



Penn Station - then and now

THE **SANDBOX** BLOG

Perpetual Penn Station?

UPDATE June 17: [Municipal Art Society President, Vin Cipolla, advocates for a new Penn Station!](#) (Go to [mas.org/newpenn](#) to find details about how you can testify at the City Council hearing this Wednesday, June 19. Let the Council know you're paying attention and want them to take action.)

[Original Blog Post](#) | [May 10, 2013](#)

Can any New Yorker imagine a worse nightmare than being trapped in Penn Station.... forever? Well that's exactly what a **"special application"** from Madison Square Gardens asked for today in front of the NYC Planning Commission.

Since the destruction of the original and grand Penn Station structure in 1965 (in order to sell the "air rights" above it to Madison Square Gardens) visitors have been treated to one of the most demeaning train station experiences in North America. The lease on these air rights are up for renewal and most civic visionaries believe it is NYC's time to resuscitate this busiest of all North American commuter hubs.

Enter Madison Square Gardens' special application, requesting that the NYC Planning Commission give MSG a perpetual (aka forever) renewal of these air rights over the train station, effectively cutting off the possibility of a comprehensive Penn Station overhaul.

Municipal Arts Society, who is spearheading a progressive [plan for a renewed Penn Station and vicinity](#), asked Pilot Projects to show up to the public meeting with a few words to say. We were number 45, so we thought we should wake up the council with our 3 minutes on the platform:

Greetings council. I am the founder of Pilot Projects Design Collective in NYC. We work with with leaders and user groups to help them articulate their visions and needs. There are hundreds of millions of users of Penn Station. So we went online to see what they are saying:

Yelp! is popular website that collects user feedback for a variety of businesses and services. Train stations are not a typical category. But 476 New Yorkers have recently taken time out of their busy days to write [reviews](#) of Penn Station. Here are a some excerpts from just the first few pages:

- *New York deserves better: This hole of a train station is my least favorite place in the city...this prison is as depressing as it could possibly be.*
- *Sometimes you simply can not avoid finding yourself at Penn station. So do yourself a favor and try not to get lost. I walked a square or circle, whatever, at least 3 times before I figured my way out!*
- *I have always had mild negative feelings toward Penn Station ... then I saw pictures of what it was like in its glory days. New York, what is WRONG with you !? Why on earth would you take an architectural marvel, bulldoze it and replace it with a labyrinthine series of awful linoleum?*
- *The station seems explicitly designed to punish travelers.*



Welcome to New York City. What?



Oh, you like this better?

- *Penn Station is balls. We all know it.*
- *Penn Station sucks. There's no way to sugar coat it. The bathrooms are smelly, the waiting rooms are shabby looking and you're always rushing to get a seat before you're overrun by the NJT mob. Avoid at all costs!*
- *I try to avoid this general area of Manhattan at all costs, but sometimes it's just not possible.*
- *Penn Station is the commuter's home away from home. That said, this place is a fucking madhouse filled with negative energy and angry people...*
- *I do not need a train station to be beautiful. Just clean and as odor neutral as possible. ...Penn Station smells like pizza, BO, and depression.*
- *The lack of vision that allowed the original, glorious train station to be destroyed remains pretty breathtaking, and the commuter toilet they put in its place--a dark, dank, decrepit, suffocating hole--is perhaps a just reward for New York's collective failure to stop what was nothing short of an act of civic vandalism.*
- *Gross, schizophrenic, hostile. If navigating around commuters running around like chicken with their heads cut off, and bumping into clueless and disenchanting tourists sounds like a good time, come enjoy the food court!*
- *Writing a review of Penn Station is like writing a review of herpes. If you're unlucky, sloppy, or come from far enough to get it, you do what you have to do to get out of it as fast as possible. .but the stink will linger on.*
- *A horrible dungeon of a train station: If the gods favor you, your train will arrive on time to whisk you out of this subterranean pit.*
- *"3 stars... Detroit is worse"*
- *Oh Penn Station. You cause me so much stress, but in the end, I really can't live without you.*
- *'Penn Station - You don't have a choice' - I feel like that should be the motto.*



Or this?



No, MSG thinks this is fine. Forever.

Yet here we are at this planning commission meeting. We *do* have a choice. We can choose to open the door to a renewed future for this cornerstone of our great city. Or we can close the door, sealing our fate forever like the stone door of a tomb.

Imagine the outcry, **the collective "Yelp"**, when it is discovered how our fate, the fate of New York City was sealed, and who was responsible. *Do any of us here want to be counted in this group?*

I would like to conclude with a poem for the Planning Commission:

In Perpetuity

Nothing is forever, they say
 But things that are ought to be the best of things
 Ought to undergird and delight
 Elevate, our heads, our eyes, our hands
 In wonder at their ever-presence.
 Can what we make tell a story of us, in this future?
 Is it design
 Or fate that spins us 'round
 Lost in a flattened grey labyrinth
 Gasping for light, for air, for space?
 Is it fate or design
 Writing the story of our city.

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