

## All Aboard: Urban train stations redeveloped as neighborhood amenities

Rachel Kaufman | Thursday, January 30, 2014



The Porch at 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station

train station of the future is full, but not crowded. Bustling, but not packed. And, in lieu of designing spaces that commuters hurry through, cities are renovating train stations to be neighborhood amenities.

### A city's front Porch

Philadelphia's 30th Street Station, on the banks of the Schuylkill River, is the nation's third busiest train station, with over four million Amtrak passengers passing through per year. Add in the local SEPTA trains and New Jersey Transit, and that's seven million riders. Thousands of people see Philly for the first time as they exit the train station.

And, until a few years ago, the view from the main entrance was a parking lot.

"It was my first impression of Philadelphia," says Prema Gupta, director of planning for the University City District, an organization dedicated to revitalizing the surrounding neighborhood. "I got off the train, and you get out of the station and there's this magnificent view of the skyline, but then you're in this concrete jungle and surrounded by automobiles."

When the city decided to turn the parallel parking in front of the station into a pedestrian sidewalk, Gupta and UCD argued that it should not be just a pedestrian thruway, but a place where "people close their eyes and put up their feet ... [a place where] we can civilize five minutes and encourage people to linger." In 2011, The Porch was born. UCD installed plants, tables and chairs, and set up space for events like a farmers' market, outdoor concerts, fitness classes and even mini golf.

During the first summer, almost 25,000 people visited the space. And they didn't just pass through -- UCD surveyed the space every hour, every day of the week to determine how The Porch was being used. UCD wanted to "demonstrate that there's a huge amount of demand to justify future investments," explains Gupta.

Even as the economy recovers, Americans are driving less. Across the country, in urban areas, we're instead choosing to walk, bike or take public transit.

On a larger scale, there's strong evidence that the Great American Roadtrip is also on the wane. Amtrak set ridership records in 10 of the past 11 years, with 2013 being its best year ever; 31.6 million passengers rode the rails.

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With 11 acres of nearby surface parking under study by Amtrak, Drexel University and Brandywine Realty Trust for redevelopment, and with 30th Street Station itself scheduled for a future renovation, investing in a flexible, pedestrian-friendly green space seems like a no-brainer.

The idea of a train station as a community gathering place has also had an impact across the state. In the capital, the iconic brick-front Harrisburg Transportation Center has undergone a decades-long renovation. Since 1983, \$7.68 million has been invested in the station (which serves Amtrak and bus traffic).

And you don't need distance travelers to spur investment. Long-neglected historic stations in the SEPTA regional rail network have found new life. In Philadelphia's Mt. Airy neighborhood, Allens Lane Station houses High Point Cafe, a charming space that lures passengers and locals in for fresh coffee and house-made baked goods. And in Elkins Park, a suburban neighborhood north of the city, a transit-oriented development philosophy has led to renovation of the beautiful train station. Reimagined as "Elkins Central," the space serves as a community gathering place for concerts, meetings and classes.

### **The \$7 Billion Question in Washington D.C.**

One of D.C.'s most-visited places and one of the country's busiest train stations is due for an upgrade.

Union Station is stuffed to the gills with people -- almost 50,000 per day -- funneling through narrow platforms and a limited number of entrances and exits. A full MARC train can carry 1,050 people -- that's nearly three 747s.

An ambitious Master Plan for the station envisions widening the train platforms, doubling the amount of parking, more than doubling the amount of space for passengers waiting in the concourse and, atop the tracks, adding three million square feet of new space -- offices, residential, hotels and retail -- in a project known as Burnham Place.

"We're knitting a hole in the urban fabric," says Corinne Scheiffer, outreach and communications head for the Union Station Redevelopment Corporation.

David Tuchmann, vice president of development for Akridge, which will develop Burnham Place, adds that while increasing capacity is important, it's not the only goal. "We've succeeded if you say, 'I live right on top of Union Station,' and people say, 'Wow,'" he says. The station, in other words, has to be an amenity in itself—not just a machine for moving people from point A to point B.

The new Union Station and its surrounding area will get seven acres of parks and plazas (including a two-acre elevated greenway that will connect to the Metropolitan Branch Trail) and a "substantial" amount of retail. The train hall, a sweeping glass structure, will be viewable from nearly every proposed building in Burnham Place. Playgrounds, restaurants and shops in Burnham Place will be available to commuters and tourists, not just the people who live and work there. In that way the train station becomes part of the neighborhood and the neighborhood becomes part of the train station.

The design also calls for adding at least eight additional entrances to the station (currently there are only three, all clustered on the south and west sides) so that commuters coming from the north don't have to walk as far and neighbors can pass through the station rather than having to walk around it.

"It might be that people who live in this area will make this their everyday walk," says Tuchmann. "They can walk down the greenway, enter the station, get a yogurt or smoothie, and walk back. They're not a tourist or commuter."

They're not even buying a train ticket. And that's OK.

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Minor aspects of the first phase of the Master Plan are underway, but the whole project will take 15 to 20 years and cost \$7 billion dollars, paid for by a variety of sources. If completed at this cost, it would be one of the most expensive megaprojects in U.S. history.

"The only solution is generational thinking," says Tuchmann. "We're trying for the bigger moves, to make sure people look back 30 years from now and say, "Wow.""

"We've learned about the power of transportation networks to create cities," says Brian Harner, master plan coordinator for Amtrak. "The value of that goes way beyond the number of people you move."

### **Rebirth in St. Paul**

If you take Amtrak into the Twin Cities today, you end up in Midway Station on the aptly named Transfer Road. About halfway between the downtowns of Minneapolis and St. Paul, the 1970s-era building is not exactly a vintage gem.

But if you ride Amtrak to the Twin Cities in just a few months, you'll coast into downtown St. Paul's newly-restored Union Depot, the original station for St. Paul and the only historic train station remaining in the Twin Cities.

More than 10 years ago, the Ramsey County Rail Authority (RCRA) determined that bringing rail back to downtown would be a positive for St. Paul. When Midway Station opened, Union Depot, in the neighborhood of Lowertown, became storage space for the post office. Finally, after a decade of work and \$250 million, Union Depot reopened to the public in 2012. It's currently a bus hub, but Amtrak is expected to move back this spring and a light rail line will open this summer.

"Amtrak was really excited when the board undertook this initiative to...bring back Union Depot," says Tim Mayasich, director of the RCRA. "It's a much better experience for their passengers to be here."

The Twin Cities' Amtrak station saw over 116,000 boardings and alightings in the last year, and the one route that runs through the area is "busting at the seams," says Mayasich -- it runs west through North Dakota where the fracking boom is attracting thousands of workers.

Redeveloping the central train station has had a positive impact on the nearby neighborhood. Lowertown is now the fastest growing part of St. Paul, full of artists, restaurants and an in-progress minor league baseball stadium.

Midway Station served its purpose, says RCRA real estate manager Jean Krueger, "but it's kind of nowhere. Whereas Union Depot is going to be one of those things where everyone is going to know where it is."

*Additional reporting by Lee Stabert*

*source: [www.keystoneedge.com](http://www.keystoneedge.com)*