Going the way of the dinosaur?: Design: Railroad stations
By Ada Louise Huxtable
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DEMOLISHED—*New York's Pennsylvania Station, modeled after the Baths of Caracalla, had a concourse longer than the nave of St. Peter's. Its vaulted ceilings were 138 feet high, and its grand staircase 40 feet wide. Its travertine came from the same Tivoli quarries as that of the Eternal City, but Penn Station's span of life was a mere 56 years—1910 to 1966.*

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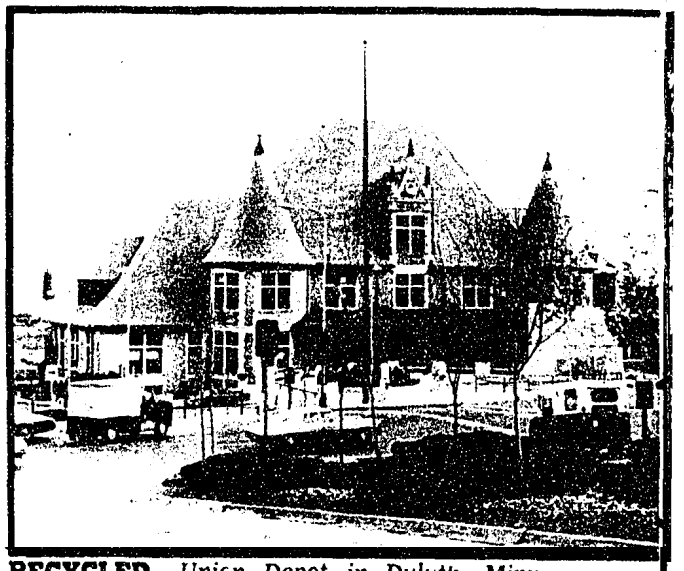
Three important new kinds of architecture were invented by modern man: the factory, the skyscraper and the railroad station. The factory and the skyscraper remain icons of our time, but with the advent of the air and automobile age, the railroad station has seemed slated for extinction.

This is a matter of concern to more than railroad buffs. It is deeply disturbing to serious connoisseurs of art, engineering and urbanism, who see the railroad station as something unique in structural and cultural history. For these buildings, ranging from Victorian whistle stops of singular charm to the grand city "entrances" of colonnaded Roman halls, offer more than nostalgia. They represent the real opening of the American West and the change of the country's shape and style, and some of the most progressive and distinguished technology and design of the 19th and 20th centuries.

But the deep-seated, complex economic problems of the railroads have multiplied, and when the travertine rubble of New York's Penn Station was carted out to the Secaucus dump in 1966, the great railroad age came to a crashing, symbolic end.

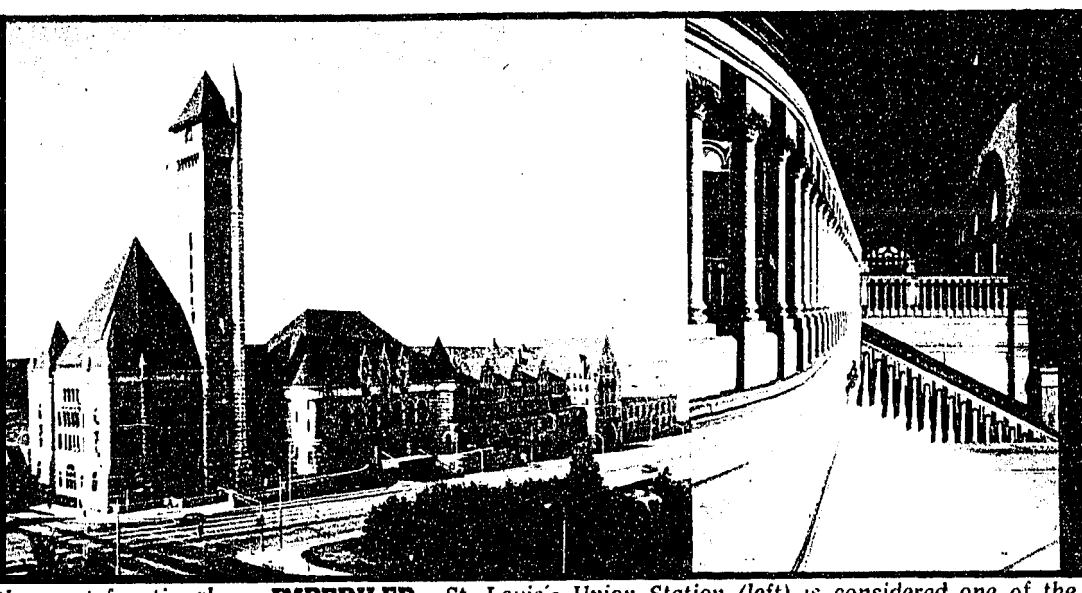
Fortunately, that is not the end of the story. While the railroads themselves are balancing precariously between slow death and even slower revival, many of the buildings, from quaint to great, are embarking on new careers.

