

Unrivaled Grandeur: Cincinnati Union Terminal

By Hannah Kebede

Rising like an enormous art-deco monument on the Ohio horizon, the Cincinnati Union Terminal's [semi-dome](#) is the largest in the western hemisphere, smaller only than the Sydney Opera House in Australia. But just as the passage of time crumbles many a man-made edifice, it almost also leveled this historic train station; a true American architectural masterpiece. Almost.

So how did the [Cincinnati Union Terminal](#) survive the transition away from passenger trains as the preferred mode of transportation in the United States? How did it survive the recessions, abandonments, repurposings and attempts to tear it down?

To understand how the station weathered these most difficult storms, one must first know the successes of its heyday and the story of its birth.

In the 1800s, Cincinnati emerged as a railroad hub, with its passenger train traffic split between five small stations scattered around the city, with flooding a constant concern in this city along a bend in the Ohio River. It took a few decades, but the seven railroad companies whose tracks crossed the city organized to solve this problem, choosing a location and commissioning the creation of the Union Terminal Company to build a new station that could handle all their trains and travelers on the city's waterfront, and one



Photos by Rich Sampson (except where noted)

Few interior spaces in North America can match Union Terminal's main hall, almost symphonic in its splendor.

that would not flood.

Construction began on the Cincinnati Union Terminal in the 1920s, and the station opened in 1933. Although the [principle architects](#) were veteran train station designers Alfred T. Fellheimer and Steward Wagner, it was consultant Paul Philippe Cret who added the Art Deco style, embodied by the arched and pil-

lared entrance, that the building is known for – a signature that inspired the [Hall of Justice](#) in the 1970s cartoon, *Super Friends*.

“An enormous throng can be handled in the great rotunda without annoying a single passenger,” declared the *Cincinnati Enquirer* [in 1933](#), describing the station as a, “Temple to Transportation.”



The blend of mosaic murals depicting average Cincinnati workers and art deco flourishes allow Union Terminal to serve as a testament to one of the nation's most iconic architectural periods.

A clocktower-sized [analog clock](#) on the center of the building's arch keeps the time, while two façade stone carvings, one representing transportation and the other representing industry, stand guard from both sides of the Union Terminal entrance. A fountain in front of the building, across the street from its doors, springs skyward in the warm months.

The interior of the terminal is equally stylish – [mosaics and murals](#) by famed German artist Winold Reiss and French artist Pierre Bourdelle decorate its walls. A fantastical jungle of peacocks and monkeys guide the way to the woman's restroom. A visual history of the Queen City spans the station's rotunda.

Mosaic murals, based on [photographs of real people](#), depict the fourteen biggest [industries](#) in the city at the time, such as soap-

making, leather and steel. They reflected the life and livelihood of Cincinnati from the train concourse until they were moved to the [Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport](#) in 1973.

“Winold Reiss created the largest collection of nonreligious murals ever in one place,” states Gibson Yungblot, Union Terminal historian, in a [video](#) about the history of the station. “Instead of putting tile on the dome they painted it, and that gave it this...Art Deco appearance that you just don't find in any other station.”

Currently, there are efforts to move nine of those murals to the Duke Energy Convention Center because the airport is set to tear down the section in which the murals were placed later this year. These murals have been saved

by the Cincinnati Preservation Association's Alfred Moore who added a special clause into their move from Union Terminal, requiring the airport to alert the six months in advance of any plans to destroy their home so that they can be moved.

“It takes many years for a work of art to be appreciated,” Moore told Cliff Radel of the *Enquirer*, explaining how he knew that the murals might have to be relocated yet again after they were transferred to the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Airport. “To many, they were just decorations.”

But truly, they are more than that; “Beautiful works of art that should be preserved for future generations to see,” says Moore, who chaired the 1970s efforts to Save the Union Terminal. He continued, “they show what



Photo courtesy of Cincinnati Union Terminal

work was like in the 1930s. They make people aware of how hard our ancestors worked just to survive.”

