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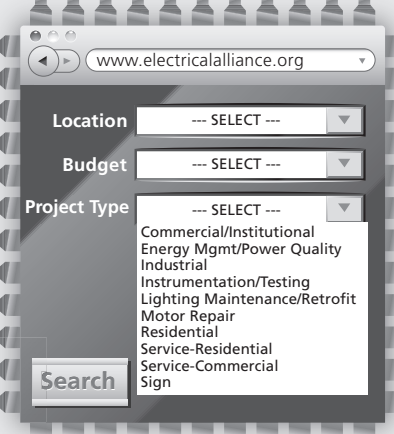
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Commercial Real Estate Extra

Past Is Present

Historic Union Station sits at crossroads today

By Rebecca Miller



Union Station has been at the heart of life in the nation's capital since its opening in 1907, and it remains one of the world's grandest railroad terminals. The station, however, is significant not just for its role in transportation but also for its architecture.

The building was designed in the beaux-arts style by Daniel H. Burnham and Co. It enabled the Pennsylvania Railroad to remove its station and tracks from the National Mall, which made possible key features of the 1902 McMillan Plan and the creation of the Mall we enjoy today. Arguably, Burnham's design for Union Station set the tone for Washington's monumental architecture for the next 40 years.

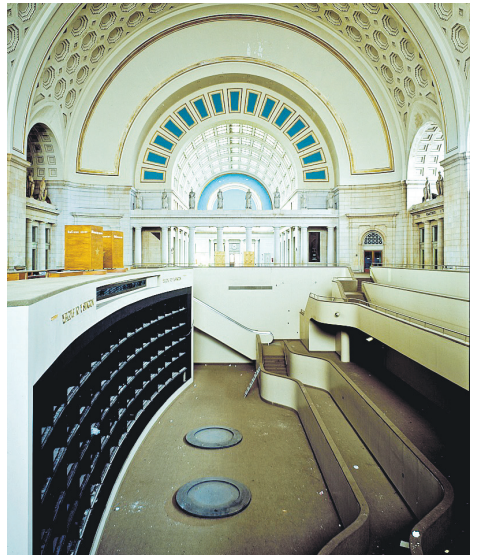
The exterior of the building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1969. The D.C. Preservation League and the Committee of 100 have submitted an amendment to the D.C. landmark nomination that would extend protections to four significant interior spaces that continue the neoclassical vocabulary of the station's exterior: the State Reception Room, the Dining Room, the Great Hall and the Ticket Lobby.

This amendment also documents the northern approach from the property line to the train sheds and platforms at the rear of the station. The northern approach was an integral part of the terminal design and a significant engineering accomplishment.

Before 1945, railroads dominated inter-city travel. In 1937, an estimated 37,000 people passed through Union Station each day. During World War II, an average of 100,000 people used the station daily.

The postwar years were a different story. Railway travel by noncommuters decreased by 84 percent from 1945 to 1965. Union Station and other stations like it around the country went into a decline.

In 1976, the National Visitor Center opened in the Great Hall to enhance the



CAROL M. HIGHSMITH PHOTOGRAPHY

During the country's bicentennial, sections of the Union Station floor were removed to set up audiovisual presentations for visitors. It was dubbed "the Pit."

visitor experience in the District for the nation's bicentennial. This resulted in the removal of significant portions of the original floor. A colossal failure, what became known as "the Pit" closed a few years later. This project also resulted in the removal of the station's wings in 1975 to make way for the parking garage.

A second, more successful rehabilitation was driven by a 1981 law that refocused the station on its transportation functions and added retail spaces. The work, concluded in 1988, included a new retail concourse, a food court, restoration of the Great Hall's ceiling and installation of new marble floors.

Today, Union Station is one of the most visited tourist attractions in Washington and remains a hub of intermodal transportation with nearly 90,000 people passing through each day.

The station is now at a critical juncture. Proposed projects could have a monumental impact on this treasured landmark. Under consideration are changes to the Great Hall that would introduce two major holes in the floor to provide for additional retail in the former movie theater space below.

Potential expanded transit facilities



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The “wings” protruding from the back of Union Station in this aerial photo, probably taken about 1920, were amputated in 1975 to allow for construction of a parking garage.

would assist in relieving the congestion at the busiest stop on the Metro system. Amtrak projects a tripling of its noncommuter ridership over the next 30 years, requiring increased railroad facilities.

Finally, there is a proposal to develop 3 million square feet of mixed-used space called Burnham Place on a platform over the tracks at the H Street NW bridge.

All of this planning appears to be taking place on an ad hoc basis, without much coordination among the various stakeholders.

I know what you’re thinking, preservation means opposing development. Untrue. Preservation isn’t about stopping change, but ensuring that change takes into consideration the historic resources affected. The D.C. Preservation League has partnered with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Committee of 100 and the Capital Hill Restoration Society to form a coalition to work with the various stakeholders to ensure that preservation of this national treasure is considered in all aspects of planning for its future.

Here is what is important to the preserva-

tion community on this project: Transportation must remain Union Station’s primary function, and restoration of the station must go hand in hand with development. A preservation plan must be created to guide the expansion, and the public must participate in the planning process. The station’s original pedestrian circulation patterns should be re-established. The visitor experience and access should be enhanced. The design of new construction must be exemplary and compatible with the landmark building. And finally, the station must be viewed as a neighborhood anchor for surrounding communities.

The redevelopment of Union Station is a tremendous opportunity to create a world-class multimodal transportation center with a mix of uses that supports community revitalization, economic development and architectural excellence. It is an opportunity this city cannot afford to miss.

Rebecca Miller is executive director of the D.C. Preservation League and writes the Past is Present column for Commercial Real Estate Extra.



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The Great Hall, shown in a photo from about 1920, was once the primary waiting area for travelers. Today this tourist attraction serves primarily restaurant and retail functions.

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