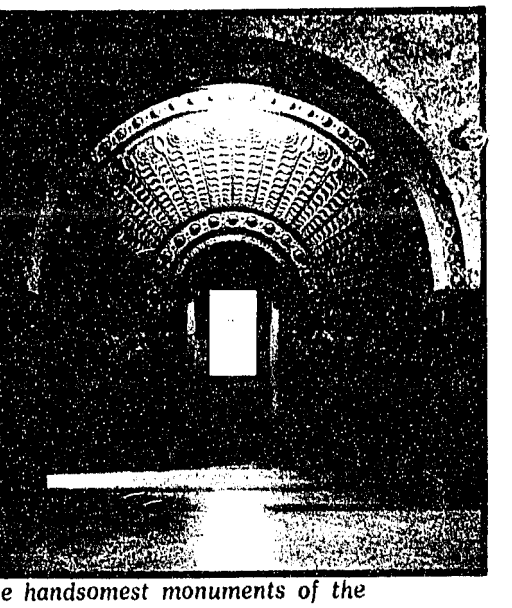
There is now an extremely impressive list of recycled railroad stations—from simple one-room, suburban-line boutiques and ice cream parlors to



RECYCLED—*Union Depot in Duluth, Minn., a handsome example of "French chateau" architecture with conical towers has been saved and will house a cultural center.*

IMPERILED—*Grand Central, the most functional of all railroad stations and New York's outstanding Beaux Arts monument, has an uncertain future.*





IMPERILED—*St. Louis's Union Station (left) is considered one of the handsomest monuments of the railroad age. The stone Romanesque building boasts a 230-foot-high clock tower inspired by Carcassonne. Inside, cloistered colonnades (center) lead to the grand staircase. Carved lunettes fill the arches (right).*

complex cultural, educational and commercial centers.

The small ones are comparatively easy conversions; the really large ones represent tangles of ownership and real estate, and the need for large amounts of complicated financing and involved commitment to a variety of purposes.

The revival is only an impressive trickle, however, and the crisis of preservation still exists. Of the 40,000 stations built between 1830 and 1950, it is estimated that about half still stand. Major cities are suffering major losses—Chicago's colonnaded, classical terminal has been bulldozed and Cleveland's incomparable Art Deco example is being dismantled piecemeal. As many buildings are being destroyed by neglect as by the wrecking ball.

With debts and deficits, capital maintenance is the last thing on the troubled corporate railroad mind. One needs only to look at New York's Grand Central Concourse's magnificent vaulted ceiling and columns to see the telltale stains of water damage that require extravagant repair, and promise even more spectacular deterioration of one of the country's most superlative indoor spaces. Problems of maintenance are as monumental as the buildings.

These matters are explained in "Re-using Railroad Stations," a report prepared by the New York architectural firm of Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer Associates under a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and published by the Educational Facilities Laboratories. They are also the subject of a workshop taking place in Indianapolis (where the railroad station is being saved and re-used) on July 22 and 23, under the auspices of the National Endowment, the National Trust for Historic Preservation and Amtrak.

But the best lessons are provided by those examples of buildings that have been, or are in the process of being, revived. And the preservationists' favorite examples are those that are able to keep transportation functions with their new uses.

Among small stations, the 1893 Rock Island Depot in Lincoln, Nebraska, was purchased by a bank and restored for a branch office. The adaptation cost about $75,000.

In a larger category, the Union Depot in Duluth, Minn., a French Norman confection of 1892 by Peabody, Stearns and Furber, has been purchased by a nonprofit corporation through Federal, state, foundation and private funding. It will house cultural groups and costs will be $2.5 million.

Baltimore, Md., has one of the most interesting and successful rescue jobs in the Mt. Royal Station, which was purchased through private funds for educational purposes. The solid stone and steel "neo-Renaissance" structure of 1896 by Baldwin and Pennington is now a handsomely functioning part of the Maryland Institute College of Art.

New London citizens recently won a drag-out fight with local renewal officials to save their H. H. Richardson station from demolition.

