TOPPING OUT

The last word from Readers of *Modern Steel Construction*

SIGN OF THE TIMES

By Fred A. Bernstein

At one end of 42nd Street, a vast transportation terminus has been triumphantly restored. The most dramatic change at Grand Central Station: the removal of advertising signs (including Kodak's famous panorama) that had blocked the east windows of the main concourse. Now, morning light splashes on pristine marble walls, reminding commuters of the power of architecture unleashed.

At the other end of 42nd Street, another terminus is about to be obscured. A 35'-high billboard, dwarfing anything ever conceived for Grand Central, will soon cling to the facades of the Port Authority Bus Terminal, blocking light, air, and architecture. Already, scaffolding has thrown that building's Eighth Avenue entrance into shadow, and signs alert travelers to the coming co-modification of the building. (The first advertiser is Delta airlines, an odd choice for a bus terminal, except that the terminal is succumbing.)

Ironically, the sign—if the Port Authority's plan is realized—will obscure one of the Port Authority's greatest successes. The architects of the 1980's terminal renovation turned what had been an urban nightmare into a smoothly functioning depot. They did it with the kind of decisions that normally fly below the radar of critical attention. For example, they selected materials for floors and walls—including rough-hewn granite, and a ruddy, burnt-sienna brick—that hold their own against punishing use. Manhattan's recent subway station renovations, employing slick flooring and bright-white walls, demonstrate the tendency of other architects to overlook these lessons.

More significantly for the cityscape, the same renovation knitted the original terminal building—a yellow brick nonentity (stretching from 40th to 41st Streets) and an even more forgettable annex (from 41st to 42nd)—into a single structure. It did this with a 400'-high, exposed-steel truss that connects, literally and figuratively, the upper halves of the two buildings. Visually, the truss is strong enough to handle the scale of the two-city-block complex, and heavy enough to suggest that the buses climbing up the terminal's ramps are on solid footing. But it isn't overbearing; skillful detailing (including gently curved, articulated joints) makes it about as intimidating as an erector set at Christmas.

And yet the trussed building rises to its role as a terminus—that is, an important place of embarkation and debarkation—in a way that no other new or redesigned public building has in decades. Built during an era in which the city eschewed public transportation (demolishing the East Side Airlines Terminal, hemming and hawing over a transit link to the airports), this building celebrates mass transit. Exposed structure has been a hallmark of transportation architecture for at least a century (long before "high tech" was "in"). The late, great Penn Station isn't remembered for its neoclassical facade so much as for its dramatic, interior spaces capped by exposed trusses, harking back to Europe's great old trainsheds. The truss around the reconfigured Port Authority is a link to an era when transportation buildings weren't just facades, but important works of civil engineering.

But this isn't a train station; the Port Authority's buses link Manhattan to America via three vehicular Hudson River crossings—two of which are invisible, and one of which, the George Washington Bridge, is composed of astonishingly elegant trusses. It's no coincidence that the Terminal's wrap mimics this filigree ladder across the Hudson (as well as the Bayonne, Goethals, and Pulaski bridges). In adapting this motif, the terminal's designer managed to evoke, at the city's transportation hub, the esthetic and engineering triumphs of its spokes.

The truss also addresses its more immediate setting. It is the precise color of the McGraw Hill Building, its next-door neighbor on 42nd Street. Designed by Raymond Hood in blue-green terra cotta, with a vaguely nautical prow, McGraw-Hill is a contemporary of the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings. It exemplifies a slightly less glamorous, but equally pleasing, strain of art deco. By the 1970's, the exuberant building, survivor of one Depression, found itself in another: From Eighth Avenue west, "Forty Deuce" had become the province of panhandlers, pushers, and pimps. McGraw-Hill (the company) had moved to a banal Sixth Avenue replacement, from which its former home — easily one of the 10 best skyscrapers in the city — could be seen in the distance, like a drowning swimmer too far out to rescue.

And then came the Port Authority's architects, who threw the building a lifeline; by extending the truss from Eighth Avenue right to McGraw-Hill's terra cotta, they brought Hood's masterpiece back to civilization (and vice versa). Walk along 42nd Street, from Seventh to Eighth Avenues, and the truss is literally a bridge. Sure, it's an odd decision to copy the colors of a terra cotta landmark in exposed structural steel B a kind of cloying contextualism that could have ended up trivializing both buildings. But here, as a link to an important building desperate for connection, it was a startlingly effective choice.

Who accomplished all this? Gene Fasullo, a civil engineer and 37-year Port Authority veteran, devised the trusses as part of an in-house team. Fasullo, who worked anonymously on both Newark Airport and the Bus Terminal, is too polite to brag about his contribution to the rebirth of Times Square. (It took a dozen calls to the P.A. just to find him.) That would mean criticizing the P.A.'s attempt to cash in on the neighborhood's newfound prosperity by turning its own terminal into the equivalent of a throwaway advertising section. What he does say is this: You guys in the press have a responsibility to keep telling the public what's being built. It's too late after the cranes are there.

The cranes are almost there. What's being built is a travesty, because of what it does to the Port Authority Bus Terminal, and because of the precedent it sets. Gene Fasullo's legacy—a landmark without Corinthian columns, a grand staircase, or even mention in an architecture book deserves better.

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