The Center for Design Engagement for the City Of Holyoke Office of Planning and Development

PRESERVATION AND REUSE OF H. H. RICHARDSON’S HOLYOKE TRAIN STATION

Creating an Anchor for the Redevelopment of the Depot Square Historic District in Holyoke, Massachusetts

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Executive Summary

The planned industrial City of Holyoke, Massachusetts, was an engineering marvel when it was conceived and constructed, beginning in 1849. The architecture of the buildings that came to populate the city over the next 75 represents some of the most interesting, creative, and important of the era. While much of that architecture has been lost to neglect and to fire, the buildings that remain provide a window into the late 19th century roots of both the city and the American industrial revolution. They also represent an opportunity for redevelopment that might anchor the city’s continued revitalization.

The H. H. Richardson designed train station on Bowers Street is an extraordinary example of the rich architectural legacy of the city. Completed in granite and brownstone, the station represents one of western Massachusetts few remaining works by this giant of American architecture, who is best known for having developed the style that became known as Richardson Romanesque, and for the grand Trinity Church on Copley Square in Boston. Richardson’s station, elevated on a pedestal above Main Street and in remarkably good shape for having stood empty for many years, may be the most noteworthy of the buildings that remain in the Depot Square district. It may also present the best opportunity for creating a
center of gravity in the district that will soon be the gateway for returning passenger rail service and as a terminus of the Canal Walk.

The important architecture of the Depot Historic District represents Holyoke’s rich past and presents the opportunity for helping to nurture a rich future. The renovation of those remaining works has the potential to move Holyoke forward.

**Introduction**

Through the course of Holyoke’s first 100 years, works of architectural importance were frequently added to the city’s industrial foundation. Mills, commercial office buildings, hotels, even an opera house presented an attractive and solid façade to the world at large. The second 100 years has so far, 60 years in, have seen the disappearance of many of those delights. Fires in times of dangerous industrial practices, obsolescence in the wake of changing uses and styles, and neglect in times of economic hardship have all claimed many grand buildings of a kind we likely will not see built again.

Those that remain, through pragmatic protection of an investment, loving stewardship, or simple luck despite neglect, constitute the fore guard of history remembered. They remind us of our history, both good and bad. They show us changing style, hint at the vernacular materials, and underscore the mechanical and organizational brilliance of those who helped build this city.
Through the work of many people, opportunities are being created to preserve and reuse the buildings that make up this heritage. Redevelopment plans no longer call for razing everything in a given district, but for celebrating the assets that have survived and giving them a second life as anchors in the revitalization of the Depot Square area.

In the well-preserved, if somewhat neglected, architectural gem that is the 1885 Connecticut River Railroad Train Station, Holyoke is presented with a unique opportunity. H. H. Richardson, the station’s renowned designer, remains one of America’s preeminent architects 126 years after his death at age 47 in 1886. His buildings represented a new style of Romanesque design (which today bears his name, Richardsonian Romanesque) which influenced many architects through the late 19th and early 20th century. Today, Richardson continues to inspire and influence, as evidenced by the many current books, articles, blogs, and internet groups dedicated to his work and memory. The restoration and reuse of the Connecticut Railroad Station at Holyoke, a subtle and lovely example of Richardson’s aesthetic vision, creates an opportunity for the city to restore a keystone to anchor the next phase of redevelopment in the Depot Square/Flats neighborhoods.

The Cityscape

The city of Holyoke evolved from a portion of Springfield known as the Ireland parish. It became a township in 1850 and later a city in 1873. The catalyst for becoming a town was provided by the creation of the Hadley Falls Manufacturing Company, an industrial venture led by a group of investors who had had success at Lowell, Massachusetts. The scale of their vision
included the establishment of a planned industrial community, the first in the United States.

Taking advantage of the 50 foot drop in the Connecticut River, the South Hadley Falls Company laid out an industrial infrastructure plan and the community that they considered ideally suited to manufacturing and commercial enterprise. A dam was to span the Connecticut River just above the falls and 4 ½ miles of canals were to provide water power to dozens of mills arrayed along those canals.

