



## Sullivan's Station

In 1892, Louis Sullivan's Union Depot united multiple rail lines in a sophisticated new facility

BY Richard Campanella

TWO OF THE MOST famous architects in circa-1900 America, both from Chicago, designed prominent train stations at opposite ends of downtown New Orleans. In an earlier article (October 2016), we examined Daniel Burnham's Beaux-Arts-style Terminal Station, also known as the Southern Railway Station, built on Canal Street at the Basin Street neutral ground in 1908 and demolished in 1955. Here we explore Louis Henry Sullivan's sole local design, the Union Railroad Depot on what is now Loyola Avenue at Howard Avenue.

Understanding both projects, and why neither still stands, entails some history on railroad geography in this era.

New Orleans in the late 1800s, like much of the South, played catch-up with the North in building railroad networks. Fearing being left behind, cities in particular bent over backwards to accommodate passenger lines' need for track bed rights-of-way and convenient downtown stations. Because companies competed fiercely, most were reluctant to share their facilities with rivals; thus, multiple and seemingly redundant railroad corridors and stations got built, slicing up neighborhoods with noisy nuisances and potentially dangerous grade crossings.

By 1885, six major and minor trunk lines came into greater New Orleans. Those from points west and south arrived onto the West Bank; those serving points north and east arrived on the East Bank; and those that needed to cross the Mississippi River did so on massive, cumbersome "transfer ferries." There was the Texas Pacific route, bringing in trains from California and north Texas; the Star and Crescent route, with access to western Louisiana and beyond; the Queen and Crescent route, named for its linking of the Queen of the West (Cincinnati) with the Crescent City; the Mississippi Valley route, with service to Baton Rouge, Vicksburg and Memphis; the Mobile route, to points east; and the Great Jackson route of the Illinois Central Railroad, to points north. Route and line names would change ad nauseam, but their corridors generally remained fixed.

Despite the rivalrous redundancies, companies sensed that one day they would have to unify, either by their own accord or official intervention. One company, Illinois Central, went so far as to envisage a new depot that would be specifically designed to accom-

modate future unification. Company officials sited the project on South Rampart Street at Howard Avenue, to take advantage of the extant right-of-way along the state-owned New Basin Canal and in anticipation of the possibility that someday that trajectory would be used for a bridge over the Mississippi River.

It was a prescient vision, and perhaps there was no better architect for it than Louis Henry Sullivan. With his firm Adler & Sullivan in Chicago, Sullivan had inspired an embrace of clean, horizontal lines in solidly crafted buildings, integrated with landscaping and uncluttered with ornamentation. It came to be known as the Prairie School, a successor of the Arts and Crafts Movement and a predecessor of Modernism.

Sullivan had been previously unimpressed by New Orleans. According to his autobiography, Sullivan traveled extensively throughout the West and South in 1890, to the point of "utter weariness," having been "irritated" by the California climate and jolted by an earthquake. "Then on to New Orleans," he wrote. "That filthy town, as it then was, disillusioned [me]." Sullivan next rode out to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, which he found delightful, and where he would buy land and design a number of winter cottages in Ocean Springs.

Perhaps that regional connection nudged Sullivan to accept the Illinois Central's commission to design a "union depot" in New Orleans. More likely was the fact that his brother, Albert W. Sullivan, served as the railroad company's vice president. Ably assisted by engineer J.F. Wallace, who created the steel sheds, and by a young protégé named Frank Lloyd Wright, who did the drafting on the station blueprints, Sullivan designed the Union Railroad Depot in the Prairie style, the first of its type in New Orleans.

Opened in 1892, Sullivan's train station went by various names (Illinois Central Station, ICRR Station, Union Terminal Depot, Union Railroad Depot, Union Depot, or, as the sign on its rooftop monitor read, Union Station), and it served passengers to or from destinations northward, toward Jackson, Miss., and Chicago. First-time arrivals would encounter here a cityscape of contrasting grit and beauty — pure New Orleans. Just across the street was



**OPPOSITE** The Union Railroad Depot was surrounded by a park filled with subtropical vegetation and hedges. The Prairie School of architecture called for buildings to be integrated with the landscaping. Photo from November 1917. **LEFT** Engineer J.F. Wallace created Union Station's 300-foot-long, three-bay steel train shed. Photos courtesy of the Southeastern Architectural Archive, Tulane University Special Collections.

the malodorous turning basin of the circa-1830s New Basin Canal, with its cargo barges and oyster schooners; on the other side were yards and sheds for the freight trains, which also shared the right-of-way. Lumber yards, wood mills, coal depots, stables, warehouses, iron works and other light industry operated all around.

