

Why Michigan Central Station matters

By [Kevin P. Keefe](#) | June 13, 2024

You might be surprised at how gaga a big city has gone for a train depot!!



A 4-8-2 leads train 303, the Queen City for Cincinnati, out of Michigan Central Station on May 1, 1955. Ernest L. Novak photo.

Walking out the 15th Street side entrance to Detroit’s [Michigan Central Station](#) last Friday morning, I found myself channeling the great baseball play-by-play man Jack Buck.

“I can’t believe what I just saw!”

Buck’s epic quote came, of course, when Dodger Kirk Gibson launched his epic home run off A’s reliever Dennis Eckersley in game one of the 1988 World Series. It was a shot heard ’round the baseball world. But what *Trains* passenger writer Bob Johnston and I witnessed on Friday was equally astounding. More so, actually.

We were there to cover the gala grand opening of Michigan Central, a weeks-long event that included a huge Thursday night concert at the front of the station, featuring a platinum lineup of Detroit pop-music stars, followed by a week of scheduled public tours. The concert’s free tickets were scooped up in less than 15 minutes, and thousands of visitors signed up to visit through June 16, according to Michigan Central Station, the Ford-created entity that manages the facility.

Bob and I managed to finagle a spot in the first tour, a 10 a.m. introduction for news media, led enthusiastically by Michigan Central Station Head of Place Melissa Dittmer. The place was crawling with MC Station staff, eager to show off every little detail, all of them beaming, including Dittmer.

The building we walked into was a sparkling vision from another time and place. Thanks to [Ford Motor Co.](#) CEO Bill Ford and his 2018 pledge to turn the station and environs into a high-tech research campus — they called it an “innovation center” — Michigan Central has become a faithful version of its 1913 self, one that transcends just about any adjective. Every surface, every square foot, every pane of glass has been either restored or replicated in amazing detail, a level of historic preservation possible only because Ford and his company were willing to spend just short of \$1 billion on the place.

From the cavernous waiting room (the owners now call it the Great Hall) to the multi-columned ticket lobby to the sunlit concourse, the station again fulfills the promise the Michigan Central Railroad implied when it first opened its new headquarters in December 1913. In those days, MCRR made sure travelers arriving on the *Wolverine* or the *Detroit Night Express* would immediately know they had arrived in one of America’s greatest cities. The station delivers that same promise today, except, of course, that you can’t arrive by train. More on that in a moment.



*Beneath the waiting room’s vaulted ceiling, a “ribbon timeline” traces MC Station’s history.
Kevin P. Keefe photo*

If you aren’t from around Detroit, you might be surprised at how gaga a big city has gone for a train depot. But you’d understand if you have followed Detroit’s gradual distancing of itself from that creepy preoccupation known as “ruin porn.” I almost feel like I’m piling on to recall a *New York Times* headline from 2012: “How Detroit Became the Capital of Staring at Abandoned Buildings.”

The *Times* would be less likely to write that headline now, given the progress Detroit has made. Recent years have been marked by new downtown sports facilities for all four major-league teams — Tigers, Lions, Pistons, and Red Wings — as well as soaring new office towers and hotels, and, perhaps most important, some reclaimed neighborhoods. Now you can add 114-year-old Michigan Central to the list.

The station Detroit embraces is significant for a number of reasons, starting with the sheer scale of the renovation. As I reported for *Trains*, “It’s hard to imagine another major American railroad terminal that had fallen as far into disrepair as Michigan Central, only to come back better than ever.” The lengths Ford has gone to get it “right” is amazing, from reopening a quarry in southern Indiana to retrieve the same limestone the railroad used in 1913, to the restoration of tens of thousands of Guastavino tiles arrayed across the arched vaults high above the waiting room. Every little decorative element, every vast stretch of marble floor has received the same attention.

Then there is Michigan Central’s complicated place in architectural history and its relationship to the company that controlled it, New York Central. To design the complex, the railroad hired two of the era’s blue-chip New York firms: Reed & Stem and Warren & Wetmore. Reed & Stem, originally based in St. Paul, Minn., was the principal firm for NYC’s Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan, and Warren & Wetmore designed a number of famous hotels as well as the landmark NYC Building at the foot of Park Avenue.

Bringing two architectural firms onto the project helped lead to criticism that Michigan Central was something of a two-headed monster; Warren & Wetmore's big, blocky office tower does seem to sit uncomfortably atop Reed & Stem's fanciful Beaux Arts train station. As *The Architectural Record* magazine reported when the station opened, "Each part taken separately might be good. Joined together, they are architecturally incongruous."



The "poster vault" (inside the former ticket offices) feature promotional MCRR graphics. Kevin P. Keefe photo.

No one is calling the place incongruous now, certainly not me. Ford's gift to Detroit, indeed to all of us who treasure railroad landmarks, reduces such criticism to mere quibbling.

And Michigan Central is more than just the building, it's part of a massive complex that stretches east two miles to Canada. The key is the 1.6-mile-long Detroit River Tunnel, which opened in 1910 and literally made the station possible. The tunnel, still in use today, allowed the railroad to bypass cumbersome ferries and give its trains a straight shot all the way east to the Niagara Frontier. It was an engineering marvel for its use of a pair of single-track steel tubes installed in trenches dug into the bottom of the Detroit River.