With the arrival of the railroad in Holyoke in 1847, a need was created for a new passenger station and freight depot. Located in what would become depot square, the station became the heart the developing industrial city. By 1850 the first portions of the canals were dug, the dam was completed (the second dam, that is, the first having been washed away five hours after completion), and solidly built mills, hotels, restaurants, and commercial spaces had begun to spring up. Across the intersection of Dwight and Main Streets from the depot, the four story Holyoke Hotel was constructed, promoted as a first-class establishment that rivaled hotels in Boston and New York. Soon provisioners, saloons, and services of every type lined Main Street. The train depot would have served as the primary connection to the rest of the world, being the point at which mail arrived, newspapers, and travelers coming to and from Holyoke. Accordingly, Depot Square became the commercial heart of Holyoke and remained so from 1848 until after the completion of the new city hall on High Street in 1874.
Henry Hobson Richardson and the train station “as it ought to be”

The string of H. H. Richardson train depots and stations that grace the rail networks of Massachusetts might never have been created if it had not been for the aesthetic goals and foresight of James A. Rumrill. As a Vice President of the Boston & Albany Railroad and as a director for both the Connecticut River and New London & Northern Railroads, it was Rumrill who is credited with having selected his old Harvard College friend H. H. Richardson to design the stations and improvements (including Holyoke’s station) that the expanding rail lines felt they needed.¹

For Henry Hobson Richardson, already very well established in the architectural world and celebrated for his masterpiece Trinity Church in Copley Square, the commissions represented an opportunity to reconsider the train station, a typology of emerging importance and relevance in American life. Perhaps of additional interest is that his two earliest commissions were for very different types of stations: the first for a commuter station serving the B&A’s new commuter line serving the western suburbs of Boston and which, for the first time, provided workers quick daily transportation between their homes in the suburbs and their work in downtown areas. The

second was for a more challenging union station, or a station serving multiple railroads, located in Palmer, MA, and to be built at a larger scale and on a much more complicated site.

Rumrill’s first commission for Richardson arrived in 1881 and was for a commuter station at Auburndale, MA. James O’Gorman asserts that Richardson’s work on this project produced the “definitive solution to the building program,” one that is similar to that at Holyoke although a bit smaller. O’Gorman writes that “the type established here was to be repeated with variations in other locales but never essentially altered.” This is notable as Richardson’s commissions for train stations ranged from the very modest Woodland and Chestnut Hill stations (at perhaps an eighth of the size of the Holyoke station) to the much larger New London Union Station (with a footprint about four times as large as the Holyoke Station, and with a full second story below the roofline).

The smaller stations had common waiting rooms and the larger ones restaurants and upstairs office space, but the basic program and design layout remained essentially the same. Richardson is credited with having changed the understanding of what a railroad station “ought to be,” transforming what Charles Sprague Sargent referred to as “vulgar little stations that look like exaggerated kiosks” into buildings that reduced the elements of the problem or a minimum of shelter and flux, then quietly celebrating these elements with simple and solid design, Norcross’s execution, and Olmsted’s gracious grounds, Richardson produced a fresh vision of the commuter depot which was to be reflected not only in the many Richardsonian stations directed all along the western flow of the railroad system also in the mature work of his creative successors, especially that of Frank Lloyd Wright.²

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² James O’Gorman, *H. H. Richardson*, pp. 115-116
³ James O’Gorman, *H. H. Richardson*, p. 122
The permanence of heavy stone, solid timbers, and lowering eaves conferred a sense of stability and modesty to the stations in these towns and cities. The appeal of these designs, for both the railroads and the hosting communities, proved attractive enough to influence train station design for many years following.

