



The old waiting room, ¹ once the largest indoor public space in New York City, is now a parking lot. ²

Demolishing “The Commons” at Old New York Penn Station

What does old Penn Station’s loss reflect about the evolution of public space in New York City?

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Demolition crews began hacking away at the limestone walls, stone eagles, and thirty-foot tall Doric columns of old New York Penn Station in October 1963. In a construction industry where architects typically quote projects as lasting 18 months, the demolition and rebuilding of old Penn Station lasted five years. At its 1910 opening, old Penn Station (and its associated service tunnels that stretched 5.5 miles under the Hudson and East River) was the largest and most expensive infrastructure project ever built in New York City. At 350 feet long and 150 feet high, old Penn Station’s waiting room was, at the time, the city’s largest internal

¹ Photo credit: Cervin Robinson and Edward Popko (for the *Historic American Buildings Survey*). *Pennsylvania Station, New York County, NY*. Retrieved from the *Library of Congress: Digital Collections*, www.loc.gov/item/ny0411/. Accessed August 6, 2020.

² Photo credit: Myles Zhang. “Excavating Old New York Penn Station.” *Myles Zhang*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.myleszhang.org/2020/07/09/penn-station/>. Accessed July 26, 2020.

space. Construction cost \$100 million, or \$2.7 billion in 2020, adjusted for inflation. By 1963, this was the largest and most expensive structure ever demolished in New York City.³

In conversation with *The New York Times* in 1963, the developer justified demolition as “putting passengers first,” and then clarified: “The outside is the only thing of artistic value as far as I’m concerned. The handling of 200,000 passengers is much more important to me. [...] In some areas the land is just too valuable to save anything that doesn’t fully utilize it.”⁴ The developer’s aspirations for Penn Station’s replacement, however misguided, were no less monumental in their imagination: to construct a profitable office skyscraper and Manhattan’s largest arena for sporting events and conventions. Corporate office workers could move directly from trains to their desks without stepping outside, or engaging with the public space of the city streets.



*1968 advertisement for the new station*⁵

³ Kenneth Jackson, Lisa Keller, et al. “Penn Station.” In *The Encyclopedia of New York City: Second Edition*. New Haven. Yale University Press. 2010. Pp. 987-88.

⁴ Martin Tolchin. “Demolition Starts At Penn Station; Architects Picket.” *The New York Times*. October 29, 1963. Pp 1.

⁵ Tom Fletcher. “Penn Station.” *New York Architecture*, <http://www.nyc-architecture.com/GON/GON004.htm>. Accessed 26 July 2020.

“The fact is that the redevelopment of the Pennsylvania Station into a \$90 million building complex will transform the area from a static uneconomic burden on the railroad into a viable commercial and recreational center of benefit to the entire West Thirty-fourth Street neighborhood and the public at large.” – Allen J. Greenough, Pennsylvania Railroad President.⁶

Architects have long positioned the demolition of monumental old Penn Station as a key moment in the discourse on historical preservation. This was, to quote leading New York City historian Kenneth Jackson, the moment when: “Human beings, myself included, have an unfortunate tendency to appreciate people and things only after they are gone. Pennsylvania Station is the catalyst for the historic preservation movement.”⁷ With the dawning public awareness that a monument so seemingly expensive and permanent in Neoclassical appearance as Penn Station could one day vanish with no mechanism for the public to object, activists pressured the city government to pass New York’s first ever landmarks preservation law in 1965.⁸ Some historians, like Anthony Wood, have posited that the movement toward landmarks preservation began years before Penn Station’s demolition, and that this demolition was not critical in motivating landmarks preservation.⁹ Nonetheless, in the following decades, the city protected over 120,000 buildings (comprising about 14% of New York City’s built environment).¹⁰

Less cited and discussed is how this station’s loss parallels a larger late twentieth-century trend toward the erosion and privatization of the commons. The following essay takes the demolition and rebuilding of old Penn Station as a lens to examine the evolving discourse on property rights, namely: the competing tensions of economics vs. aesthetics and private vs.

⁶ Allen J. Greenough. “Redeveloping Penn Station.” *The New York Times* (letter). August 23, 1962.

⁷ Hilary Ballon. *New York’s Pennsylvania Stations*. New York. W. W. Norton & Company. 2002.

