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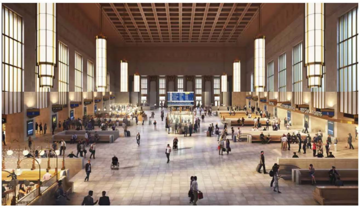
OPINION

How SEPTA and Amtrak improvements could help turn 30th Street into a neighborhood

The challenge will be to upgrade Schuylkill Yards in a way that is equitable to everyone.



Amtrak has started a project to modernize 30th Street Station with the aim of making it a destination for people living and working nearby. The plans call for a chef-driven restaurant in the so ... **Read more**
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by Inga Saffron | Columnist
Published May 4, 2024, 5:00 a.m. ET

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Ever since 30th Street Station opened in 1933, the cathedral-sized train hall has functioned primarily as a portal to somewhere else. More than 16 million people pass through its seven-story Corinthian columns every year, most of them in a hurry. While some might stop to pick up a coffee, grab a boxed lunch, or admire the great bolts of sunlight slanting off the travertine walls, they've never had much of an incentive to hang around the magnificent building.

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That's about to change. As the no-man's-land around the station has gradually filled in with labs, offices and apartment towers, the majestic terminal has taken on an expanded role: the anchor of the emerging Schuylkill Yards neighborhood. Amtrak now wants to turn the building — recently named in honor of the late U.S. Rep. William H. Gray III — into a destination for people who aren't necessarily going anywhere.

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The challenge will be to modernize the historic station while still preserving its soul.

If you've hustled through the soaring concourse lately, you've probably noticed evidence of the coming metamorphosis, which is being overseen by architects from SOM, Beyer Blinder Belle, and WRT. The former retail spaces have been sealed off, and several hefty walnut benches have been removed from their moorings so Amtrak can begin repairing the station's century-old plaster and stone.

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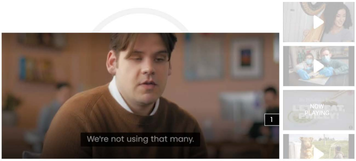

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Once the initial phase of the $550 million project wraps up next year, Amtrak and its development partner, Plenary Infrastructure Philadelphia, plan to lease the retail spaces to tenants that can appeal equally to locals and travelers. The wish list includes a chef-driven restaurant with table service, a produce market, bookstore and bars.

But this project isn't merely about expanding the station's amenities. It also has big implications for Philadelphia's economy.

Historical gravitas, evolving Amtrak ridership

Much like the main stations in New York and Washington, 30th Street has become a catalyst for new development, particularly research labs. In contrast to Center City, which is struggling to retain conventional office tenants, the area around the station is a booming construction zone, with at least five new lab buildings in various states of completion.

Philadelphia's future is heavily tied to the jobs that will be created in those labs. What's more, their employees are more likely to come into the office because they need to monitor experiments and collaborate with colleagues. Last year alone, more than 1,300 positions were advertised, according to data from Lightcast, which tracks employment trends.

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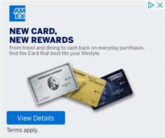

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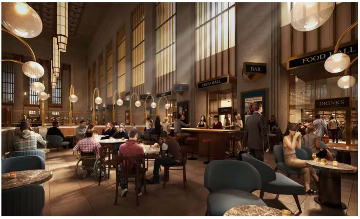

Amtrak wants to add more amenities to 30th Street Station to make it a destination for people who live and work in the surrounding neighborhood. This restaurant would be in the southwest co ... **Read more**
Plenary Infrastructure Philadelphia

Amtrak, which is headquartered in offices above the train hall, also has a lot at stake with the project. Its ridership has now surpassed pre-pandemic levels, and the rail company expects the number of travelers to double by 2040. Not only will Amtrak be serving more people, it also needs the rent from new retail businesses to help pay for improved rail service.

