

Center for Buildings, Infrastructure and Public Space Moynihan Train Hall Commentary of 14 January 2021

Tearing down the original 1910 Penn Station in 1963 has long been seen as a disastrous mistake. Adding a new train hall to the adjacent James A. Farley Post Office building was a stroke of genius, attributable to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, for whom the new train hall is named.

The old Penn Station, located between 7th and 8th Avenues and West 31st to 33rd Streets in Midtown Manhattan, was torn down to create a site for the new Madison Square Garden, a sports arena and multi-purpose hall that relegated most of the train waiting areas to underground windowless spaces.

The area around Penn Station and the Farley Building has attracted the low-cost bus companies that do not pay to dock within the Port Authority Bus Terminal nine blocks away. While not truly multi-modal, it is significant that buses, subway, regional rail and long-distance trains come together at one spot.

CitiBike is prominently situated, largely for the benefit of Long Island Railroad and Jersey Transit commuters, outside the Eighth Avenue doors of Penn Station and Moynihan Train Hall. Both Eighth and Ninth Avenues benefit from delineated bike lanes. A part of the Farley Building has been used for bike repair.

Skanska was the construction manager for the Moynihan Train Hall. The construction barrier on the building's north side shows a rendering that hints at the intensity of future commercial use of the public space. The photo is looking east toward the Empire State Building, not far away on Fifth Avenue.

Many of the original façade details of the Farley Building remain and have been restored. The proximity of Hudson Yards and Manhattan West large-scale commercial developments makes the conversion of the postal facility into a train hall all the more logical and necessary, benefitting commuters returning to neighborhood office buildings.

New canopies help signal the major entrances, which are situated almost at sidewalk level and lead to the upper concourse of the new transit facility. This image shows the north entrance on West 33rd Street. The modern canopies by design and material are within the vernacular of the original building.

The train hall is below grade, at an intermediate level to the train platforms. Arriving at the level of the hall there is none of the compression felt at the current Penn Station basement across the street. There is a sense of light and adequate volume helping with the transition.

Graphics and future food service will enliven the space, creating a sense of welcome. The impetus for locating the General Post Office above the tracks, dates to the time when trains were the principal way to move long-distance mail, brought easily down into designated mail cars of the passenger trains.

The graphics throughout contain dynamic and changing images that chronicle the construction process of the train hall. The south entrance, on West 31st Street, is particularly animated. The entrance-defining mutable graphic display currently helps explain the construction process, augmenting what the architecture says on its own, without additional graphic assistance.

Significant public art projects are located at the entrances. The ceiling artwork by Elmgreen and Dragset evokes the city, with skyscraper forms hanging down from the ceiling, almost like images from the film Inception. Another piece, a backlit stained-glass fresco by Kehinde Wiley, is called “Go” and certainly suggests movement.

Once on the train hall level, the volume of the space is the most notable feature. For someone used to arriving and departing from the basement level of Penn Station, this new room is spectacular. The pre-existing trusses that were above the General Post Office sorting room were newly revealed.

A large, centrally located clock, designed by Peter Pennoyer Architects, creates a meeting place. Moving video displays of New York City landmarks define the east edge of the train hall, above the waiting room for ticketed passengers. There is no seating for those who are not holding a train ticket.

The skylight glass is clear, making it possible to know not only the time of day, but the weather. The project team included architects Colin Koop and Roger Duffy from Skidmore Owings & Merrill, engineers from WSP and Severud, and construction managers from Skanska. Many others worked on particular aspects.

Above the Moynihan Train Hall skylight level, the pre-existing building will provide office space for Facebook. The investment was \$1.6 billion dollars, of which \$630 million, or just over 39% came from Vornado and the Related Companies, in return for a 99-year lease on 730,000 square feet of office space.

The train platform levels are easily accessed from the train hall. Separate ticketing for the long distance rail and the LIRR suburban commuters recalls Grand Central. The public sector funds, \$970 million, came largely through the Empire State Development Corporation, a public benefit entity of the State of New York

Designed by the Rockwell Group – who said that they were inspired by some of the great train halls around the world - the Amtrak and LIRR Ticketed Waiting Room areas are a combination of traditional and modern. Some have commented that it would be hard to sleep on the seats.

The Metropolitan Lounge, for Amtrak first-class ticket holders on the long-distance trains, is located at the southwest corner of the train hall, provides work space as well as a private amenity space for those waiting to depart. Designed by FXCollaborative it is reminiscent of the priority lounge areas at airports.

The baggage area is the one place where images of the demolished station are shown. A quote from Senator Moynihan reads: “In the old times, you arrived at Pennsylvania Station at the train platform. You went up the stairs to heaven. Make that Manhattan. And we shall have it again.”

The upper level of public space will be activated by food service and bars. This rendering of a future post-pandemic bar on the mezzanine level of the new train hall shows the trusses to advantage and a young, awkwardly homogeneous clientele suggesting the question – who is this new space serving?