The Cincinnati Preservation Association is [accepting donations](#) to help fund the \$5-to-\$7-million move, as the city government cannot afford to pay the entire cost.

At the [height of its use as a train station](#), more than 200 daily trains passed in and out of Union Terminal, with a capacity of 17,000 passengers. Visitors also came to the [terminal to shop](#). There was a bookstore, clothing stores for both men and women, and a toy store that mesmerized children into almost missing their trains.

Over the years, at least 18 trains and ten railroads made use of Union Terminal. Three

of these trains, the *Cincinnati Limited*, the *Cincinnati Mercury*, and the *Cincinnati* were namesakes of the city they served. Railroads ranging from the Louisville and Nashville to the New York Central had stops at the terminal, along with their competitors such as Baltimore & Ohio and Pennsylvania. Amtrak also put down routes to the station, first the *George Washington* and the *James Whitcomb Riley*, and the *Cardinal*, which still serves Union Terminal today.

During World War Two, trains came through carrying soldiers from all over the country to their bases to be deployed, and back home again once the war ended. At the 1944 peak, there were [34,000 soldiers](#) travelling through the terminal per day. It was after the war, in

Day or night, the sweep of Union Terminal's profile and well-manicured landscaping are captivating.



the 1950s, when Union Terminal started its inevitable and all-too-familiar decline.

By 1971, Cincinnati Union Terminal welcomed only two trains a day. By 1972, it was



The dome over Union Terminal's main hall is intended to reflect a sense of motion – perfect for a train station!

zero, as [Amtrak had removed its service from the station](#).

This could have been the death of the Cincinnati Union Terminal, as it was for many of its brethren. Empty and abandoned by all its trains, passengers, shops, and even the Cincinnati Science Center that briefly existed in the building from 1968 to 1970, the great station faced, at best, an uncertain future.

In 1973, the Cincinnati City Council designated Union Terminal an historic landmark, rescuing it from ever being demolished.

The [Land of Oz Mall](#) opened in the terminal building with 40 tenants in 1980. In 1982, the Cincinnati Museum of Health and Science moved in.

Like before, the station was bustling with life. But just like before, it was abandoned when the recession of the early 1980s forced the mall and the museum to close. For a second time, the high ceilings and semi-dome of the Cincinnati Union Terminal echoed with emptiness.

This, too, could have been the death of the historic station. But, again, it was not.

Hamilton County residents saved Cincinnati Union Terminal from destruction, in a 1986 vote to repurpose the building as the Cincinnati Museum Center. Former Cincinnati mayor and television personality [Jerry Springer](#) was involved in the effort to preserve the station, recording and singing a song titled [Save the Union Terminal](#).

In 1990, the terminal became home to the [Cincinnati History Museum](#), the Museum of [Natural History & Science](#), the [Robert D. Lindner Family Omnimax Theater](#), the [Cincinnati Historical Society Library](#), and the [Duke Energy Children's Museum](#), as well as, the [Cincinnati Railroad Club](#), stationed in Tower A overlooking the station. It was a new incarnation that's lasted now for 25 years.

Today, the [Cincinnati Museum Center](#) averages more than [1.4 million visitors per year](#). A [virtual tour](#) of the building is available online for those unable to visit in person.

"The Museum Center has a goal of bringing in more experiences, modern-day science, modern-day exhibit activity," Museum Center

Vice President Elizabeth Peirce told the *Huffington Post*. "We've got one-stop shopping for cradle-to-grave educational experiences."

Currently, mummies are one of the themes at the Museum Center. The Omnimax Theater is showing the IMAX movie [Mummies: Secrets of the Pharaohs](#) while the Natural History Museum is exhibiting [Umi the Mummy](#) as part of their [Mummies of the World](#) exhibition.

The Cincinnati History Museum displays more [recent and local history](#). Guides teach Cincinnati history in full costume and completely in character of city residents from the late 1700s to the early 1900s. Learning is interactive in the history museum; visitors can help Ohio River boaters with their cargo and printing press owners with setting their type. A [miniature model](#) of the 20th century period with moving trains, as well as interactive computer stations, provides even more engaging education.