It's how Amtrak adds those businesses that matters. Philadelphia's train station is one of the greatest of America's surviving rail terminals, so it's important that the architecture is treated with respect. The building was designed by Graham, Anderson, Probst & White, an important Chicago architecture firm that traces its lineage to Daniel Burnham and the City Beautiful movement.

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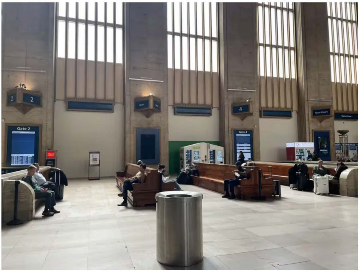
The main hall is one of the most inspiring rooms in Philadelphia. As many times as I've been there, my heart still beats a little faster every time I step inside. I always take a moment to admire Walker Hancock's deeply moving memorial to the railway workers who died in World War II, which depicts an angel tenderly lifting a fallen soldier heavenward, away from the flames of war. Its understated grandeur more than stands up to the monumental architecture. The train hall is one of just a handful of Philadelphia interiors protected by the Historical Commission, and the entire building is listed on the National Register.

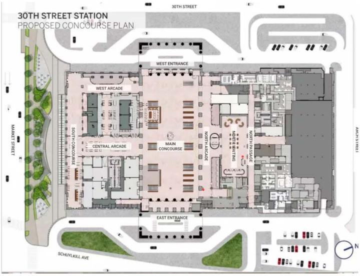


Four free-standing walnut benches in 30th Street/Gray Station are being moved to make room for restaurant tables.
Inga Saffron

Modernization fears unwarranted

Yet, despite those layers of protection, there has been a great deal of trepidation about whether the modernization project might make the terminal feel more like a shopping mall than a train station. While some American train stations have been reducing seating in their waiting rooms to accommodate retail — and discourage lingering — 30th Street has continued to welcome all comers with rows of comfortable walnut benches. Some are attached to the stone walls that enclose the staircases; others are free standing.

So when Amtrak removed four of the free-standing benches earlier this year, some saw it as a bad omen. In a recent essay, the Wall Street Journal's architecture critic complained that the sit-down restaurant would be too close to Hancock's somber sculpture, overwhelming and trivializing the memorial.



This floor plan shows the changes that Amtrak plans to make as it modernizes 30th Street Station. The ticket counter, along with four free standing benches, will be moved to the North Waiting ... **Read more**
Amtrak

So far, those fears appear unwarranted. While the project is being designed to attract more business from locals, architects from SOM told me they are being careful not to alter the station's essential architectural character. After studying the way people flow through the space, they decided to shift the ticket counter to the North Waiting Room, the large empty space with Karl Bitter's bas-relief depicting the history of transportation.

To fill out the space, Amtrak will relocate the four benches to the new ticket area, and SOM will design two new seating pods, increasing the station's overall seat count. Since Amtrak is also enlarging the Market Street plaza by removing a driveway that cuts through the space, that outdoor waiting area will have more tables, too.

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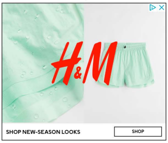
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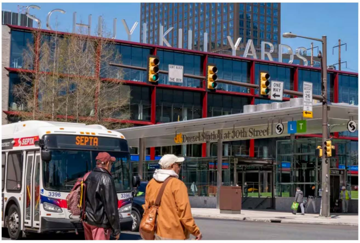
Hancock's sculpture also appears to be safe. The two new restaurants will occupy existing retail lots in the southeast and southwest corners of the main concourse, both located a respectful distance from the war memorial. Although restaurant tables will be allowed to spill out into the main hall, Amtrak promises that the seating will not extend beyond the stairways leading to the platforms. It's certainly in Amtrak's interest to keep the central portion of the great hall clear of clutter because it needs to move large numbers of people through the space.