⁸ George Siedel. “Landmarks Preservation after Penn Central.” *Real Property, Probate and Trust Journal*. Vol. 17, no. 2. 1982. Pp. 340-356.

⁹ Anthony Wood. “Chapter One: The Myth of Penn Station.” In *Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect a City’s Landmarks*. New York. Routledge. 2008.

¹⁰ Myles Zhang. “A History of Historic Preservation in New York City.” *Myles Zhang*, November 4, 2018, <https://www.myleszhang.org/2018/11/04/historic-preservation-and-new-york-city/>. Accessed August 6, 2020.

public interests. Old Penn Station's demolition is a good place to start unpacking these tensions, and how they reflect on New York's built environment. The demolition and reconstruction of old Penn Station mirrors the larger abandonment of government and corporate responsibility for maintaining and upholding public space.



*Although Midtown's largest building in this c.1911 photo, it was soon buried by neighboring skyscrapers.*¹¹

Old Penn Station as Public Space in a City of Private Interests

In a city symbolic of capitalism and industry, the design of old Penn Station spoke of an alternative vision for future New York: a city of low-rise buildings and ample public space. The

¹¹ Photo credit: Detroit Publishing Company. "Bird's-eye view, Penn Station, New York City." Retrieved from the *Library of Congress: Digital Collections*, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2016812231/>. Accessed August 6, 2020.

architects McKim, Meade, and White distained New York's emerging skyscrapers, and they toured Europe in preparation for designing Penn Station. They looked to European models of wide boulevards framing the monumental train station façade, such as the *Gare de l'Est* in Paris. At the time, the average building in Midtown Manhattan was no higher than six stories, and Penn Station – at over 150 feet tall – would have been among the neighborhood's highest and largest buildings. For inspiration, the architects copied the main waiting room from Rome's Baths of Diocletian.¹² This reference is more than simply aesthetic: Rome's massive baths were as much functional infrastructure in a city without widespread indoor plumbing as they were civic and social spaces for all types of people to gather and socialize. By analogy, the Pennsylvania Railroad envisioned its waiting room – which was far larger and cathedral-like than the purely functional operations of boarding a train demands – as a civic and social space, an urban stage-set for the drama of commuting. Andrew Carnegie, the industrialist turned philanthropist who launched his business career as an employee of the Pennsylvania Railroad, writes in his 1889 article *The Gospel of Wealth*: “Surplus wealth should be considered as a sacred trust, to be administered during the lives of its owners, by them as trustees, for the best good of the community in which and from which it had been acquired.”¹³

Old Penn Station operated as public space that belonged to the city at large. Ingrained in a visit to the museum (with a required admission fee), the public library (with set hours and borrowing rules), or the church (which demands a certain dress code and level of reverence) is the management's expectations of how one is supposed to behave. The rules of these rarified spaces effectively narrow the social class and types of people who visit museums, libraries, and

¹² Ballon. “The Interior Procession.” In *New York's Pennsylvania Stations*. Pp. 60-73.

¹³ Andrew Carnegie. “The Gospel of Wealth.” New York. Carnegie Corporation of New York. 2017. (Originally published in the *North American Review* in 1889.)

churches.¹⁴ The big city train station has, in contrast, fewer expectations of users; it is open at all times and to all audiences and social classes with effectively no restrictions. Like the restriction-free spaces of Times Square and the public park, the monumental rooms of old Penn Station seemed to belong to everyone – one of those public and communal spaces created entirely through private initiative where anyone may assemble in the shared experience of urban life.¹⁵

However, there was a crucial difference between normal public space and the “public space” of old Penn Station. The station was privately owned and subject to the whims of its owner who, unlike a government official responsible to the public, was responsible only to company shareholders and employees. The public could use this station and construct it in the collective imagination as belonging to the city and the people, but the public’s use was entirely at the property owner’s discretion. By the 1950s, the Pennsylvania Railroad was losing rail passengers to the increasing popularity of the automobiles, highways, and airlines. The company was bleeding money on old Penn Station’s upkeep to the sum of \$3.3 million a year. Although the station’s appearance and location were effectively a public service and an enhancement to civic life for the thousands of commuters, there was no profit to be made from this form of public service.¹⁶ In other words, with no “business model” for the space to pay for its own upkeep, old Penn Station gradually slipped into decay as the walls grew black from decades of soot and deferred maintenance.