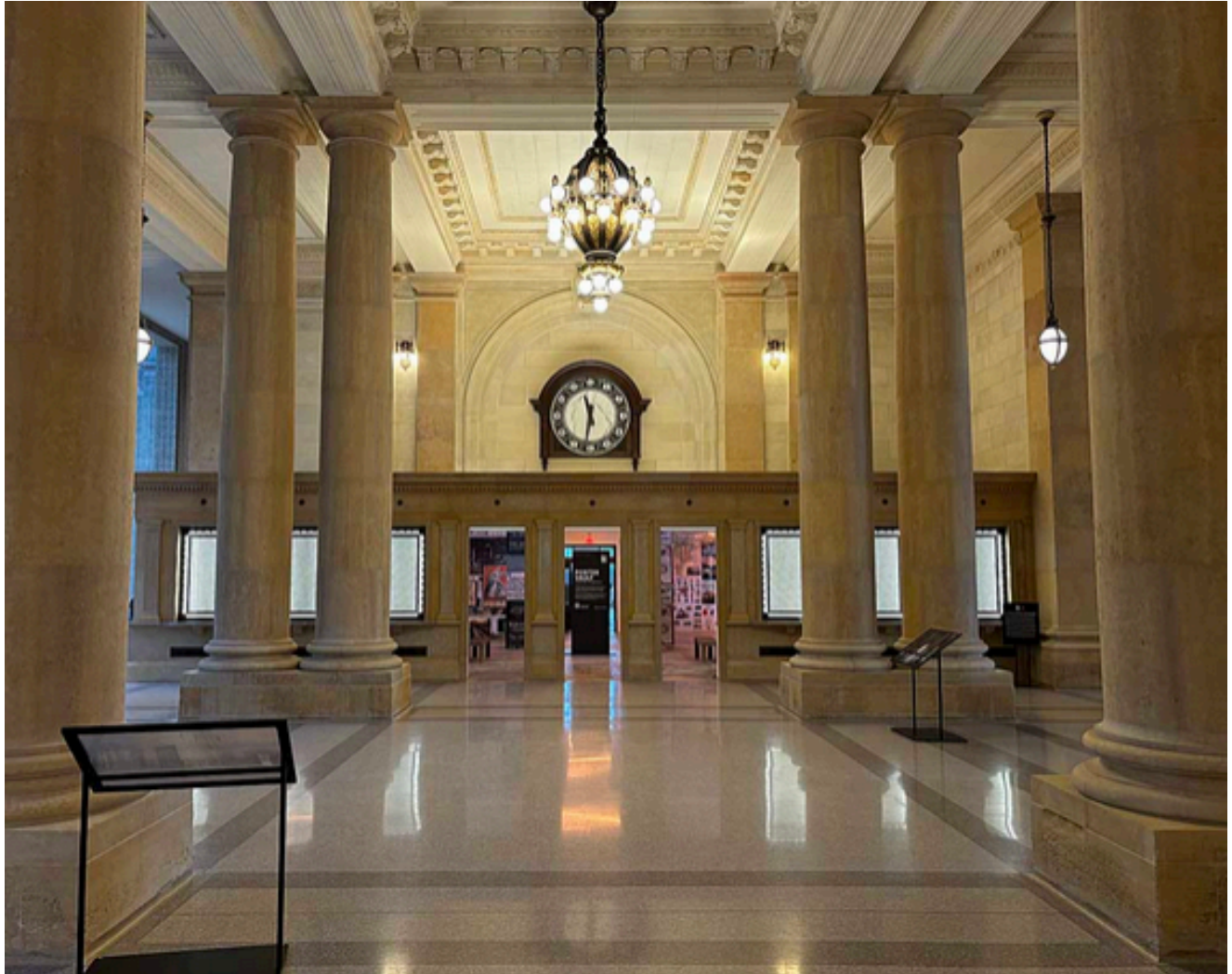
To underscore the significance of the entire Michigan Central complex, consider this conclusion by authors Garnet Cousins and Paul Maximuke in their two-part, 9,500-word history of the station in the [August](#) and [September](#) 1978 issues of *Trains*: "The (station), with its 15-story office tower, was a predecessor of what today is called a megastructure. Megastructures are totally integrated environments, combining within their boundaries parking, transportation access, commercial facilities, office space, and residential space." In that vein, Cousins and Maximuke make a direct connection between Michigan Central and Detroit's Renaissance Center of 1977.

Amid all the wonder of Ford's accomplishment, a question lingers: will Michigan Central ever be a real station again? As in, a place served by actual trains.

That was the question Bob wanted to have answered. As he wrote in his follow-up story for the [Trains News Wire](#), there are no plans at the moment to restore Amtrak service anytime soon. The 18 tracks that originally served the station are gone and the concourse tunnels sealed off. But as Dittmer told Johnston, the station is in talks with Amtrak and the state of Michigan, and she is "optimistic." We'll hang onto that.

Meanwhile, Michigan Central says the station's main floor will be kept open to the public. That's a wonderful gesture on the part of Ford, a chance for anyone to experience a truly miraculous resurrection of a thrilling public space.

Writing in 2002 about that lost railroad temple of New York, art historian Hilary Ballon said, "Penn Station did not make you feel comfortable, it made you feel important." Strolling along Michigan Central's endless terrazzo floors and beneath its vaulted ceilings — thank you, Ford — I felt the same way.



Marble-faced clock in the ticket lobby was painstakingly replicated by MC Station artisans. Kevin P. Keefe photo.