

The Stakes Are High for All in Grand Central Battle

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The question of whether Grand Central Terminal should go the way of New York real estate has turned into a tense test case of the city's newly acquired preservation and planning powers. This week's hearings to determine the landmark's fate go far beyond the obvious considerations of art,

history and sentiment to a broader concern with the city's pattern of growth and change, its economic and functional health, and to what degree and by what means the city can, or should, control the gargantuan benefits and disasters that its developers heap upon it.

Everything involved is New York supercolossal: the scale of the proposed new construction, its impact on a neighborhood of maximum density and highest circulation use, and the magnitude of the preservation problem, which includes the station's huge, abused concourse.

There is also the immensity of Penn Central's financial woes and the size and importance of its midtown holdings and how their development will affect one of the city's core areas in the next decade.

Appetite for Skyscrapers
The problems are dramatized by the powerful mystique that always attaches to Manhattan's skyscraper of the moment—in this case the soaring commercial tower that the developer, Morris Saady, and Penn Central propose for the terminal site.

The objective of the current hearings, under the landmarks law, is simply to decide whether a "certificate of appropriateness," should be issued for either of two proposals submitted by the developer. The criteria to be applied are actually limited to the effects the proposal will have on the exterior features and character of the landmark.

The procedure is usually no more than a gentlemanly formality over the remodeling, say, of a historic front stoop, but in this case it has become a prime public battle because so much is involved in money and environment. The stakes are high—for the city, the future of the landmarks law and the strength of New York's planning powers; for the developer, at least a \$250-million investment and a skyscraper that would overshadow the Pan Am Building right behind it.

The developer and the railroad have come armed with

economists, lawyers and one of the country's best architects, Marcel Breuer. The two plans are known as Breuer One and Breuer Two.

Breuer One, submitted and rejected for a certificate of "no exterior effect" last year, is a magnificently ludicrous plan to hollow out the terminal, inserting the new skyscraper behind the old facade and letting it soar above it. This would keep the concourse, except for the south gallery. Preservationists have been having nightmares ever since about office towers rising like funny hats over churches and mansions.

Breuer Two, being submitted for the first time, would replace the terminal building completely. It would sacrifice the station's Beaux Arts facade to move the tower forward, in order to save the entire concourse. In either case, the developer is offering to rescue the concourse from its present state of dingy hard sell and restore it to its "original splendor."

The Normal Situation

Under any normal circumstances and in any normal location, the Saady-Breuer building would be more warmly received. The proposal promises a structure of quality. But under normal circumstances it is more likely that what would be offered would be New York's routine commercial package.

Mr. Saady has done more than dress up the package. He is including, and would pay for, special features for improved circulation in addition to the staggeringly expensive refurbishing of the concourse.

The rub here is that the landmarks law protects only the exteriors of buildings. What is proposed for destruction is exactly what the law is designed to preserve. This is further complicated by the fact that many authorities consider the concourse, rather than the facade, the terminal's most important feature — as architecture, as a great covered public space that is an essential part of the area's hard-pressed circulatory patterns, and as the "sense of place" for the Grand Central area.

Certainly Breuer Two is a far better and more sensible solution than Breuer One. But the Planning Commission Chair-

man, Donald H. Elliott, feels, as he did a year ago, that this is still the wrong building in the wrong place at the wrong time. The city planners' studies of alternate development possibilities presented at the hearings propose relocating the building to avoid the central axis of the terminal. The planners consider that the developer's scheme puts maximum vertical circulation on top of maximum horizontal circulation for maximum congestion.

Under its own steam, Penn Central is considering turning part of its upper-level tracks into a pedestrian passage between 42d and 48th Streets. In the year since the first proposal, the city's transit picture has improved. Funds have been appropriated for a Second Avenue subway; there are plans for a 48th Street crosstown subway and for an East Side transit center. If this all materialized, it would unglue midtown congestion spectacularly.

But the city points out that, at present, everyone will end up on the same old, inadequate subway platforms. Mr. Saady counters that the city only moves on its plans when faced with such emergencies.

Choice of Dilemmas

To embrace or not to embrace the developer's proposal gives the Landmarks Commission a selection of near-suicidal

dilemmas. There are those, including the city's Corporation Counsel, who believe that the loss of the terminal as a designated landmark, threatens the landmarks law. From this viewpoint, there is no alternative to rejecting the proposal. The city's planners' re-siting suggestions are designed in part to avoid this danger.

Still, under the law, the railroad is free to destroy the terminal's concourse tomorrow. It points out that few developers would undertake the restoration that Penn Central cannot afford. It is offering the Landmarks Commission a very large, tempting half-loaf.

It is obvious that the special features of the developer's proposal stem from the very real strengths of the landmarks legislation, which are responsible for the unusual negotiations between the city and the builder.

If his proposal is rejected, the inevitable next step seems to be a suit charging the unjust taking of property, the most serious possible threat to the landmarks law.

The question is whether the city will go for broke — for what it considers the optimum future Grand Central area development—or indulge in some hard Yankee bargaining for better than it has ever hoped or dreamed of getting before. It looks like the big gamble.