¹⁴ Nikolaus Pevsner. “Railway stations.” In *A History of Buildings Types*. Princeton University Press. 1976. Pp. 225-34.

¹⁵ Carroll Meeks. *The Railroad Station*. New Haven. Yale University Press. 1964.

¹⁶ Ballon. *New York’s Pennsylvania Stations*. Pp. 93-101.

Erosion of the Commons

By the 1960s, the Pennsylvania Railroad's reasons for maintaining old Penn Station started shifting when they argued that they could only support the commons so long as they did lose anything financially. The now aging and indebted railroad no longer had the "surplus wealth" to think of the public interest and the "good of the community" (to borrow Carnegie's words). In demolition proposals, the developer clarified that new Penn Station would be financially self-sufficient. Revenue generated from the new offices and arena above ground would support the upkeep of the station below ground, all the while generating surplus income to be distributed among the company's shareholders and creditors. This is a frequent and often repeated claim among New York City developers: The creation and maintenance of public space must generate some profit. Or if no profit is to be made, the public should compensate the corporation for its gift. Hence, the lead redeveloper is quoted as saying about old Penn Station: "If anybody seriously considered it art, they would have put up some money to save it."¹⁷

Old Penn Station had tall ceilings and, with no buildings above, ample natural light could illuminate the interior. When the public saw this kind of space, they read it as open and public. When the owners of Penn Station saw this space in the 1960s, they read all this "empty" space as unused air rights. (Air rights refer to the space above a parcel of land that belongs to the property owner.) City law might limit building height to, say, fifteen stories. If the developer only builds a ten story building on a site, he will have five stories of undeveloped air rights. The discourse on air rights presents undeveloped (or underdeveloped) sites as not extracting the full height allowed, and therefore reducing the income that could be generated from the most profitable land

¹⁷ Martin Tolchin. "Demolition Starts At Penn Station; Architects Picket." *The New York Times*. October 29, 1963. Pp 1.

use.¹⁸ Thus, in the Pennsylvania Railroad's opinion, a vast and open station, although beautiful, represented undeveloped air rights and a financial loss. In 1910, the powerful railroad was wealthy enough to sacrifice million of dollars on a monument and its annual upkeep. The railroad's objective in 1910 was less to extract the greatest profit with the least investment in New York City. However, When 1960s developers measured the value of Penn Station heritage by its precise cash value instead of its intangible cultural value, preserving heritage started to look unrealistically expensive – not just an annual loss of \$3.3 million but a loss of several hundred million dollars over several decades in unrealized profits that could have been pulled “out of thin air” so to speak.¹⁹

By late-twentieth-century New York, the discourse on the commons had evolved. In previous decades, buildings like Rockefeller Center devoted almost half of the ground-level areas and many rooftops for public use, even though developers in 1930s New York received few tax benefits or compensation from the city for doing so. Other examples include the numerous early Manhattan skyscrapers whose ornamental appearance and decorative silhouettes enliven the urban landscape even though more ornament outside does not necessarily boost the builder's bottom line of more rentable office space inside. However, with ever-rising land values, corporations were no longer willing by the 1950s to cede increasingly-valuable private land for public use (or even lower-density development) unless compelled to or compensated for doing so. In response, starting in 1961, New York City developed an increasingly complicated system of tax and building incentives for developers to be “civic” and invest in the commons. Examples include corporate green spaces and plazas. In exchange for setting aside a fraction of their land

¹⁸ Philip Weinberg. “Critical Areas: Landmarks, Wetlands, Coastline, Flood Plains, and Takings.” In *Environmental Law: Cases and Materials Revised 3rd Edition*. Lanham, Maryland. University Press of America. 2006. Pp. 98-108. Personally, I believe the assumption that “air” is a commercial asset to be bought and sold fundamentally undermines the idea in the commons that air, water, and light are owned collectively by society.

