

The Moynihan Train Hall's Glorious Arrival

January 13, 2021 | By Ian Volner

Page 1 of 6



The new transit hub redeems the destruction of the original Penn Station.

Photograph by Mark Kauzlarich / Bloomberg / Getty

The film noir "Killer's Kiss," from 1955, is an almost perfect dud. But because it was filmed on location in New York—and because its director was a twenty-seven-year-old photographer named Stanley Kubrick—it's worth watching for the first scene and the last, which occur in the same place: the passenger concourse of the original Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan, where the protagonist, having escaped from shadowy thugs, waits impatiently for his lover. Kubrick captures the hero from a low angle, and, overhead, the arched trusses holding up the station's glass-and-iron roof seem impossibly high. The building looks very dirty, but the ambient soot in the air catches the sunshine as it streams down from above, making the light appear more abundant, almost solid.

A little more than a decade after the film's release, all this would be gone. The old structure, created by the firm McKim, Mead & White and opened to the public in 1910, was bulldozed to make way for the current Penn Station-Madison Square Garden complex, designed (if that's the word) by the businessman and architect Charles Luckman. Save for the name, the two Penn Stations share nothing: the McKim, Mead & White design—with a main waiting room partly based on the early-fourth-century Baths of Diocletian, in Rome—packed two city blocks with lofty columns, coffered ceilings, graceful arcades, and, of course, all that splendid natural light. Its successor, as generations of weary travellers know, is a kind of underground people extruder—a literal tomb for twentieth-century American design, the place where the great architect Louis Kahn died in 1974, alone, in the men's room. For many critics, historians, and lovers of the cityscape, the demolition of the Beaux Arts beauty of Penn Station, starting in 1963, is one of the original sins of New York urbanism, the beginning of the city's fall from grace.

We've been trying to atone ever since, with mixed results. Renovations of Penn Station in the nineties included the addition of murals evoking the old building—a strangely cruel gesture. Luckman died in 1999, and his obituary in the Times noted that plans "are now afoot to redevelop the Garden site." They had been afoot for years, and they would be for many more. Schemes to get Penn Station out from under the Garden's concrete boot have been revived and dashed, victims of government parsimony or private intransigence or both. Here in 2021, a global pandemic has dismantled the city's economy, given all forms of public transit a bad rap, and cast a pall over the notion of public space. Yet even now, at this most unlikely juncture, New York's new train hall has arrived, more than twenty years behind schedule but somehow right on time.

Moynihan Train Hall, as the new facility is called, occupies the middle slice of the James A. Farley Building, which had been—and partially still is—an iconic New York post office, built in 1912, and also a product of McKim, Mead & White's studio. The new transit facility, sitting just opposite Madison Square Garden between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, is named for Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the long-serving United States senator from New York who was among the first to suggest the reportedly underused postal building as a suitable alternative to the botched Penn Station. As the senator is said to have observed, "Where else but in New York could you tear down a beautiful Beaux Arts building and find another one right across the street?"

Courtly, principled yet ideologically ductile, Moynihan represents a vanished species of political animal. His belief in “an ethic of collective provision,” as he once put it, has been under sustained assault by the outgoing Administration—as has his personal legacy. Not two weeks before the Moynihan Train Hall’s public opening, on January 1st, the White House issued an executive order establishing “classical and traditional architecture” as the preferred styles in the construction of new federal projects. The new directive countermands nearly six decades of national policy that favored invention and creativity in federal buildings, a policy with the specific provision that “the development of an official style must be avoided.” Those words, from the “Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture,” were written in 1962 by Moynihan, then an aide in the Kennedy Administration.

The building that now bears Moynihan’s name is a reassertion of his political and cultural values. It’s not traditional or modern but both, combining early-twentieth-century grandeur with early-twenty-first-century sophistication. Stepping into the boots of McKim and Luckman is the global firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (S.O.M.), led by the design partner Colin Koop and the partner emeritus Roger Duffy. What they’ve delivered ticks off practically every item on what could be thought of as a good public-project checklist: Easy mass transit access? Yes—the Eighth Avenue subway lines feed into the sub-concourse level. High-quality amenities? Sure thing—the designers at Rockwell Group have contributed a waiting room that’s equal parts homey and streamline-chic, while FXCollaborative has created an Amtrak lounge indistinguishable from a sleek co-working space. A strong sense of place, a palpable commitment to the public realm? Yes, again: the McKim, Mead & White exterior is preserved in toto, with smart-looking marquees and wayfinding marking the entryways. Inside, the new main concourse is a single floor that’s far more attractive and easier to navigate than the squalid holding pen across the street, lined in polished granite from the same quarry as the stone used in Grand Central Terminal.

