

Hoping for a rail revival in Baltimore

By: [Commentary](#): Joe Nathanson April 29, 2021



One of my earliest childhood memories is that of being lost ... in New York City's Pennsylvania Station. It was only a brief time that my four-year-old self was separated from my mother, but I certainly felt then and remember today the vastness of that space. And then, in 1963, that magnificent train station was gone.

Penn Station of Yesteryear

Marilyn Jordan Taylor is a past dean of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Design. As a practicing architect and partner at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, she led the SOM design team in preparing new concepts for rail stations along the Northeast Corridor. This is how she describes the demolished New York landmark.

"I never saw the late, great Pennsylvania Station. It opened in 1913 and was demolished in 1963. The original ticketing hall was styled after the classical Baths of Caracalla in Rome, while the train hall was a soaring space of steel and glass, filled with daylight that guided passengers to the train platforms (70' below grade) where they boarded their long-distance trains. It was heroic. It really was heroic."

The demolition of Penn Station, designed by the storied firm of McKim, Mead and White horrified those in New York who wanted to preserve the city's architectural heritage. Adding insult to injury was the cramped and dingy replacement station buried under Madison Square Garden.

Moynihan Train Hall

The outcry following what some saw as desecration led to the passage of New York City's Landmarks Preservation Law in 1965. But, starting in the 1990s, there were calls for something better to serve as a prominent gateway to the city. One of those who championed the creation of a new station was the late U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. His vision was to turn the adjacent James A. Farley Post Office, designed in the same grand Beaux-Arts style as the old, demolished station, into a new intercity rail and local transit hub.

After nearly three decades, that vision has been realized. In January, a new, nearly half-million square foot concourse, along with a waiting area, retail stores and eateries serving Amtrak and Long Island Rail Road commuters opened to the public. The new grand space is named in honor of the senator.

The \$1.6 billion Moynihan Train Hall, featuring a 92-foot high skylit atrium, provides a fitting entryway to America's largest metropolis. "Dad always said the greatest single act of vandalism in the history of New York was the destruction of Penn Station in 1963," commented his daughter Maura Moynihan on seeing the new facility. "This is really a miracle."

Revival in Baltimore

Is it possible that another miracle will occur right here in Baltimore?

Plans are underway for the redevelopment of our own Penn Station, the eighth busiest in the Amtrak system. The last time there were renovations to the station was nearly four decades ago. Now Amtrak, the owner of the station and some adjoining land parcels, has selected Penn Station Partners (PSP), a consortium of developers led by Beatty Development Group, to bring about a transformation of the station and the larger site.

Looking not to the near-term, post-pandemic recovery of rail travel, but to the anticipated increased passenger volumes through 2040 and beyond, the PSP team has a bold vision guiding the project. The initial phase calls for full historic preservation of the station building, including making vital core and shell improvements and improving its operational efficiency. A subsequent phase will provide, across the tracks from the existing station, a state-of-the-art station expansion, connected to the historic building and accommodating to the future. With the expansion of Acela service, there will also be the construction of a high-speed rail platform.

At the north end of the development is the proposed eight-story, mixed-use Lanvale building, providing both street-level commercial space and residential units. The overall redevelopment project is located at a point that connects Baltimore's cultural center and educational institutions, including the Myerhoff Symphony Hall, the Lyric. Maryland Institute College of Art and the University of Baltimore, to the Station North Arts and Entertainment District and the residential neighborhoods to the north. The planned Penn Station transformation promises to bring a new vibrancy to this uptown Baltimore location.

Work on the initial phase of the project is expected to begin this summer. As we look toward the further opening of the economy and the expansion of travel, perhaps we will be able to count this as more than a minor miracle.

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