



Why do so many people care about Toronto Union Station?

“But whether seen as a space, a shell, a triumph of engineering mechanics, or as a solid, a mass, an architectonic design, the railroad station in general came to be regarded as the symbolic gateway to the city. This kind of centrally located monument was, in fact, the only structure capable of serving as such a focus of movement, change and growth in the evolving megalopolis with its continually altering borders.”

Douglas Richardson, *The Open Gate*

“In big cities throughout the world, railway stations were among the most magnificent public buildings ever constructed. At a time when railroads were the most important commercial enterprises in existence, the downtown rail terminal served as a showcase for railway supremacy and grandeur. They reflected urban pride as well as the spirit and personalities of the cities and the railway companies that built them. The most impressive of these edifices incorporated extravagant and opulent architectural styles and were as important to their communities as the public baths of ancient Rome and the cathedrals of the Middle Ages. Newspaper commentaries about railway stations evoked religious analogies and referred to them as “temples of transportation” and “cathedrals of steam.” These urban railway terminals represented the efforts and ambitions of the foremost architects of their day, the powerful rail company executives who commissioned them, and municipal politicians who wanted the buildings to inspire spiritual awe in visitors to their cities.”

Derek Boles

“...the railroad terminal was also somehow a microcosm of city life; scarcely another single place could make such a claim since the city by its very definition seemed to allow no small model of itself, no place where its essence could be summed up. But here in the great railroad terminal, one could see on display everything that made social life tick: urgency, mobility, response to desire and aspiration, standards of dress, habits of thought, peculiarities of speech, ebb and flow, joy and sorrow, motion and emotion, parting and reunion.”

George Douglas, *All Aboard*

Despite their opulence, urban railway stations were among the few truly democratic public structures. Unlike other monuments to distinctive architecture such as courthouses, department stores, cathedrals, bank lobbies, theatres and skyscrapers, the grand rail terminals were open to everyone. They were truly public buildings where all classes could mingle. On their way to and from the trains, the rich and famous passed through the same gates and walked along the same concrete platforms as the impoverished immigrant. Once on board the trains however, class privilege asserted itself, with plebian passengers traveling in dingy coaches or colonist cars while the economic aristocrats were ensconced in plush lounges and luxurious sleeping cars.

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