¹⁹ Ballon. *New York's Pennsylvania Stations*. Pp. 95-96.

for public use, the developer is allowed to build higher or larger than the laws would otherwise permit. These resulting spaces are in some ways like the interior of old Penn Station, private space that effectively has the *appearance* of public. These private-public spaces have opening hours, and prohibit certain behavior like skateboarding, panhandling, or street music performances. Incidentally, city government approved the greatest number of these privately owned public spaces during the city's near-bankruptcy in the 1980s, when declining budgets motivated the city's government to relinquish maintenance of the commons to the private sector.²⁰ Politicians today speak of contracting the management of public services to for-profit corporations. Privatized services in many states now include water supply, electricity, highways, immigration services, the military, space exploration (through public-private partnerships) and prisons with companies like the Corrections Corporation of America (recently rebranded "Core Civic" in an Orwellian twist). Capitalism and the profit-driven management of the commons is still seen as somehow purifying, making government more efficient, innovative, and flexible.²¹ Penn Station's demolition is an architectural symbol of the limits of historic preservation law, in particular, and the corporate erosion of the commons, in general.

The state and property owners' expectations of monumental buildings seem fundamentally different from their expectations of traditional monuments like statues and parks. For instance, it is an acceptable question for developers to ask: How could the spaces at Grand Central Terminal be rented more profitably? Or is this current land use financially unsustainable? Such questions could not be asked of comparable monuments that are often just as important to civic life. The land Central Park sits on is most certainly many times more expensive in

²⁰ "New York City's Privately Owned Public Spaces." *NYC: Department of City Planning*, <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/planning/plans/pops/pops.page>. Accessed July 26, 2020.

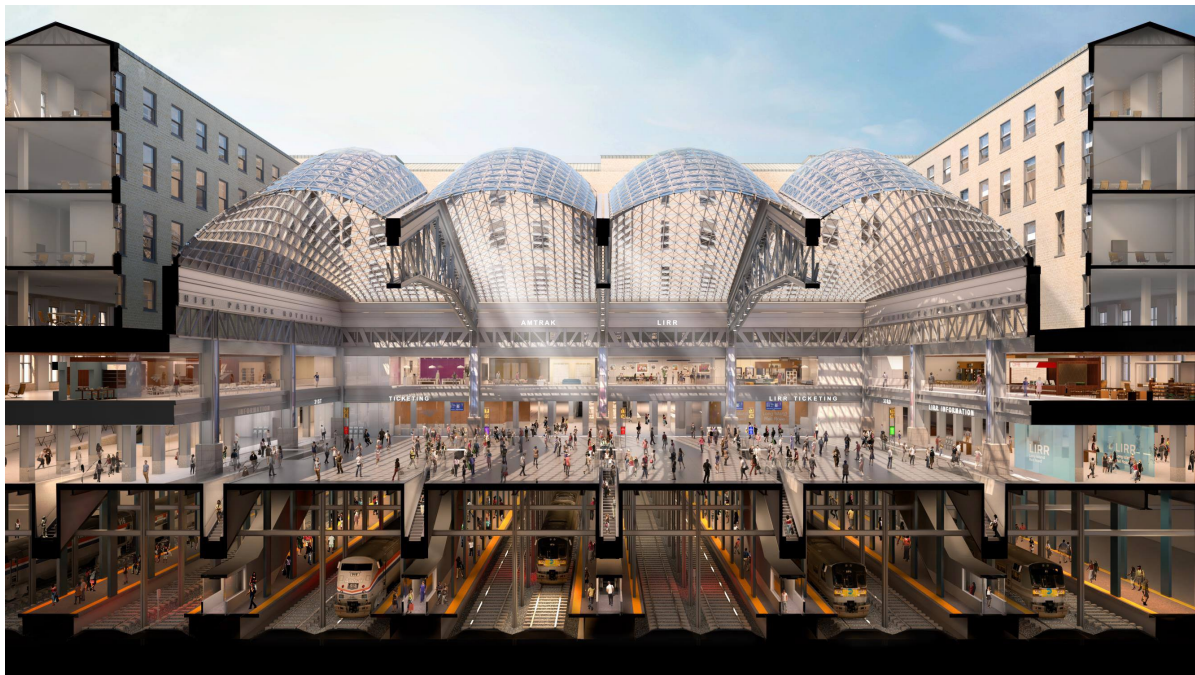
²¹ Brett Heinz. "The Politics of Privatization: How Neoliberalism Took Over US Politics." *United for Fair Economy*, September 8, 2017, http://www.faireconomy.org/the_politics_of_privatization. Accessed July 26, 2020.

unrealized air rights than the resale value of the timber that currently occupies the land, but that is beside the point because society does not measure the success or failure of the commons by the income it generates. There was a time a century ago when private investment in shaping civic spaces looked something like old Penn Station, New York City's numerous Carnegie Libraries, or even the New York City subway system. Even something like ornate nineteenth-century bank lobbies with imposing neoclassical facades have something "civic" about them and share much in common aesthetically with libraries and museums from the time. If only this kind of benevolent attitude toward the commons could be applied today to all manner of other civic institutions: museums, streets, public markets, subways, or the rebuilt future Penn Station.

