

## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# Grand Central At a Crossroads

**T**he fate of Grand Central Terminal is now before the Supreme Court, which has agreed to hear an appeal from its bankrupt owner, the Penn Central, which hopes to reverse the New York State Court of Appeals decision in favor of the city's landmark designation. Penn Central wants to use the air rights above the terminal to build a piggy-back tower on top of the turn-of-the-century Beaux Arts Monument, an idea almost everyone except the Penn Central and some unreconstructed real-estate types considers architecturally and environmentally revolting. The scheme, which has been kicking around for a number of years, is an unmitigated horror; in the last version, Grand Central would be the filling in a Pan Am-office tower sandwich.

It was not really very difficult for the Landmarks Preservation Commission to deny this project a certificate of "appropriateness"; what has been far harder for everyone has been the legal battle that has ensued. The case, in which Penn Central is trying to overturn the Grand Central designation and the landmark laws constitutionality, is an extremely important one for historic preservation and the quality of cities in this country. It turns on some extremely technical legal problems that the New York State Court of Appeals and its Chief Judge, Charles D. Breitel, have attempted to resolve with both courage and brilliance—the interpretation of zoning and landmark law and the methods and rationale of control and compensation in the light of today's public and community values. These are considerations well worth review by the country's highest court.

Meanwhile, back at the terminal, significant things have been happening. Penn Central has sold the adjacent Commodore Hotel in an elaborate deal involving the railroad, the City of New York, the State Urban Development Corporation, the developer, Donald Trump, and the Hyatt Hotel Corporation. Tax breaks, lease backs and other investment esoterica will make it possible to put a new Regency Hyatt Hotel into the Commodore's remodeled shell.

• • •

The deal will also produce \$2 million for the exterior cleaning and rehabilitation of Grand Central Terminal—a development devoutly wished for by its champions. The money will come from "forgiveness" of the sales tax on materials used for the hotel job. As an investment, this could well

*Continued on Page 28*



Jules Coutan's sculpture atop Grand Central Station

# Grand Central At Crossroads

*Continued from Page 25*

be seed money for far greater returns in the start of a revitalized 42d Street area.

The work on the terminal will be carried out by the architectural firm of Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer, according to a city-approved program. The remodeling of the hotel will be done by Gruzen and Partners. Both firms rank high among the city's established, younger practitioners.

It is hard to believe that Gruzen has come up with the tiresome mirror-gloss facade that has become such a redundant developer's cliché in the published drawings of the new hotel; the firm is capable of better. Perhaps this hack formula means "modernity" to someone wanting to project a routine image of newness. Ironically, this gloss will just be buttered over the old masonry—the kind of thing that used to be done with formica and porcelain enamel. Mirror gloss needs the exquisite, knife-sharp design refinement of the Hancock Building in Boston to come off in a cosmopolitan setting. Back to the drawing board, everyone.

On a happier note, the \$2 million spun off from this endeavor will pay for a complete cleaning of the terminal's exterior stone and trim, cleaning and repair of windows, mullions and roof (a major item) and anything else needed for the proper future maintenance of the building. The roadway will be redone, and the parapet, railings and stone and iron work of the road and bridge will be restored. Lighting fixtures and conduits will be repaired and upgraded, and the flood-lighting of the building will be renewed and made permanent.

The prospect of all this exterior preservation as a reality rather than as a dream, is the kind of thing that makes New Yorkers perennial cockeyed optimists in the continuing face of cataclysmic adversity. Cynics, of which there are as many in New York, have repeatedly said that funding for this kind of rehabilitation was a pipe dream.

Cynics continue to be cynics, and optimists continue to be optimists. Now the city's planners have formed a task force to prepare a proposal to use this \$2 million as matching funds, in order to be able to apply for about \$10 million in Federal grants for major work on the terminal's interior. Just as important, this would be used as leverage for the revitalization

of the surrounding midtown blocks. The idea is to combine restoration of the terminal's architectural features with strengthening of its mass transit functions and the use of its physical resources—shops, subways, arcades, mezzanines, passages and connections between neighboring streets and structures—for a lively commercial and pedestrian center fanning out to other blocks and buildings.

It should be noted that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, under whose jurisdiction the terminal now operates, has been doing a great deal to clean and restore the interior, including the upgrading of stores. The M.T.A. deserves credit for saving the building from demolition by neglect. But this is a piecemeal, holding operation at best, and what the city is suggesting is a comprehensive plan that would affect not only the terminal, but everything around it.

It is not unreasonable to believe, as the city does, that this project could be carried out under a recent amendment to Federal Transit legislation that makes grants available from the Urban Mass Transit Administration for major land use projects in connection with mass transit, rather than for transit improvements alone. Matching (but not equal) funds are required for grants given separately from those for capital transit improvements. U.M.T.A. is apparently willing to consider New York's proposal.

What the Federal Government had in mind with the new provisions is a way of encouraging private investment and constructive land development around new mass transit facilities such as those under way for Atlanta and Baltimore, for orderly and vitalizing urban growth. New York has that development potential in connection with an old transit facility, rather than a new one—the Grand Central complex was a planning model and miracle in its day. But that extraordinary urban connective tissue will almost certainly go with the breakup of Penn Central's properties.

A study has already been made of the regenerative uses of this unified 12-block space and circulation network by Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer, under a National Endowment for the Arts grant, and as a project at Yale. The firm is working with the city to prepare the proposal for a Montreal-type, multi-level, largely underground commercial concourse with substantial development possibilities for connecting and surrounding properties, from the salvation of the troubled Chrysler Building to coordinated new construction. The point is that the unique means are there, if they are not lost or destroyed.

The alternative is incremental decay, which is going on now, or isolated monster buildings that could be larger than Pan Am. The Supreme Court's decision and this proposal have a lot to do with the future of midtown. Grand Central is more than a landmark; its fate is pivotal to New York. ■