Mighty Penn
by Michael J. Lewis

The Pennsylvania Station in New York
Is like some vast basilica of old
That towers above the terror of the dark
As bulwark and protection to the soul.
—Langston Hughes

Through it one entered the city like a god . . . . One scuttles in now like a rat.
—Vincent Scully

It is the easiest thing in the world to convince someone that Penn Station should be rebuilt. All it takes is a look at a photograph of the original station and then a look at Penn Station today. The subterranean warren huddled under Madison Square Garden is one of the most disagreeable public spaces in New York, or in any major Western city. The public usually becomes inured to bad design, through a combination of familiarity and the inability to imagine something better, but the photographs of Penn Station in all its Roman glory are a constant reminder that it does not have to be this way.

Incompetent design is everywhere, of course, but today’s Penn Station represents something far worse. Its humid unpleasantness seems too thoroughgoing and systematic to be accidental; something so uniformly nasty can only be the result of deliberate design. And such was the case. When the reeling Pennsylvania Railroad tried to delay its inevitable bankruptcy in 1963 by selling off its air rights, it lowered ceiling heights to the physically acceptable minimum—which turns out to be rather below the psychologically acceptable minimum.

To rectify this planning calamity, better late than never, a group has organized itself under the name Rebuild Penn Station, which is at once their mission statement and battle cry. Rebuild Penn Station is currently conducting a campaign of public persuasion, making its case pragmatically rather than on the ground of nostalgia. With the planners Richard W. Cameron and James Venturi, it has undertaken a study showing how wider track platforms and additional escalators will improve circulation and eliminate the desperate bottlenecks that make a train trip so unhappy. To recreate the vanished station would not be cheap. Construction costs have been estimated at $3 to $3.5 billion, which does not include the cost of replacing the buildings on the site. Madison Square Garden would have to find a new home. And the twenty-nine-story slab of Two Penn Plaza should also come down (although the station could be built around it, if necessary). Yet as Rebuild Penn Station likes to point out, Santiago Calatrava’s flashy (and leaky) World Trade Center Oculus cost $4 billion to build. It serves fifty thousand passengers daily; Penn Station serves six hundred thousand.

Rebuild Penn Station is an initiative of the National Civic Art Society, the Washington-based nonprofit organization that was established in 2002 to promote “beautiful, meaningful civic design.” Under its president, Justin
Shubow, the National Civic Art Society first made a name for itself in its opposition to the National Eisenhower Memorial, Frank Gehry’s “Eisen Curtain” (Shubow’s term for the metal mesh screens that are its most prominent feature). While it could not prevent the construction of Gehry’s memorial, its tenacious opposition helped mitigate some of its worst features. It became clear that there is a great reservoir of untapped public support for a dignified civic architecture, so long as one makes a persuasive visual case. Not everyone cares about monuments and memorials, of course, but everyone sooner or later deals with train stations. And so there could hardly be a better test case for the prospects of reviving a humane and gracious architecture than Penn Station. The challenge of Rebuild Penn Station is to make the public consciously aware of what it already knows instinctively, that something went catastrophically awry at Penn Station. And to understand why our current station is so bad, one must first understand why the original Penn Station was so good.

Into the twentieth century, train passengers could enter Manhattan only by means of ferry. Northbound passengers detrained at Jersey City into the lobby of a ferry house and walked directly into the waiting ferryboat that would whisk them across the Hudson to a corresponding ferry house on Twenty-third Street. The Pennsylvania Railroad did what it could to minimize the inconvenience. It commissioned Frank Furness, Philadelphia’s imaginative Victorian architect, to outfit the ferryboat interiors with mahogany seats, tile floors, and brilliant electric lighting. (It was here that Furness first replaced the conventional labels on the restroom doors, “Gentlemen’s Cabin” and “Ladies’ Cabin,” with the modern terms “Men” and “Women.”) Yet all the festive decor could not conceal that the ferry ride added an hour or so to the trip.

