States were palaces of splendor, symbols of progress and objects of civic pride.

Now they are caverns of gloom. Almost as a group, they face a crisis of existence in the air age. And they have become a rallying point for those who prize quality, and who would keep their unreproduceable grandeur, in some fashion, alive.

Almost 40 years ago, in April, 1933, there was nothing grander than the Cincinnati Terminal. Serving seven unified railroad branches, it covered 287 acres. Its 180-foot diameter, 106-foot-high dome, and a 410-foot-long, 36-foot-high train concourse were decorated with mosaic murals of the history and industries of Cincinnati and the story of transportation. Every detail was specially designed.

*

The style was pure Art Deco, that marriage of Art and Industry out of Paris of the 1920's, sometimes called "modernistic" or "beautility" by those who championed it. The roster of materials included the curious, fashionable taste mix of the day: aluminum, neon, marble, carved linoleum and exotic woods. The architects were Fellheimer and Wagner, and the artists were Winold Reiss and Pierre Bourdelle.

The Cincinnati Terminal was a landmark of a style and an era, and it was also an anachronism. Built during the Depression, at a time that was clearly the beginning of the end of the Age of the Iron Horse, it was an instant, extravagant monument to the past. In 1972, it is a monument to nostalgia, and a first-class period piece of first-rank art and architecture.

There are incredible touches: a curved-wall elevator of koa wood veneer inset with aluminum bands under a steel cove ceiling that makes Op Art and Supergraphics pale; lunchroom counters of Vermont Verdi marble with a Verona marble dado, a circular president's office of gumwood and cork, and the great round-arched east facade with fountains, lights and landscaping ideal for a Busby Berkeley set. It makes Radio City look like a toy.

*

It should be no surprise that this is all scheduled for demolition. One of the railroad companies, the Southern Railway System, a component of the owning Cincinnati Terminal Co., plans to destroy or alter the train concourse for a piggyback freight operation. With that gone or mutilated, the rest would be just a matter of time.

What is surprising is that Cincinnati cares. Save-our-terminal editorials are being written in papers, which might, ten years ago, have argued for "progress" and demolition. Cincinnati Post columnist David B. Bowes has embraced the cause. A distinguished, larger than life civic committee has been set up officially to deal with the problem.

The group is fortunate to be doing so at a time when preservation sentiments and practice are on the upswing, and notable preservation successes are a fait accompli. It is less fortunate in the very size and splendor of the building, which pose horrendous preservation problems. The project will need a coalition of new uses, strong, unified leadership to carry out any collaborative scheme, and, above all, money. The $42-million structure still has $10-million worth of bonds outstanding. Conversion will be formidable.

There are, however, heartening examples of railroad revitalization across the country. The National Endowment for the Arts, which has been quietly promoting solutions, has counted 49 depots in 26 states already remodeled and restored to useful life. The city of Indianapolis has bought its terminal for commercial conversion, and Yuma is well on the way to financing its station as an arts center.

*

But the big ones are the big problems. Washington is lucky to be able to turn Daniel Burnham's 1908 classic into a visitors' center. St. Louis has an 1896 Richardsonian gem that has been sitting precariously in the lap of the gods for some time. In New York, developers are suing to be allowed to violate grotesquely the spirit and style of Grand Central with an aggressive air rights structure over it, after a Landmarks Commission turndown. The city has offered unusually conscientious and creative alternate proposals.

While the decision is awaited with great concern, neglect is doing its work inside. There are signs of roof leaks around skylights in the great interior, and if, some day, a piece of cornice or ceiling falls, the owners might simply announce that the building is dangerous and unsound and fit for demolition.

The railroad station problem is finally being faced on a national level. The National Endowment for the Arts, under its director of Architecture and Environmental Arts, Bill Lacy, makes the importance of the railroad terminal as national heritage clear. A bill introduced into the last Congress by Frank Thompson, Jr. of New Jersey would rescue the old stations for renovation as community arts and cultural centers, under the auspices of the National Endowment. The legislation failed to make it in this Congress, but it will come up again. Even with such help, immense logistical and economic obstacles remain.

*

A particularly interesting development is a $37,000 study of the problem on a country-wide scale, being carried out by Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer Associates, a young, established, avant-garde New York architectural office.

The work is being done with a joint grant from the National Endowment, under Mr. Lacy's program, and the Educational Facilities Laboratories of the Ford Foundation, under Harold Gores. It consists of a feasibility study, with analyses of problems and solutions, case by case, from whistle stops to the big depots. These case histories will provide guidelines for the National Endowment.

The architects are immensely concerned for the Cincinnati Terminal, which they profoundly admire. (There is an Art Deco rug from a demolished New York movie theater in their conference room.) "It is one of the very best of the terminals," says Norman Pfeiffer, "and the only one of its kind."

Among solutions being considered in Cincinnati is one that would just save the mosaic murals, an exercise in pointless irony. As art, they are totally diminished out of context and without the container; the whole is much greater than any of its parts. Dr. Donald Waldrip, Cincinnati superintendent of schools, visualizes wide educational uses, and is talking to the Educational Facilities Labs, which has broadened its horizons and definitions.

"At one point," Hugh Hardy points out, with some awe, "the whole culture came together with the railroads, and then that culture vanished." There is now a national movement to save the arts of that culture for those who never knew the age.

Note: Additional architectural credits that should have been given for Boston's Old City Hall are F. H. Stahl, Anderson-Notter, and Gund-Monacelli. The major part of the renovation and many of the admirable interiors are by Anderson-Notter.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.