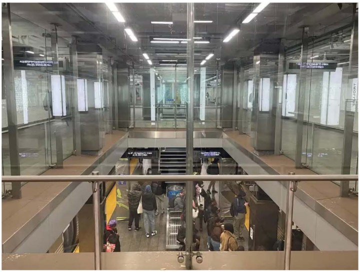


The headhouse of SEPTA's Drexel Station at 30th Street shows the new, simpler signage to direct riders — a blue L for the Market-Frankford Line and a green T for trolleys.
Tom Gralish / Staff Photographer

New SEPTA station sparkles but lacks identity

When Amtrak first released its ideas for updating the station in 2016, they were part of a larger plan for upgrading public infrastructure around 30th Street. Improving the grim conditions at SEPTA's Market-Frankford Line station was one of the plan's top recommendations. At the time, that seemed like an impossible lift for the underfunded transit agency. But Drexel University, Drexel development partner Brandywine Realty Trust, and the federal government all kicked in money, and SEPTA debuted a sparkling new station in early April.

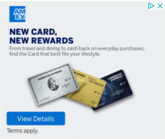
The renovated station, which has been renamed Drexel Station at 30th Street, is brighter, cleaner and easier to navigate, which is good news for the 5,000 people who pass through every day. The cave-like entrance has been replaced by a welcoming plaza and trio of glass vestibules, and the old concrete columns have been encased in backlit, white scrims that give the mezzanine a gentle glow.



Large windows give passengers a view of the platform from the mezzanine at SEPTA's newly reconstructed stop at 30th Street.
Inga Saffron

My favorite innovation is the large glass window that allows you to look down into the train platforms from the mezzanine level. Being able to see trains coming and going energizes the station, while also making waiting feel safer during off-peak hours. New elevators also allow people with mobility limitations to change easily from the trolleys to the trains.

Although this is the seventh busiest station on the Market-Frankford Line, it's the first where SEPTA has deployed its new wayfinding system, which replaces the traditional names for its trolleys and subways with a single letter. Many of the changes are simple and intuitive. What we used to call the El is now just "L" and trolleys are "T." All are rendered in bright colors in the easy-to-read Roboto type font. While the signs look simple, they're heartening evidence that SEPTA really can modernize the cumbersome network it inherited in 1964.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Maybe because SEPTA has been practicing triage for so long, it hasn't been able to develop a real design sensibility. Engineers still run the show, and making its stations vandalism-resistant is generally SEPTA's top priority. But with the recent renovation of its Fifth Street Station, which included tile murals by the celebrated artist Tom Judd, SEPTA demonstrated a more sophisticated side.

So it is disappointing that no art was included in the Drexel Station project. As bright and efficient as everything is, the station lacks a distinct identity. It feels as if it could be anywhere. If Schuylkill Yards is to evolve into a true neighborhood, it needs to be more than a generic collection of glass forms.

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Amtrak hopes to host a farmers market at its renovated 30th Street/Gray Station and is building a canopy to shade the produce.
Plenary Infrastructure Philadelphia

No riders left behind

When new neighborhoods are shaped by developers, there's also a danger that they will feel like exclusive enclaves. Given that there are big institutions involved in the station district — Drexel, the University of Pennsylvania and the University City District — they have an extra obligation to fight for a welcoming and high-quality public realm.

Yet none of those institutions has taken the lead in advocating for a central bus station, which was one of the recommendations in the 2016 district plan. The contrast between the haves and have-nots is extreme. Even as Amtrak builds a large canopy outside its building to shield its customers, Megabus passengers — many of them students and low-wage workers — are still forced to wait on a barren Schuylkill Avenue sidewalk with no protection from the elements.

Perhaps nothing demonstrates the upside-down priorities more than University City's District's recent proposal for a floating water park and pool on the Schuylkill River, just below the Megabus stop. That project will certainly require public subsidies, money that could easily be devoted to building a bus station.

Overall, the improvements at 30th Street offer proof that good-quality transit facilities can drive economic growth, create jobs, and make Philadelphia a better place to live. But we'll never succeed in ensuring everyone benefits if some of those transit riders are left behind.

Inga Saffron
I write about the design of buildings and places, and what those designs tell us about our culture, our values, and our policy choices.

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