Future Penn Station?

The demolition and replacement of Penn Station sits at an inflection point in the evolving definition of "public space." Despite public outcry at the demolition of old Penn Station at the hands of powerful private interests, the current station is not publicly owned or managed. The semi-government entity that acquired all of the Pennsylvania Railroad's assets after the railroad's 1970 bankruptcy is Amtrak. At least on paper, and although it has never once turned a profit in its over fifty year existence, Amtrak is listed as a corporation with a CEO, stock, and earnings reports. Disgruntled citizens and preservationists cannot speak to or hold them accountable in the same way they can vote out elected officials. As the Metropolitan Transit Authority and Amtrak are both quasi-private "public-benefit corporations," their executives are all unelected or political appointees; this creates several degrees of separation between those who manage public space and those who use it. What this means for the public is that the spaces the public might see as

being public and shared by all – in this case our national rail network and places like the current Penn Station – are effectively private.²²



*Proposal for rebuilding Penn Station across the street as the Moynihan Train Hall*²³

There seems to be an innate discomfort among city leaders with the idea of investing in the commons *without* the intention to make some kind of measurable return on investment. New Penn Station’s current owners collect rent from this station’s commercial tenants, the arena at Madison Square Garden, and companies in the office tower above. However unattractive new Penn Station may be, it is at least profitable, which is exactly as the builders who demolished old Penn Station intended.²⁴ Following this trend, the half-dozen (and counting) proposals over the years to rebuild Penn Station always included a major element of retail shopping and offices. The

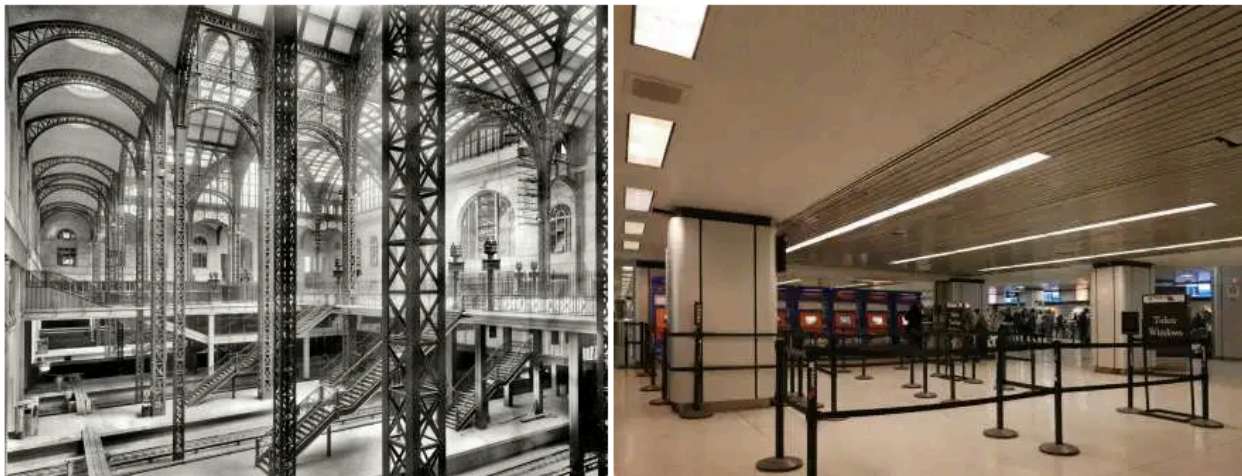
²² Fawn Johnson, Rachel Roubein, and National Journal. “Amtrak Has a Trust Problem in Congress: Democrats want to give the rail service more money, and Republicans are demanding more accountability.” *The Atlantic*, May 13, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/05/amtrak-has-a-trust-problem-in-congress/456042/>. Accessed July 26, 2020.