Yet, as passengers disembarked, they would also encounter beauty, in the form of Wallace's dazzlingly intricate 300-foot-long, three-bay steel shed, followed by the sleek modern lines of Sullivan's station. Upon exiting, they would find a lovely park of subtropical vegetation and neat hedges, beyond which was the skyline of the South's largest city. Union Station Park was no accident; the Prairie School called for architecture to be integrated with landscaping, invoking the natural beauty of the Midwest.

Union Depot, which had 11 tracks pulling into its sheds, partially fulfilled its expectation to unify other lines, as Illinois Central officials arranged to host the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley and Southern Pacific railroads, among others. It also became a hub of local transportation. Just outside, one could catch streetcars plying the Clio Street, Dryades Street and Peters Avenue lines, which connected to neighborhoods citywide.

By World War II, more than a dozen trains came and went daily from Union Station (sources indicate more people called it "station" than "depot" by this time), and it would be part of the wartime experience of tens of thousands of Americans. In 1947, the famed City of New Orleans line began daily service between New Orleans and Chicago here.

But Americans by this time were increasingly opting for auto travel over rail, which not only reduced train ridership but also created more motorists berating those multitudinous grade crossings. The once-powerful railroads had lost their bargaining chip, and now stood at the mercy of city governments.

In 1946, New York master planner Robert Moses, contracted by the state Department of Highways to write an Arterial Plan for New Orleans (a document best known for its infamous Riverfront Expressway proposal), articulated his vision of consolidating all tracks into a new, truly unified terminal. The project became a key component of Mayor deLesseps "Chep" Morrison's campaign to modernize transportation.

In 1947, Morrison began negotiations to reroute all passenger

lines into a single terminal, to be called the New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal. His administration also oversaw the complex engineering process of separating citywide grade-level crossings in favor of the over/under passes we have today.

Unification was the right move from an urban planning standpoint, but it did not bode well for architectural preservation, as none of the old stations, including that of the Illinois Central line, the Southern line and the Louisville & Nashville line at the foot of Canal Street, were large enough for modern needs. But at least Union Depot had geography on its side, being in alignment with the largest number of tracks and already accommodating multiple lines. For this reason, in 1953, a new \$2.25 million Union Passenger Terminal was built 200 feet directly behind Sullivan's 1892 station, while the other two downtown stations at either end of Canal Street were decommissioned and demolished. After tracks were realigned, the new Union Passenger Terminal, designed in a Moderne style, commenced service in early 1954. Soon, trains pulled into the new station via the Illinois Central, Southern Pacific, Missouri Pacific Gulf Coast, Louisville & Nashville, Southern, Texas & Pacific, Kansas City Southern, and Gulf, Mobile & Ohio lines.

As soon as the new station opened, Sullivan's facility fell to a wrecking ball to become the traffic plaza at today's Loyola and Howard.

Unification could not stave off the hemorrhaging of passengers on America's rails. Congress stepped in in 1970 with the Rail Passenger Service Act, which created the publicly funded National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak). Today, the Union Passenger Terminal serves Greyhound intercity bus lines, local RTA lines, the new Loyola streetcar outside, and, as its primary tenant, Amtrak, including the City of New Orleans.

No trace remains of Louis Sullivan's station, nor of the adjacent park and basin, and neither he nor Frank Lloyd Wright would be directly involved in another New Orleans project. Both, however, did work on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in 1890, including on the Charnley-Norwood House, which bears a fundamental resemblance to their train station design, with its low-slung horizontality and integration of landscaping.

Readers are encouraged to go to Ocean Springs and see its post-Katrina restoration at 509 East Beach Drive — although chances are, you probably won't take a train.

## streetscapes

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