It is natural that the Cincinnati Union Terminal housed and continues to house so many museums, as its architecture is a time-capsule of the time in which it was built and the station itself is a living example of Cincinnati history, evolving along with the times instead of becoming obsolete and getting destroyed, or becoming a relic with historical significance but no practical use.

But even now, the Cincinnati Union Terminal is not just a museum. It has returned to its original and intended purpose: a train station.

Three times a week, Amtrak trains pass through on the [Cardinal route](#) from New York City to Chicago, and back. The return of Am-

trak makes [Cincinnati Union Terminal](#) one of the busiest train stations in the state of Ohio.

Still, for a third time, the terminal faced long odds when National Trust for Historic Preservation listed the [Cincinnati Union Terminal](#) as one of the [11 most endangered historic sites](#) in the country, due to deterioration.

“Engineers are looking at the seven- to 10-year range until the disrepair becomes major,” Elizabeth Pierce, Vice President of Cincinnati Museum Center, told Grace Dobush of [Wired](#). “If we don’t fix it now, the deterioration of the building will escalate from the current rate –and it becomes significantly more expensive to do than it is to do right now.”

Again, the voters of Hamilton County arrived to save it. With a 61 percent majority, residents [voted to increase their sales tax](#) in November 2014 order to raise money for the restoration of the beloved station.

“I am pleased to offer my hearty congratulations to the Cincinnati region for your support and passage of Issue 8 to save Union Terminal,” congratulated U.S. Veterans Affairs Secretary Bob McDonald in a statement released by his office. “This successful vote indicates what we’ve known for a very long time—that this community loves Union Terminal and values its future! So many people have been a part of making this effort a success tonight.”

McDonald was founding chairman of the Cultural Facilities Task Force that promoted the restoration of the Cincinnati Union Terminal, and was personally invested in the vote. Another McDonald personally invested in the rescue was, [Doug McDonald](#), President and CEO of the Cincinnati Museum Center.

“We will be the generation that will restore this building and create the legacies and the memories of tomorrow by restoring this iconic building, Union Terminal,” McDonald told Lucy May and Greg Noble of WCPO Cincinnati.

Now that the Cincinnati Union Terminal has been rescued, it may be able to rescue another struggling service – neighboring Indiana’s *Hoosier State* line. Ever since the 2008 [Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act](#) mandated that state government must fund the intercity passenger routes of Amtrak within their states, Indiana has had trouble raising the money to support its section of the Hoosier Route, which runs from Chicago to Indianapolis.

Ridership on the daily Hoosier train [decreased by 10 percent](#) this year, compared to 2013, and the Indiana Department of Transportation is [considering discontinuing](#) the service. Nonprofit All Aboard Ohio has proposed a solution to the Hoosier’s budget issues. The organization suggests [extending the route into Ohio](#), stopping in Cincinnati, at Union Terminal, as well as in Oxford so that Miami State University students can ride. Adding Ohio to the Hoosier Line would give Cincinnati a daily connection to Indianapolis and Chicago, as the *Cardinal* only runs three days a week.

Within Cincinnati, there is already a local rail transit under construction. The [Cincinnati Streetcar](#) is scheduled to begin operation in 2016, with 17 stations throughout the Queen City utilizing five modern streetcars. Following its debut, an extension proposed to serve

Union Terminal, proving that the terminal’s revitalization as a station and Museum Center is attracting more new business and new visitors.

The Cincinnati Union Terminal has endured multiple flatlines of abandonment, attempts at demolition, and failed revivals in its more than 80 years of existence. But it also celebrated the triumphs of art, its architecture and murals, of history, its museums and preservation, and most importantly, of transportation, getting people where they want to go. 

Although Amtrak’s footprint at Union Terminal is limited to a waiting area in the former barber shop for the thrice-weekly *Cardinal* between New York and Chicago, the space is in keeping with the building’s flow and design.