Richardson recognized early the need to make station design as simple as possible. For him, station design was driven by only a few factors: 1) facilitating the “best possible circulation of the maximum number of travelers” while creating the greatest “comfort and efficiency”; 2) showing a attractive and suitably dignified presence for a railroad company in a given town; and 3) providing travelers with the best possible impression of the hosting town as possible. The latter was a point of significant importance for the railroad companies and for James Rumrill, Richardson’s patron.

The simple, straightforward programs for the Boston & Albany Railroad stations designed by Richardson were closely based upon the program laid out for the Auburndale station, although scaled up for the larger stations such as at Holyoke. The program included waiting rooms for travelers (sometimes common waiting rooms, sometimes divided into men’s and women’s waiting rooms, and sometimes all three), restroom facilities, ticketing, telegraph, and platforms for the trains.

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5 James O’Gorman, *H. H. Richardson*, p. 115
The Holyoke Train Station

The station is situated only a quarter mile from the original station at Depot Square on a gentle curve in the tracks. Depot Square had become too busy with freight traffic to be comfortable and safely used as a passenger depot. The reasons for the selection of the current site are quite unclear as it placed the station on the far side of the tracks from the main commercial districts of the city. Instead, the station faced out onto residential and small retail and entertainment establishments that edged a densely developed residential area known still as the Flats. The station centered on Ely Street, whose axis intersected the building and whose length ran to the third canal some half mile away to the east. Today, the Flats neighborhood is

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6 Charles O’Connell, interview, December 29, 2011
almost entirely residential with almost no commercial activity. Suburban style single family houses on sizable lots now stand were once stood three to five story tenements and the neighborhood’s population has dropped from over 5,000 to less than one third that number.

The station’s exterior material palette consists of solid walls made of granite ashlar and Longmeadow brownstone for trim. Wood windows and slate tiles on the long, broad roofs complemented the stone walls and finished the composition. This material palette is similar to that used in many other Richardson design and is considered to a signature of sorts. The station design follows that of other stations that Richardson designs, in particular the Framingham Station serving the Boston & Albany Railroad, which was designed, constructed, and opened at about the same time (1883-1885). The station is roughly 40’ x 120’, with the long side parallel to the tracks. The eaves project another sixteen feet beyond the walls, protecting the boardwalk around and access to the station building. The large expanse of the roofs is broken by gables on either end of the building and three similarly shaped dormers on each long side, with the central dormer larger than the two flanking it. Each triangular dormer and gable face has rectangular windows beneath a heavy band of brownstone. The central side dormers also have arched windows.
above the brownstone and fill up the space below the point of the dormer. Arches are frequently found in Richardson’s designs, part of his Romanesque style, although those on the Holyoke Station are more subdued than is typical; in the Framingham station, for example, the arches fill the dormers completely, while at the Old Colony the arches stretched from the ground to above the line of the eaves. With these more modest arches, the Holyoke Station appears more restrained and formal than other stations.

The interior, however, was at least as visually engaging as his other stations. The double story main waiting room boasted a complicated arrangement of trusses to support the high ceiling. The lower lintel of the arched windows, modest from the outside, begin a full 20 feet above the waiting room floor, bringing light across the high ceiling and wooden beams, illuminating every corner of the great room.

The smaller stations such as Auburndale might have had two small segregated waiting rooms while Palmer’s had a large common waiting room, a small “smoking room,” and a small “dining room,” in addition to several other minor spaces.7 Richardson’s drawn program for the Holyoke station, however, contained an unusual element not seen in any of his other station plans.

As at many other stations, Holyoke contained a general waiting room, a women’s lounge (the “Ladies’ Room”), a telegraph room, a ticket counter, and a baggage room within the station (an outbuilding for baggage and Railroad Express was added later). Not seen in any of his other commissions is the separate “Emigrant’s Room”, a waiting area with only one entrance from trackside, and with its own restrooms. It is assumed by Jeffrey Karl Ochsner in his “H. H. Richardson: Complete Architectural Works” that this room was meant to serve immigrants.

