

A Tale of two stations, A Tale of two unions

Story By Stephen Cirello

Photos by Union Station Redevelopment Corporation (USRC)
and Los Angeles Conservancy (LAC)

As far as majestic train stations are concerned, it was the best of times, it was the best of times...



L. A. Exterior (LAC)

Although I was a longtime New York City commuter, train stations never interested me. My goal was to grab my newspaper and coffee

and get to work on time. That all changed after moving to California and taking a tour of Los Angeles Union Station.

Both Washington Union Station and the Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal (LAUPT or Union Station) were the results of civic improvement programs developed to centralize and beautify downtown areas. LAUPT (Parkinson and Parkinson, 1939) is considered the last of the “great” pre-war stations. It represents the consolidation of three railroad terminals: Southern Pacific, Santa Fe, and Union Pacific. Washington Union Station (D.H. Burnham & Co., 1907) replaced the Baltimore and Ohio and Baltimore and Potomac (a subsidiary of the Pennsylvania Railroad) stations.

The Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal is a blend of two architectural schools: Spanish Colonial Revival (Baroque and Mission) and Art Deco. The former owes its popularity to the Spanish heritage of the Southwest and can be observed in the station’s arches, bell towers, gardens, and church-like interiors. Art Deco (Paris, 1925), originally



DC Main Entrance and Exterior (USRC)



known as Moderne (Zigzag and Streamline), remained popular throughout the 20s, 30s, and into the 40s. Art Deco is characterized by its geometric shapes, flat surfaces, sleek lines, recessed windows, and sweeping curves.

Washington Union Station is a classic example of Beaux-Arts architecture. The Beaux-Arts style was developed in France in the 1830s and combines Neo-classicism, Gothic, and Renaissance styles. It was showcased at the

1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, for which the Director of Works was Daniel H. Burnham, and was popular through the early twentieth century. Various designs at the station reflect Neo-classicism and recall the Baths of Caracalla and Diocletian in Ancient Rome. The white granite entrance resembles the Arch of Constantine and six of the exterior statues entitled "The Progress of Railroading" represent Greek gods, mathematicians, and astronomers, including Ceres (the god of agriculture) and Prometheus (the god of fire).

The exterior of LAUPT is highlighted by a series of giant, arched windows, each one displaying a bell. Bells are reminiscent of California's mission heritage and the locomotive. The 125-foot clock tower calls to mind the vertical characteristics of Art Deco; it is



it is crowned with a finial, Moorish in style, a symbol of medieval Spain. Finally, the station's sign with its "finned" lighting fixtures above is yet another example of the Art Deco style.

In another nod to Spain, LAUPT has two outdoor patio "courtyards." Travelers can enjoy the California sunshine while strolling past fountains, Jacaranda trees, and Deco sconces. The Spanish Colonial influence is reflected in the stucco walls and tile roofs.

The majestic Main Hall at Washington Union Station is a sight to behold measuring 219 feet by 120 feet by 96 feet high. The arches and the 36 Roman Legionnaire statues in the Main Hall represent the Beaux-Arts style. The barrel-vaulted ceiling is adorned by 255 octagonal



DC Main Hall Interior (USRC)



L. A. Ticket Concourse (LAC)



L. A. Chandelier and Bell Window (LAC)

coffers, the center of each gilded in 23-karat gold leaf. The floors are white and red marble (sourced from quarries in Vermont).

The largest room inside the Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal is the magnificent Ticket Concourse. It measures 146 feet by 80 feet with a 52-foot ceiling and is another example of Spanish Colonial. What really stands out are the six

decorative chandeliers measuring ten feet in diameter and weighing over 3,000 pounds each. The counter is black walnut and the floor is Spanish tile and marble.

Back in the day, hungry travelers would have enjoyed the iconic Harvey House at LAUPT.



L. A. Harvey House (LAC)

These “Houses”, the brainchild of English entrepreneur Fred Harvey, were actually restaurants built along the Santa Fe Railroad Line starting in 1876. The servers, known as Harvey Girls, in their black and white high-collared uniforms, would greet guests with fine dining options.

Since Washington

Union Station is located in the nation’s capital, it was only fitting that it have a “Presidential Suite.” Before the advent of air travel, Presidents traveled by rail. Although the suite provided security (not too long before Union Station was built, Presidents Garfield and McKinley were assassinated, the former at a train station), it also served as a venue for hosting foreign dignitaries. Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt greeted the English royals in the suite, while President and First Lady Kennedy received Haile Selassie there. The last President to actively use the suite was Harry Truman before signing it over to the USO.

Both stations have served as venues for countless movies and commercials. Some notable

films in L.A. include Union Station (1950), The Way We Were (1973), Blade Runner (1982), and The Dark Knight Rises (2012). Washington was a locale for Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939) and Strangers on a Train (1950), among others. Jillian Hess, the Public Relations and Outreach Manager at Union Station Redevelopment Corporation in DC (USRC), thinks this pop culture fact is interesting: "Two days after the Beatles' February 9, 1964 appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show, due to a snowstorm grounding flights, the Fab Four took the train to Union Station for their first U.S. concert at the Washington Coliseum in DC."



DC Presidential Suite (USRC)

In the post-war years, train travel declined and many stations fell into disrepair. Although both stations have undergone restorations, preservation efforts continue. The Los Angeles Conservancy (www.laconservancy.org) works through education and advocacy to recognize, preserve, and revitalize the historic, architectural, and cultural resources of L.A. County. One of the objectives of Union Station Redevelopment Corporation (www.usrcdc.com) is the preservation and restoration of the historic station (and USRC is currently involved with its expansion). Both organizations offer station tours and USRC has a free Union Station tour app.

Today, Washington Union Station serves Amtrak, Maryland and Virginia commuter rails, and the Metrorail, along with Greyhound and Megabus intercity buses. LAUPT is home to Amtrak, MetroLink, MetroRail, and the El Monte Busway. According to Alex Inshishian, Program Coordinator for the Los Angeles Conservancy, "The Conservancy has worked closely with Metro to strike a balance in creating and adopting a new Union Station master plan that allows for significant change while maintaining the historic station." It is estimated that over 100,000 people pass through each station daily.

Special thanks to Ms. Jillian Hess, Mr. Alex Inshishian, and their respective organizations for their assistance with this article.

By now, I am sure that you are all ready for a tour of both stations. I would be happy to join you! Bring a camera and some friends. No newspaper or coffee is required (well... maybe the coffee).