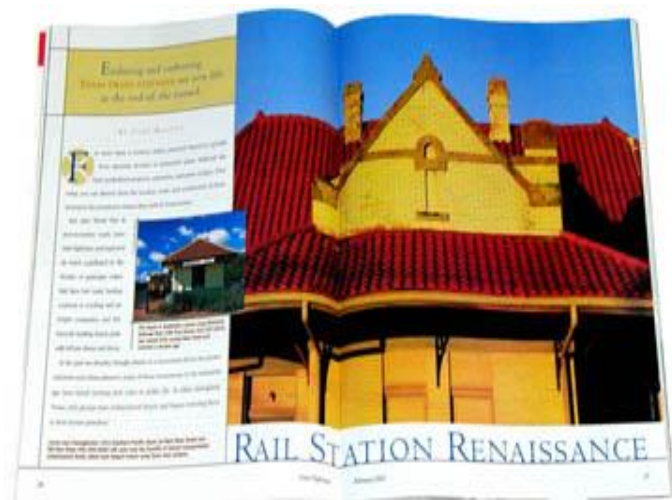


## Rail Station Renaissance

**Designed for the ages, Texas railroad stations are seeing new life for new uses**

For over a century, trains powered America's growth from agrarian frontier to industrial giant. Railroad stations symbolized progress, enterprise, and pride of place. From their location, scale, and architecture, you can still see the prominent stature these stations held in Texas towns.



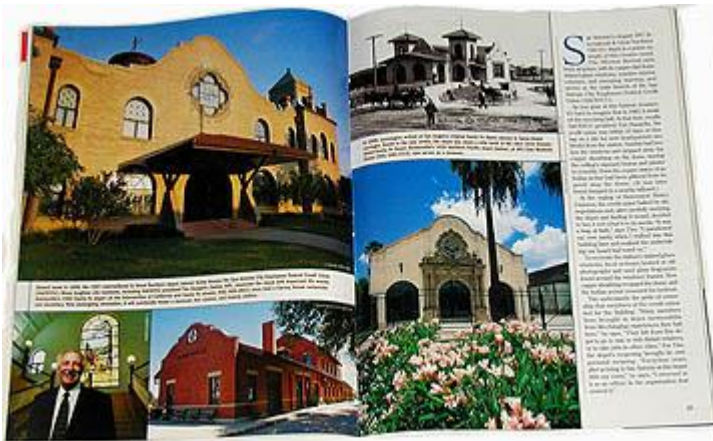
After World War II, passenger trains gave way to automobiles, interstate highways and air travel. Many hauling contracts were lost to trucking and air freight companies. And formerly bustling depots fell into disuse and decay.

Recently, though, in cities throughout the state and the country, civic groups are rediscovering and restoring their depots to their former grandeur. Driven by urban planners and preservationists, these monuments to the industrial age are finding exciting new places in Texas life.

You'll find a prime example of this creative revival in San Antonio's elegant 1906 Spanish renaissance style International and Great Northern (I&GN) depot. The brick structure, with its copper-clad dome and rose-shaped stained glass window, its massive interior lobby columns and sweeping stairway, now serves as the main branch of the San Antonio City Employees Federal Credit Union (CEFCU).

As you gaze at this nationally registered historic treasure, it's hard to imagine that in 1985, it was ready for the wrecking ball. At that time, recalls CEFCU president Tim Haegelin, the credit union was within 10 days of closing on a site to build new headquarters two blocks away from the abandoned station. The copper sheathing on the dome had been stripped away by vandals, leaving the ceiling's exposed beams and plaster to crumble. Even the copper statue of an Indian

bowman had been pilfered from its perch atop the dome. (The statue was later found dumped in a rail yard near the depot).



At the urging of then city mayor Henry Cisneros, the credit union halted its new site negotiations and, after carefully studying the depot, with its sturdy steel girdered underpinnings, elected to buy and adapt it to contemporary banking needs.

"It was a leap of faith," says Haegelin, "I questioned my own sanity when I walked into this building and realized the undertaking our board had just voted on."

To recreate the station's broken stained glass windows; local artisans used old photographs and glass fragments found around the windows' frames. New copper sheathing recapped the roof's dome, and the Indian bowman resumed his lookout atop the dome.

Haegelin says he now understands the pride of ownership credit union members feel for the building. "Many members have brought in depot memorabilia from life-changing experiences they had here," he says. "They left from this depot to go to war, visit a distant relative, or move to a new job in a new city." For Haegelin, the depot's re-opening brought its own personal meaning. "Forty-four years after arriving in San Antonio at this depot with my mom," he says, "I returned to it as an officer in the organization that revived it."

Another early depot renovation came to Dallas' stately union station. At the time of its 1916 opening, America was flexing its muscle as a new world power, and the emerging Beaux Arts architectural style, with its classic Greek and Roman design and ornamentation, perfectly reflected the eight contributing railroads' confidence in the vibrant young town.

With its massive granite columns, its roof line balustrades and parapets, the three-story station received international dignitaries and provided world-class entertainment under the 40-foot

vaulted second-story ceilings in the opulent 126 x 68-foot ballroom and sprawling verandah. It closed in 1969 when the last passenger train left the station.