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who had continued to arrive in Holyoke seeking work in the mills from French-speaking Canada, Ireland, and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{8} James O’Gorman similarly assumes that the room was for immigrants, specifically the Slavic immigrants coming to work in the valley’s tobacco fields in the 1880s, and other groups at other times in its history. It is not clear how this room came to be added to the program of the building or of its function once built, but the intention of separating immigrants from the established Holyoke population, or the “general Yankee population” as O’Gorman put it, is abundantly clear.\textsuperscript{9}

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\textit{Richardson’s original floor plan for the Holyoke station}

\textsuperscript{8} Karl Ochsner, \textit{H. H. Richardson: Complete Architectural Works}, p. 323

\textsuperscript{9} James O’Gorman, speech at the Holyoke Train Station, April 29, 2011
Adaptive Reuse Precedents

There are not many of Richardson’s train stations that still exist, but from those that do we may extract some useful lessons. This section also includes studies of other stations and buildings they can help us envision what uses the Richardson station in Holyoke might someday house.

South Framingham (MA) Train Station

This H. H. Richardson designed station in South Framingham has much in common with Holyoke’s station. Commissioned, designed, and completed at virtually the same times (1883-1885), the two stations share a similar size and layout. Framingham’s station continued to serve Amtrak and commuter rail passengers until the late 1990s when the MBTA built a new station adjacent to the old one. At that time the Richardson station was converted to a restaurant and has housed several different restaurants during the intervening years. The most recent restaurant in the station is Café Belo, a Brazilian eatery.
The interior has been restored, including having “had paint stripped from its wooden bead-boarding, and many details are maintained, such as brick moldings and some tile-work. The central interior room reveals a soaring network of trusses and beams.”

South Framingham became the commercial center of the town in the 1880s, a growth correlated with the building of the Richardson station and the town’s many rail lines that linked passengers in six directions. While South Framingham is not thriving as it did 120 years ago, it remains a commercial hub and is served by many commuter trains and two Amtrak trains every day. Amtrak does not provide ticketing or baggage services at the Framingham station, which is unstaffed.

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10 [www.greatamericanstations.com/Station/FRA](http://www.greatamericanstations.com/Station/FRA), accessed December, 2011
**Palmer (MA) Train Station**

The Palmer Union Station opened on June 1, 1884, having been commissioned by the New London Northern Railroad and the Boston and Albany Railroad to replace two separate stations. This was the second railroad passenger station commission received by Richardson’s office and again originated with his good friend and railroad executive James Rumrill. Palmer prided itself in being home to seven different railroad lines, with the Boston & Albany being the largest line and the main east-west trunk. The Union Station was designed to serve passengers of both an east-west line (Boston & Albany) and a north-south line (New London Northern). Located at a junction where the tracks of two of the railroad lines crossed and an acute angle, Richardson designed a trapezoidal station that presented platforms on its two longest sides and the main entryway on a shorter side.  

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11 [www.steamingtender.com/about.asp](http://www.steamingtender.com/about.asp), accessed December, 2011
Passenger rail service ended at Palmer on April 30, 1971. The next day the Penn Central Railroad, in bankruptcy at the time, turned over its passenger operations to the newly formed Amtrak. Before that date there were two daily stops at the Palmer Union Station; the new schedules put out by Amtrak for May, 1971, included no stops at Palmer.

Today, the roof, with its deep eaves sheltering boardwalk waiting areas, remains the dominant feature of the building. Richardson’s trademarks granite and brownstone masonry are overshadowed by the deep eaves. On the north and west sides of the building the eaves have been removed, presumably due to damage caused by neglect, revealing tall, narrow windows gathered in groups of three. The station has not served passenger traffic for 40 years, but the activity on the tracks reportedly still draws trainspotters to watch the freights and the occasional Amtrak train cross the “diamond”, the spot where the two sets of tracks cross one another at an acute angle. The station’s owners, Blake and Robin Lamothe, operate a restaurant called the Steaming Tender in the station, catering to locals and train enthusiasts alike. They have been working to restore the station since 1987.

