

Down by the Depot

This is the country of the throwaway civilization. Most conspicuously expendable have been the artifacts of the railroad age, that period of slightly more than half a century that opened the continent, shaped the environment, set the pattern of cities and built a series of monuments of notable esthetic ambition and engineering ingenuity.

From whistle stop to Roman tepidarium (New York's Penn Station, demolished 1966) these buildings are an unparalleled document of American art and history. Rendered obsolete and uneconomic by the decline of railroading, they have become an easy victim of the bulldozer.

With the renewed interest in train travel, there should be a little more hope for this heritage. The case for preservation is a natural corollary of the arguments for mass transportation. As a report just completed for the National Endowment for the Arts points out, the preservation idea is already working. Some sound solutions are being found for the huge, classical terminals as well as for minor Victorian depots, from Washington's Union Station as a national Visitors' Center to smaller stations as shops and offices. There are numerous economic techniques available.

But more are gone, or going, and many, like New London's, remain in danger. Of over 40,000 stations built in this country, 20,000 have been demolished. They are as much the victim of an attitude as of economics. The railroads themselves are notoriously negative, apart from their financial straits. The idea of maintenance, even aside from cost, is as unpopular as passenger service. The issue is an urgent one: as many significant and handsome structures are being demolished by neglect as by the wrecker.

In addition to commercial and cultural uses, there is another possibility with the potential of revived rail travel: some railroad stations could be reincarnated as railroad stations. It would be a delightful irony and a happy ending.