The solution was a tunnel under the Hudson, but this was impossible so long as trains burned coal. By the turn of the century, electrified trains were possible, and the president of the railroad instantly grasped the possibility. This was Alexander J. Cassatt, a trained engineer and the brother of the painter Mary Cassatt (a modernist in her own right). Cassatt set the grand project in motion in 1901, and began building two single-track tunnels that would take trains under the Hudson and directly into midtown Manhattan. Here would be an enormous station, taking up a full four city blocks, from Seventh to Eighth Avenues, and from Thirty-first to Thirty-third Streets. The site was enormous—784 by 430 feet—and enormously expensive. For an architect it was the project of a lifetime, and Cassatt made an inspired choice.

Up to this point, Cassatt had turned to Furness for every one of his buildings, from the railroad’s corporate headquarters (Philadelphia’s Broad Street Station) to his own house, church, and cricket club. These were cheerfully belligerent performances, with Furness’s characteristic Victorian overstatement. But Cassatt intuited that Penn Station was essentially a civic building, and that classical dignity was the order of the day, not Victorian restlessness. He put the project in the hands of America’s most brilliant and accomplished classicists, McKim, Mead & White. (As a consolation prize, Furness was given the station in Wilmington, Delaware, whose spirited brick and iron expressiveness demonstrates precisely what Cassatt did not want for New York.)

McKim, Mead & White were all nominally the architects, but the building has nothing of Stanford White’s sensual treatment of materials and textures. It was entirely the work of Charles F. McKim, whose classicism was of the severe Roman sort. McKim had studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in the 1860s, and his planning is that of the Ecole at its very best. It is a hallmark of a fully resolved Beaux-Arts plan that one never hesitates for an instant and is always effortlessly aware of the direction of movement and the waiting destination. At Penn Station, everything flowed with gracious axial logic. The pedestrian entered on Seventh Avenue, moved along a generously proportioned, shop-lined arcade, and entered the main waiting room with its monumental vaulted ceiling. This was set at a right angle to the main axis—indicating that it was a place of repose, not movement—
although the hurrying passenger could dash through it to the train concourse beyond. Here the elaborate plaster coffering of the vaulted ceiling vanished, exposing the steel frame beneath and letting light pour into the train platforms below.

Beaux-Arts architects were trained to make intelligent use of the cross axis, and this Penn Station did with panache. To avoid chaos, arriving and departing passengers used opposite ends of the waiting room—arrivals at the north and departures at the south. Taxi stands were placed at either end, reached by descending ramps, crossed by pedestrian bridges. This made it possible to accommodate automobile traffic easily, something that was not foreseen when the station was designed in 1904 but that was already of critical importance when the station opened in 1910.

The most extraordinary feature of Penn Station, however, was not its plan but its character. Most of the great urban train stations, regardless of their architectural style, follow the same conventional formula. They bring their tracks into the city above grade, crossing streets by means of viaducts, and enter into that marvel of engineering known as a train shed. These were invariably of iron and glass—iron to prevent fire from sparks, and glass to bring light through the smoky air. In a terminus, the train shed was fronted by a monumental head house that served as its formal face and was generally of considerable architectural pretension. It was in the nature of things that the shed was the work of an engineer, thinking in terms of the maximum achievable span, and the head house the work of an architect, thinking in terms of a pleasing civic image. This was the basic typology of the station, as perfected in the great terminals of London and Paris in the mid-nineteenth century, and still surviving in the stations of most larger European cities.

