

Standing like a time weathered beacon of an unrealistic past of the city of Detroit, the Michigan Central Station appears out of place in its grandeur, now marked harshly by time, planted in the middle of nowhere of the city's western limits. Visible off of interstate seventy-five, the train station appears like a forgotten piece of Detroit's historical fabric, and it is hard to imagine the opulence that the building must have once enjoyed. Even with the building being a prime example of architecture of the early twentieth century, the question begins to arise of how, and perhaps even why, should a community save a part of its architectural history when it no longer has a place for it in the present?

Ironically begun as a replacement itself, the Michigan Central Station began its development in nineteen twelve and was rushed to completion in nineteen thirteen due to a fire at the original central station and opened earlier than expected to compensate.¹ Designed by Warren & Wetmore and Reed & Stem, architects of the Ritz-Carlton in Atlantic City, New Jersey and the Grand Central Station in Manhattan, New York, respectively, the Michigan Central Station echoed of Classicism and magnificence.² "Seven thousand tons of structural steel, one hundred twenty-five thousand cubic feet of stone, and seven million common bricks" were used in the overall construction of the station making it a massive example of Classicism and of Beaux Arts architecture (Kavanaugh, p.32).

¹ *Detroit's Michigan Central Station*, p.7

² *Detroit's Michigan Central Station*, p.7

In nineteen thirteen, upon its completion, the building cost a monumental two and a half million dollars to construct, equaling to around fifty five million dollars current day taking into account inflation.³ Even with its extravagant cost, the station's idealic landscape of Roosevelt Park across from the entrance was not made a reality until eight years after the grand opening in nineteen twenty-one, costing the city nearly seven hundred thousand dollars to construct additionally.⁴

Nestled in Detroit's oldest neighborhood, Corktown, and near Mexicantown, the train station sits amongst a slum area of Detroit, though not by accident: it was presumed that the area "would be cleared as downtown inevitably expanded westward," but this never happened (Kavanaugh, p.7). Standing almost as an ethereal temple to transportation, the station glorified the railway system, adding a sense of wonder and glamour to the whole experience, something needed at the time as many thought of train travel as dirty and noisy.⁵ Upon its opening, the Michigan Central Station was the tallest train station in the world, and was an immediate crowning achievement for the city.⁶ The exterior of the building itself is a fine example of Classicism and Beaux Arts style architecture.

A massive marquis covers the main entrance of the station which is "covered by Guastavino tile vaults divided by broad coffered arches, and was decorated with marble floors, bronze chandeliers, gargantuan sixty-eight foot

³ *Lost Detroit*, p.131

⁴ *Detroit's Michigan Central Station*, p.31

⁵ www.historicdetroit.org

⁶ www.historicdetroit.org

Corinthian columns, and three arched twenty-one by forty foot windows flanked by four smaller windows ornamented with lovely wrought iron grilles,” certainly taking inspiration from Classical architecture (Austin). Elaborate capitals and intricate dentil work of the cornices, coupled with the impeccable attention to symmetry added to the Classical vocabulary of the space.⁷ “The Roman elements utilized at the base of the building are returned to, however, from the eleventh floor though the top” only, while the middle part of the office tower remains very simplistic with its rectangular windows and brick façade (Kavanaugh, p.101).

With the three story depot and an eighteen story office tower connected into one colossal building, many critics and employees were under the impression that the railroad company “actually planned [the building’s] future use as a hotel” as each floor of the tower had vacuum outlets, presumably for this very reason (Kavanaugh, p.27). As well, its birthing architects had hands in designing numerous hotels, which is evident by the exterior look of the train station.

The entrance into the station is governed by bronze doors with mahogany trim, and guides travelers into the arcade. “Ceiling heights, reaching upwards of twenty-eight feet, would alter a simple walk into a procession of some dignity” as guests were enveloped in the stone arches, guided by the enormous bronze chandeliers, and then gently deposited to the ticket office (Kavanaugh, p.41). After purchasing their ticket, travelers would then proceed to the extraordinary waiting room.

⁷ *Detroit’s Michigan Central Station*, p.98

Modeled after the public baths of Ancient Rome, the room stretches the length of the building and is the centerpiece jewel of the entire building.⁸ The Guastavino arches are repeated within the space, and accented by the Indian mahogany benches, Kasota marble walls and columns, resulting in a ceiling height of fifty-four and a half feet.⁹

As well, the station included a concession stand, newsstand, drugstore with two licensed pharmacists on hand, cigar shop, and a barbershop which included bathing facilities to allow visitors to freshen up during their travels.¹⁰ “The main concourse had nearly twenty skylights and huge windows providing tons of natural sunlight” and included ten gates in an attempt to limit any sort of crowding during travel (Austin). At its peak, the Michigan Central Station serviced approximately five thousand passengers a day, making it a hub of travel, and even servicing such prominent people as Herbert Hoover, Harry S. Truman, Franklin Roosevelt, Charlie Chaplin, and Thomas Edison.¹¹