In 1978 Dallas' Woodbine development company, in partnership with the city, renovated the station as part of a development project that included the Hyatt Regency Hotel and 50-story Reunion Tower on the adjoining property.

Woodbine senior vice president Gary Coffman, who oversaw the renovation, recalls, "I was at the station as a boy with my dad in 1951 when President Dwight Eisenhower arrived and gave a speech on the loading platform. The station renovation had city-wide support because, says Coffman, "Just like me, nearly every Dallasite had personal experience and memories of that station early in their lives."



Today, the station's grand hall and meeting rooms lend elegance and history to business and social events. The facilities are managed by the Hyatt Regency, which connects to the station by a 1948 tunnel that passes beneath the railroad tracks and loading platforms.

The spacious first floor passenger waiting area once again bustles with busy downtown commuters. It serves as the city's ticket office for the Amtrak passenger train line and, since 1996, it's the downtown terminal for the Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) light rail line.

In fact, rail is one of the exciting "new" uses communities are finding for their rediscovered depots. DART and the Fort Worth Transit Authority (The T) plan to join the cities with a commuter transit line.

At Fort Worth's end of this commuter line, you'll find another recently revived depot that's dazzling ball-goers and business event guests. The stunning 13-story 1931 Texas and Pacific (T&P) depot and office building is one of the country's finest examples of Zig-Zag style Art Deco architecture. The style reflects the brash, jaunty, sophisticated international influences brought to the cowtown by the military, movies, radio, automobiles and aviation during and after World War I.

Just a few decades after its zenith in World War II, the railroad began its decline, and in 1967 the last passenger train pulled away from the Fort Worth T&P station.

Separated from downtown since the fifties by an overpass of Interstate 30, the imposing depot was increasingly ignored and all but forgotten. That is until 1978, when it caught the eye of Judith Cohen, who was writing her master's thesis at Southern Methodist University on Fort Worth's Art Deco buildings. Her studies led to her 1988 book, "Cowtown Moderne." But more

important, her tireless proselytizing sparked other preservationists, eventually leading downtown business, city government, and private interests to restore several Deco era buildings.

The T&P depot's 1999 restoration is part of an ambitious downtown renovation that includes re-routing the I-30 overpass, rejoining the depot to downtown, and using its 90 x 60 foot first floor central waiting room as the terminus of the planned Dallas-Fort Worth Trinity Express commuter rail line.

Says Cohen, who writes the guides' dialog for city walking tours that include the T&P depot, "I get a real satisfaction when people-many of them local residents-tell me, 'now when I come downtown, I look up at the buildings, and I notice and appreciate things I never noticed before.'"

Other Texas city residents are noticing their old depots with new eyes--even in the ever-forward-looking Houston. In 1999, the city melded two great American passions-railroads and baseball-in Enron Field, the new stadium for the National League Astros baseball team.

The stadium adjoins the city's 1911 Beaux Arts style union station, making it the thematic and literal cornerstone of the ball club and the stadium. To take one of the daily stadium tours, you'll start under the station's 40-foot decorative ceiling and arched walkways. The six-story building also houses the Astros' offices as well as a third-floor conference center, a tour theater, an Astros memorabilia retail store, a restaurant, and a rooftop party deck overlooking the ballpark's left field.

You'll see the railroad theme carried throughout the "industrial moderne" styled stadium with its lacy ironwork, fully-resolved details and traditional masonry. All ballpark concession stands have railroad theme names. An oversize replica steam locomotive chugs behind the center field stands and blows its whistle to announce every home team home run. Even the ballplayers' uniforms incorporate the station's brick red, black, and sand architectural colors.

Says Astros president Tal Smith, "We built the stadium with a sliding roof to allow the sun to shine on the natural grass field, recalling for fans the way baseball is traditionally played. We also built it with a 50,000 square foot window onto downtown." Smith, continues, "The stadium reconnects people with the city, and an important past that built the city."

Like Houston, many Texas cities are reviving their train depots to connect visitors with the town's present day attractions by way of its past. A classic example is Abilene, which, in 1881 sprung up from the prairie when the T&P Railway sold 139 lots at auction around the site where the train would pass through.

Abilene's 1910 red brick T&P depot now houses the city's convention and visitors bureau, along with its cultural affairs council. It was restored in 1994, largely through contributions from an anonymous donor, whom nearly everyone in the city knows by name, with grateful admiration. From a preservation standpoint, notes San Antonio Architect Killis Almond, whose firm oversaw the Prairie style depot's renovation, "Abilene is the city 'Anonymous' saved."

Diners and chocolate-lovers are also grateful to "Anonymous." The T&P renovation includes the freight depot of matching brick, which now houses the Railhead Grill restaurant; and the former railway express building now is home to Candies by Vletas, purveyors of hand-dipped chocolates, fruits and other made-on-site delectables.

A spokesman for Abilene's unnamed benefactor says his boss's generosity stems from "a desire to rekindle the sense of place and community the depot and other downtown buildings once fostered."

You can follow Texas' highways in almost any direction and see how other towns are rekindling their sense of place by reviving their train depots to serve their communities in new ways. The common thread in this vast web of Texas railroads and depots is Texans' recognition of how the trains and depots shaped their cities and their lives.

*by Cory Walton*