It's walking through the concourse, with all the platform entrances on the same level, surrounded by upper-level galleries for bars and restaurants, that the visitor might get some inkling of the glory that was Penn. Way up high, S.O.M. has opened up the ceiling of what had been the post office's sorting room, using the original trusses to support a fully glazed skylight that ripples and flows clear across the space. There's another skylight, a touch less dramatic, in a shop-lined hallway just to the west; there are art installations, including a backlit stained-glass fresco by Kehinde Wiley and a beguiling ceiling sculpture by the artistic duo of Elmgreen & Dragset. But the concourse is the main event, the great civic stage for our future exits and entrances.

And it's here, unfortunately, that reality starts to set in. That title again: Moynihan Train Hall. It's not a standalone railway station. A chunk of the Farley building has been repurposed as an alternative point of ingress; access to the platforms below has been extended westward from Penn Station to serve the new facility. (But not all of the platforms: New Jersey Transit riders still have to board their trains via Penn proper.) For relieving the (very un-covid) human bottlenecks that regularly plagued the station, Moynihan Train Hall will have some functional value, though even that's been rendered slightly redundant by the simultaneous completion of a new dedicated entrance for the Long Island Railroad, on Seventh Avenue and Thirty-third Street, also designed by S.O.M. The new concourse is a stage all right, but the show is a bit of a farce.

As Duffy put it during a preopening tour, Moynihan Train Hall in its current iteration could be likened to “the main departures terminal of an international airport,” more lobby than logistical hub. What New York truly needs is for elected officials to increase railroad capacity to the city, preferably by carrying out the long-deferred plans that would put new tunnels under the Hudson, allowing for additional platforms south of the existing station. But even then, there may always be something ineluctably airporthy about Moynihan Train Hall. The design, after all these years stuck in the administrative pipeline, has picked up some moss, outpaced by technology and by taste. We’ve seen this space several times before, often on a grander scale, as in the “diagrid” canopy of London’s King’s Cross Station revamp, in 2012, by John McAslan & Partners, or in impressive high-speed train sheds popping up across East Asia, including such massive undertakings as China’s Guangzhou South Railway Station, designed by the international firm Farrells, in 2010. Certainly, Moynihan Train Hall is not likely to attract the same social-media fandom as Santiago Calatrava’s Oculus, at the World Trade Center, an even more farcical but more visually awesome take on transit-as-spectacle.

Perhaps most distressingly, portions of the Farley complex not used for transportation purposes or by the Postal Service are now being leased (via a commercial deal with Vornado Realty Trust) as corporate offices for Facebook, whose employees will enjoy entrance lobbies off the northwest corner and a whole suite of connected spaces on the building’s upper floors. At all hours of the night and day, passengers gliding into the airy elegance of the concourse might be looked down upon by the employees of Mark Zuckerberg, whose windows sit directly above the skylight, surrounding it. As a metaphor for America’s society of digital surveillance, it’s pretty on the nose, inspiring a sensation that’s nearly the opposite of the comforting vibes Langston Hughes once described, in his 1932 poem about the original Penn Station. The “vast basilica,” he wrote, “towers above the terror of the dark / As bulwark and protection of the soul.”

At the ribbon-cutting, two days before the public *début*, Governor Andrew Cuomo seemed chipper. “How great is today, huh?” he declared, as his co-celebrants sat separated by six feet, masked. Joining him at the dais was the architecture critic Paul Goldberger, who advised on the project and whose remarks put the project in historical perspective. “We travel every day across bridges and through tunnels and along subway tracks that were built in difficult times, because other generations invested in us,” Goldberger said. “Moynihan Train Hall is a symbol of our will to do the same thing today,” he added, “because investing in the future is actually one of the best ways we have to keep afloat in the present.” For a symbol, Moynihan Train Hall is awfully pricey: \$1.6 billion. Its completion leaves some very thorny problems—not least, the ultimate fate of the Madison Square Garden site, since the arena’s proprietors (chiefly the Dolan family, owners of the Knicks and the Rangers) haven’t appeared to be in any rush to move out. The realization of the Moynihan Train Hall’s potential—and with it the redemption of New York’s greatest architectural mistake—can’t be truly complete until the late-sixties complex meets the same wrecking ball that clobbered its predecessor.

But coming into the new hall’s southeastern entrance, guided gently downward by a sloping ramp (shades of Grand Central) and drawn forward by the glow up ahead, a visitor finds that the project’s failings seem rather small. It was, after all, tight fists and narrow minds that destroyed the good old Penn in the first place—and we have already been partly compensated for its loss, thanks to a national preservationist movement that sprang from the rubble and helped save thousands of historic buildings. Being the new old Penn Station was never the Moynihan Train Hall’s job; instead, it does something else, and it’s more than symbolic. It’s a place, and it’s ours—and its opening, despite all the challenges of the pandemic, is fairly stunning, an eleventh-hour arrival that suggests perhaps some kind of corner is being turned. In the final scene of “Killer’s Kiss,” our hero looks disconsolate, convinced that his beloved will not appear. At the last second, there she is, dashing across the station to greet him. They embrace.