“The station saw hundreds of trains a day during the First World War, as the city burgeoned, but in the nineteen thirties the regional electric railways failed. The big trunk lines boomed during the Second World War and for a little while after, but then came the interstates and intercity air travel. In nineteen sixty-seven, fateful year of riot and war, the waiting room was closed” signaling an inevitable end to the stations tremendous run (Schultz, p.891). “In nineteen seventy-one Amtrak picked the station out of the wreckage of the failed merger

⁸ *www.historicdetroit.org*

⁹ *Detroit's Michigan Central Station*, p.44

¹⁰ *Detroit's Michigan Central Station*, p.45-49

¹¹ *Lost Detroit*, p.131

of the New York Central and the Pennsylvania and limped it along to serve a few trains a day until nineteen eighty-eight,” when at eleven thirty A.M., on January fifth, nineteen eighty-eight, train number three hundred fifty-three bound for Chicago was the last train to ever leave the station (Schultz, p.891).

The end of the great age of locomotive travel and the golden high of decadence of the Michigan Central Station came to an end and left the building with no income for upkeep and maintenance and resigned it to a solitary confinement behind chain link walls. “Any building that stands empty for long is eventually a playground for delinquents and arsonists, a canvas for graffiti taggers, a shelter for vagrants and the homeless, a magnet for artists and other melancholy types,” and the Michigan Central Station is no different (Schultz, p.891). Even the grandeur of it’s past cannot save the station’s tragic and underwhelming future.

In nineteen ninety-five, the School of Fine Arts from Wayne State University in Detroit installed a temporary exhibition of multimedia works in the train station entitled “The Cathedral of Time”.¹² Though a raging success, and certainly a draw of attention, the station still remains an empty, unutilized space. Several times proposals have risen as to what to do with the space including repurposing it into office space, a hotel, and most simply tearing it down, but nothing has come of it. Again the question begins to arise, is there really still a place for such relics as gargantuan train stations in a modernist society that is about keeping up with the future rather than relishing the past?

¹² *Detroit’s Michigan Central Station*, p.115

In Kansas City, Missouri, a similar epidemic was felt and creatively resolved with their own Union Station. Similarly built in nineteen fourteen, the Union Station was comprised of eight hundred thousand square feet of space that originally featured nine hundred rooms.¹³ “The North Waiting Room held ten thousand people and the complex included restaurants, a cigar store, barber shop, railroad offices, the nation's largest Railway Express Building used for shipping freight and mail, as well as a powerhouse providing steam and power” making it quite the equal to Detroit’s Michigan Central Station (Union Station Kansas City). Designed in the Beaux Arts style as well, by the architect Jarvis Hunt, it was second largest in the country to Detroit’s own train station. With the ceiling in the Grand Hall standing ninety-five feet high, “there are three chandeliers weighing thirty-five hundred pounds each, and the Grand Hall clock has a six-foot diameter face,” ornamenting the space making the magnificence of the stations architecture impeccable and overwhelming to witness (National Register of Historical Places).

Similarly closed in the nineteen eighties, Union Station sat empty, deteriorating until a Missouri state initiative was passed and restoration was begun on the building; completed just before the new millennium.¹⁴ Presently, the Union Station is now the site of Kansas City’s Museum of History and Science, with their mission stating: “we shall be recognized as the region's finest educational and cultural resource committed to the preservation and interpretation of Kansas City's regional history and the promotion of innovation,

¹³ www.unionstation.org/about

¹⁴ www.unionstation.org/about

research and discovery in science and technology through the development of collections, exhibitions and other educational programs for all citizens of and visitors to the Greater Kansas City metropolitan area,”

(www.unionstation.org/about). The museum’s commitment to the community and to the renaissance of the building itself is astounding, and inspirational to say the least.

Perhaps this is the salvation that the Detroit’s Michigan Central Station is looking for? Being transformed into a public entity like a museum would allow for funding to come from grants and stipends rather than solely laying upon the city of Detroit’s struggling finances. But what institution would be large enough to take over the space? That resigns the fate of the station to a private business entity, turning the space into an office building of some sort or a hotel. While the building would be prime for either option, the cost of renovation will be soaring, having been previously estimated to take upwards of one hundred million dollars.¹⁵ Though, with such a prize tag, the outlook of the building begins to look greyer and greyer. Without a backing financial entity to return the building to its former glory, it is likely to continue to sit, abandoned and unused until it is deemed condemnable, and a case is made against it’s historical preservation certification to have it removed entirely.

The current owner of the station is Manuel Moroun, who is also the director of Central Transportation International, the company that controls the Ambassador Bridge in Detroit. Moroun has stated that the building is nothing but

¹⁵ *Lost Detroit*, p.132

a drain upon his finances and has stated that he will no longer care for the maintenance of the site, and will not entertain any ideas of renovation until a company of high finances with a pre-formed plan comes to him.¹⁶ With such an attitude the outlook for the train station to return to its original glamour looks quite impossible, even neglecting the fact that the city of Detroit is in financial disarray. The simple fact of the matter is, if the restoration and preservation of this iconic site were substantial enough, perhaps a greater entity than the city itself should step in and lend a helping hand. As the Union Station in Kansas City, Missouri can attest, the repurposing of such buildings is not just a pipe dream.

¹⁶ *Lost Detroit*, p.321

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