But at Penn Station there was no mighty train shed, unrolling grandly behind the façade of a head house. The station rested above the tracks, which arrived below street level rather than above. The architecture was above the engineering, so to speak, not in front of it, and so the key architectural event that gave earlier stations their monumental urban presence was absent. McKim’s challenge was to achieve this monumental urban presence when the great engineering drama was below ground and out of sight. His imaginative solution was to think of the station as both a bridge and a gateway. In purely physical terms, the station was nothing more than “a monumental bridge over the tracks, with entrances to the streets on the main axis and all four sides,” arranged so as to create “the greatest number of lines of circulation.” But in symbolic terms, it was a gateway, although one placed at the very center of the city, rather than at the periphery of the traditional city wall. McKim compared its function to the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, a dignified classical portico that also accommodated an enormous amount of daily traffic. This was the inspiration for the colossal Seventh Avenue façade of Penn Station, McKim’s solemn essay in the dignified power of the Roman Doric.

A gate at the periphery need only be a place of passage; a gate in the center of a city, especially one that one emerges into from below, requires a grand and welcoming space. But the classical buildings that Beaux-Arts architects studied were fiercely hierarchical; the axis of a palace leads to a throne, the axis of a temple to an altar. Public buildings in the modern sense scarcely existed in the ancient world, which certainly had nothing quite like a train station which directed scurrying travelers along different paths. McKim found his model in the great Baths of Caracalla, built in the third century A.D. and still one of the most stupendous ruins of Rome. Charles Moore, McKim’s assistant and first biographer, describes the day when McKim decided to make it the basis of his waiting room:

That afternoon it was simply artistic impulse that led him to hire the willing but astonished workmen to pose among the ruins to give scale and movement—movement, because in all his designing McKim ever had in his mind’s eye the people, men and especially well-gowned women, who would sweep up and down his broad staircases.
In fact, McKim’s paraphrase of the Roman bath is considerably larger than its prototype, so large that Grand Central Station might have fit inside it. When it opened, Penn Station was praised for this stupendously creative use of Roman architecture—and half a century later, this same studious historicism was invoked to justify its demolition. It was, after all, just “a duplicate of the hall of the old Baths of Caracalla.”

The demolition of Penn Station, which began in 1963 and took nearly three years, left intact its entire substructure—the train platforms, layout of the concourse, the tracks beneath. In fact, when entering on Seventh Avenue, one is still passing along McKim’s grand axis and following the circulation pattern he devised at the start of the last century. And yet if the plan survives, it does so without those changes in proportion and scale, the sequence of compression and release, that gave it decorum and grace, and that treated the station’s users not as objects to be channeled efficiently through troughs, as in an abattoir, but as citizens, invested with dignity and self-respect. There can hardly be a more devastating rebuke to functionalism than the translation of McKim’s glorious sequence of spaces into a mere two-dimensional diagram of paths of movement.

Rebuild Penn Station is not alone in recognizing the grievous problems in circulation and crumbling infrastructure at Penn Station. The now defunct post office immediately behind the station on Eighth Avenue, also by McKim, Mead & White, is to be converted into use by Amtrak and the Long Island Rail Road. In honor of Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, perhaps the last politician of note to show sustained interest in architecture, it is to be named the Moynihan Train Hall. At the same time, a new concourse for Long Island Rail Road users has been opened under Eighth Avenue and further renovations are planned for the station’s two subway stations. All of these improvements are welcome and necessary, but they are scarcely adequate. Only 20 percent of the station’s commuters will use it, and New Jersey Transit riders will scarcely be affected. These piecemeal interventions reflect the divided lines of responsibility and ownership between Amtrak, the Port Authority, and the lessors of the buildings above the station, as well as between the City and the State of New York. Although an equally vexing confusion over responsibility and ownership afflicted the World Trade Center site, a satisfactory administrative structure was nevertheless eventually built.

Another challenge for Rebuild Penn Station is the ideology of historic preservation, a movement that is violently opposed to the making of historic facsimiles, not only of a building but of any of its damaged or missing parts. This doctrine is a recent one, historically speaking. It is scarcely older than John Ruskin, whose *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) contains a memorable tirade against architectural restoration.