²³ Photo credit: Dana Schulz. “Cuomo releases new renderings of Moynihan Station as major construction gets underway.” *6sqft*, August 17, 2017, <https://www.6sqft.com/cuomo-releases-new-renderings-of-moynihan-station-as-major-construction-gets-underway/>. Accessed August 6, 2020.

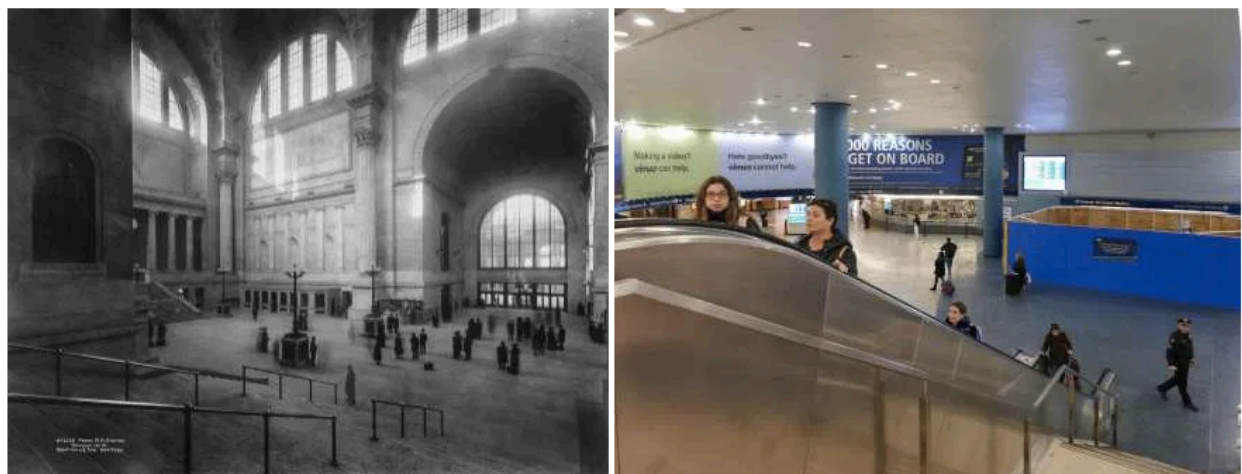
²⁴ Ballon. “The New Pennsylvania Station.” In *New York’s Pennsylvania Stations*. Pp. 153-175.

rebuilt Moynihan Station next door to Penn Station effectively devotes more room to the operations of shopping concourse than rail travel.²⁵

However, what made the old Penn Station so aesthetically pleasing was precisely how the design *did not* consider retail profit. In the interest of aesthetic effect and having impressively large interior spaces, old Penn Station's retail was segregated to a half-dozen shallow storefronts in the shopping arcade. The architecture was front and center. Rebuilding new Penn Station would require more than money. More importantly, rebuilding would require rethinking the long-held American assumption that extracting profit is compatible with the commons.



Train concourse before and after, from the same camera angle



²⁵ Justin Davidson. "Every Plan to Fix Penn Station Ranked." *New York Magazine: Intelligencer*, January 30, 2020, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/01/every-plan-to-fix-penn-station-ranked.html>. Accessed July 26, 2020.

Main entrance to waiting room before and after



Perhaps, beneath this asphalt parking lot, fragments of the original waiting room floor remain.

All photographs by author

Directions for Future Research

How much will Moynihan Train Hall be an effective replacement to old Penn Station? What will happen to Madison Square Garden arena above Penn Station when its lease expires in 2023? The land and areas below might belong to Amtrak, but the areas above are leased away. Will the city demolish the arena above to rebuild the station below, or will it renew the lease for another decade? I am curious how these debates will unfold between now and 2023, and how private interests might permit or hinder the public's rebuilding efforts.

Another research avenue, although beyond monuments and architecture, is to examine alternatives to rebuilding. Adam Brodheim feels that the station's main problem is not design, but inter-agency collaboration. Currently, rail service to New York City is provided through the Metropolitan Transit Authority, Amtrak, Metro North, NJ Transit, and Long Island Railroad. With little to no inter-agency collaboration, managing the infrastructure becomes needlessly complex and crowded. For instance, directing arriving trains to alternative stations nearby, which are now owned by different and non-cooperative agencies, could siphon away most of the overcrowding at Penn Station, and therefore make rebuilding easier. The logistical problem causes the design problem.