New London (CT) Union Station
Located with its back against the waterfront, the New London Station faces a public plaza and the rest of the city. It is conjectured that H. H. Richardson, who died in 1886, was involved in the schematic design of the station, although it is not definitively clear what his input was.

The final design was apparently still being modified as late as 1887 (when a newspaper reported that brownstone trim would be used on the building, although none was included in the final building), calling into question how much of Richardson’s design is today in evidence. The building was completed in 1889, three years after Richardson’s death.

The station continues to serve Amtrak passengers and serves as the city’s regional intermodal transportation center, including local buses, commuter rail, and ferries to Long Island and Block Island. The station was commissioned by the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad.
and the New London Northern Railroad, who together decided to construct and share a new “union station” to replace a station that burned down in 1883.

Richardson’s New London Union Station is markedly different from his earlier commissions, featuring highly symmetrical facades built with a single deep, rich red brick material palette, and an emphasis on lightly textured rectilinear surfaces. Similar to the Holyoke SP and South Framingham stations, the New London station has projecting bay window that introduces a curved element to the otherwise rectilinear station design; this date originally served as a ticket booths, as did those in Holyoke and South Framingham. The New London station also had a small outbuilding nearby that served as a railroad express baggage room, as did the outbuildings at Holyoke and South Framingham. The New London station is much larger than the Holyoke station, with two stories below the eaves and a significantly larger footprint.

The station was in use until 1969, when the New Haven railroad ceased operations. The Union Station became shabby and run down and threatened with demolition by the city’s redevelopment agency. In 1971 the building was placed on the national register of historic places, and in 1975 a group of investors advocating for preservation and adaptive reuse of historic structures purchased the station to ensure that remain open to passengers. In 2002, the station was sold.
again to the New London Railroad Company. This time a full restoration was undertaken of the exterior and of the waiting room. In a slight departure from a true restoration, the decision was made to not return the massive wooden benches to the waiting room but to instead use less permanent furniture so as to facilitate a variety of uses in the main waiting room. The Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation, an active supporter of the station’s renovation and reuse, notes:

The goal of the renovation is to make Union Station an accessible community building that is interesting, fun, and functional. It is not to be a museum to a bygone era, but rather an active, vibrant part of New London's present-day life. Barbara Timken, one of the station's owners, said, "It's a fantastic building, and I think we can make it work for the city as a real portal. It's a connection from State Street to the trains and the water."

Today the station serves both travelers and office tenants on the upper floors.

Amtrak provides ticketing services at the station but not baggage services. An average of 20 trains serve New London daily, including Amtrak’s Acela high-speed service.

Northampton (MA) Train Station

The train station in Northampton was built in 1897 for the Boston & Maine Railroad, serving both the north-south Connecticut River line and the east-west Massachusetts Central Railroad that connected Northampton to Boston with several trains a

day. Amtrak suspended service through Northampton in 1987 and soon after the station became home to two restaurants, Union Station and Spaghetti Freddie’s. Union Station was mid- to high-priced restaurant while Spaghetti Freddie’s was more mid-range. In 1999 the Tunnel Bar, located in an underground access passageway that once provided access to the platforms to foot traffic, was opened by the owner of the restaurants above. These establishments were successful for many years although the two restaurants closed abruptly in 2011, citing a difficult winter likely related to the three year old recession. The Tunnel Bar, a popular destination in a creative use of an unusual space, remains open at this time.¹³

The future use of the station is unknown. The city may consider it for their station when Amtrak returns to the city in next few years.¹⁴

¹³ [www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM54TY_Union Station_Northampton_MA_Retired](http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM54TY_Union Station_Northampton_MA_Retired)

¹⁴ Bob Flaherty, “Longtime Northampton restaurant Union Station closes after ‘very tough winter’”, *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, March 10, 2011