Do not let us talk then of restoration. The thing is a Lie from beginning to end. You may make a model of a building as you may of a corpse, and your model may have the shell of the old walls within it as your cast might have the skeleton, with what advantage I neither see nor care: but the old building is destroyed, and that more totally and mercilessly than if it had sunk into a heap of dust, or melted into a mass of clay.

Of course Ruskin was writing about a particular kind of restoration, the replacement of decayed masonry, and the rebuilding of a wall in pristine modern masonry. It is standard practice for a mason to recarve a badly eroded stone by first tooling away the worn surface and then cutting anew the moldings and details. Only the outer half-inch of material is lost, but for Ruskin this was to lose everything. This outer surface was the part of the building that bore the evidence of the work of the human hand, each visible chisel mark and edge held the impression of living human labor—sometimes plodding, sometimes joyous, but always alive. And if it was worn and scarred, so much the better, for it testified all the more eloquently to the passage of centuries. At a time in the Industrial Revolution when machine-tooled factory products were displacing the work of artisans, Ruskin
felt an exquisite agony at the effacing of the living surface of a building—like the flaying of a body. All that was left was inert matter. Behind this was a cri de coeur against the materialism of the modern world—and yet this was itself a kind of inverted materialism, in which all that mattered was one component of a building’s physical fabric, its material skin. (Ruskin had little to say of those aspects of a building that we regard as its essentials: its plan and spaces.)

Ruskin’s tirade, entertaining as it is, has been enormously destructive. Our modern revulsion toward facsimiles is in large part a reaction to the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, which began in the 1930s, a comprehensive and well-intentioned reconstruction of an entire colonial town that resulted in the reproduction of numerous buildings, including the original Capitol, which was lost to fire in the eighteenth century. This sort of restoration sought to recreate vanished buildings with such impeccable accuracy that they could not easily be distinguished from the original. In the inevitable counter-reaction this became taboo. It became official orthodoxy, enforced by historic preservation legislation overseen by the Department of the Interior, that historical facsimile be strictly forbidden, and that historical building fabric, no matter how ruinous, must be lovingly preserved. (Perhaps the best example of this is the moldering joists of Philadelphia Independence Hall, which have been encased in modern steel trusses that carefully keep in place the useless but sacrosanct timber, as if fragments of the True Cross.) But while architectural elites might object to the making of a facsimile, those of us who are not architecturally ideological, and that includes most people, do not. It would be the bitterest of ironies if the rebuilding of Pennsylvania Station were to be thwarted by the inflexible orthodoxy of the historic preservation movement, a movement that would scarcely exist were it not for the destruction of that station in the first place.

Yet while architectural reconstructions have been frowned upon in this country, Europe has been witness to a growing number of them. Among the reborn buildings are Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior, dynamited in 1931 to make way for the Palace of the Soviets; St. John’s Cathedral in Warsaw, destroyed by the Nazis in 1944; the Berlin Palace, condemned as a symbol of Prussian militarism five years after the end of World War II—each of these has been scrupulously rebuilt, at great expense and with deep research.

In the end, the principal obstacle confronting Rebuild Penn Station is neither administrative nor financial but psychological. Our society is reluctant to acknowledge that there is any realm in which our predecessors were more capable or accomplished than we are. To architects it would be a confession of failure to admit that they are not in a position to create something at least as beautiful and efficient as Charles McKim did. Such a confession, like all confessions, could be good for the soul. At present, Rebuild Penn Station is in need of articulate political supporters who can make the case for decent civic architecture, as Senator Moynihan once did. The moment is auspicious. Madison Square Garden’s lease is set to run out in 2023, and its management should be considering alternative sites at this moment. And as various elements of the surrounding transit lines are renovated and made to sparkle, the contrast with the station itself will become all the more unbearable. There is also a satisfying irony to the timing: Irving M. Felt, the developer who negotiated the demolition of Penn Station in order to build Madison Square Garden, said in 1962, “Fifty years from now, when it’s time for [Madison Square Garden] to be torn down, there will be a new group of architects who will protest.” Actually, no. There won’t be any.