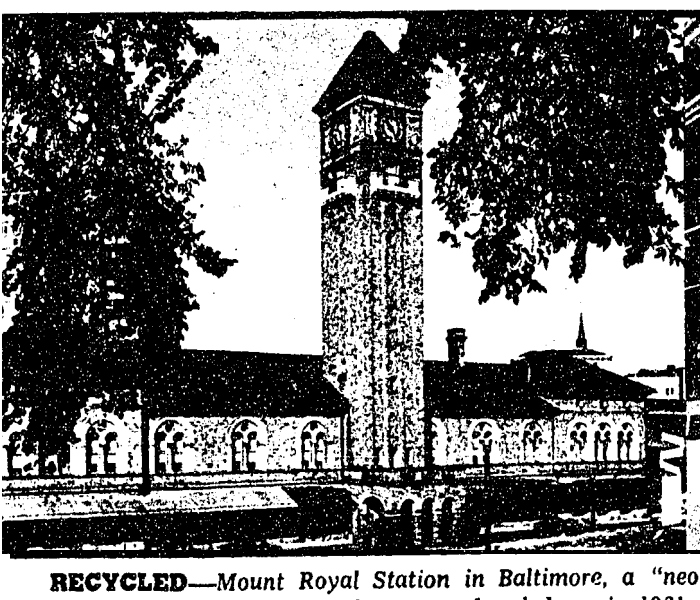
In the category of really large stations, the 1906 Beaux Arts Terminal Station of Chattanooga, Tenn. represents an outstanding conversion. It was bought by a group of private businessmen, who called themselves the Chattanooga Choo Choo Company, and the building was restored and remodeled into a restaurant and shop of turn-of-the-century elegance, for more than $4 million in private funds.

Daniel H. Burnham's great barrel-vaulted, 1907 Beaux Arts Union Station in Washington, D. C., is in the process of being turned into a National Visitors' Center.

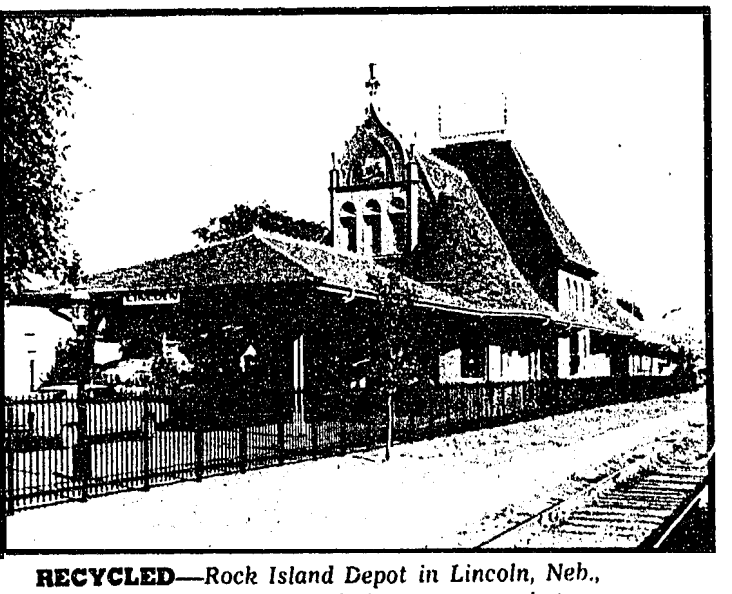
But some of the very finest monuments, such as New York's Grand Central Terminal, have an undecided and greatly endangered future. A Landmark's Preservation Commission decision to refuse permission to allow the railroad to build on the terminal's air rights has been contested in court. The case, the building, and even New York's landmarks law, are awaiting judgment.

Union Station in St. Louis, Mo., built from 1891 to 1894 in the popular Romanesque style by Theodore C. Link, is a fairy tale extravaganza of superbly crafted exterior and interior details. It is the object of on-again, off-again commercial deals, adversely affected by the uncertainty of St. Louis's downtown. At night, deserted and dimly lit, the station seems to be waiting for some grand, princely ball.

And so it goes. Successes, failures and cliff-hangers. But at last, the American railroad station is recognized for its true worth: a high point in architectural history of irreplaceable crafts and construction and an unparalleled environment resource. And if the move to mass-transit set off by fuel and energy shortages really ever materializes, who knows—some might even be railroad stations again. ■



RECYCLED—*Mount Royal Station in Baltimore, a "neo-Renaissance" structure of granite and limestone, is set in a 4-acre park. It was closed down in 1961. Later the Baltimore and Ohio sold it to the Maryland Institute College of Art at far below market value. The former baggage transfer (right) now houses the Rinehart School of Sculpture.*



RECYCLED—*Rock Island Depot in Lincoln, Neb., was a modest evocation of the European chateau style. It is now a "drive-up" branch of the City National Bank.*