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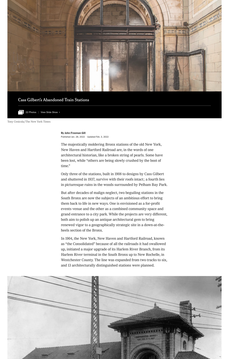
STRUCTURES

In the Bronx, a Push to Save Cass Gilbert's Train Stations

Two of the stations designed by the famed architect more than 100 years ago for the old Consolidated railroad have a chance to be transformed for new uses.



Cass Gilbert's Abandoned Train Stations

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Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

By Alexis Freeman Gill
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The majestically rundown Bronx stations of the old New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad are, in the words of one architectural historian, like a broken string of pearls. Some have been lost, while others are being slowly crushed by the hand of time.

Only three of the stations, built in 1909 to designs by Cass Gilbert and abandoned in 1937, survive with their roofs intact, a fourth lies in picturesque ruins in the woods surrounded by Pelham Bay Park.

But after decades of malign neglect, two beguiling stations in the South Bronx are now the subjects of an ambitious effort to bring them back to life in new ways. They are envisioned as a for-profit cultural center, a nonprofit environmental education center and a proud entrance to a city park. While the projects are very different, both aim to polish up an antique architectural gem to bring neighborhood and geographically strategic one to a dreary or dangerous stretch of the Bronx.

In 1896, the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad, known as the Consolidated because of all the railroads it had swallowed up, initiated a major upgrade of its Harlem River Branch, from its Harlem River terminal in the South Bronx up to New Rochelle, in Westchester County. The line was expanded from two tracks to six, and 12 architecturally distinguished stations were planned.

The Westchester Avenue station, designed by Cass Gilbert, is one of only three of the Consolidated railroad's stations that survive in the Bronx. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

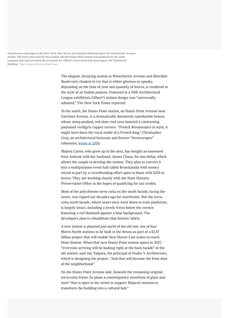
Under J.P. Morgan, "Everything was greatly built to show off the company's power," said Wayne Drummond, a former president of the New Haven Railroad Historical and Technical Association.

But not all the architectural showpieces were constructed, he added. In places where tunnels had not sufficiently settled to support a major building, more commodious stations were put up.

In the end, the Consolidated's grand stations were never built. Instead, the railroad's leaders decided to focus their building competition for the Custom House at Bowling Green, now the Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House. For the Harlem River Branch, he planned stations in a variety of styles, including Spanish Mission, Tudor and an eclectic chateau facade, built he told, than a string of pearls.

In 1905, The Architectural Record called the Gilbert stations "great fun" and "examples of conscious art," noting that "the architectural pilgrim who gives a whole day to the Branch will find himself not only repaid but rewarded."

The Bartow station, where travelers once transferred to a steamed boat for Pelham Bay Park, is in ruins. Its roof has collapsed, and its large stone whaler arches were supported by heavy timber, for master's-caste materials betting its weekly settling. Today, it is a roofless wreck adorn with colorful graffiti, and a great uprooted tree has ripped out a lovely joint at the entrance.

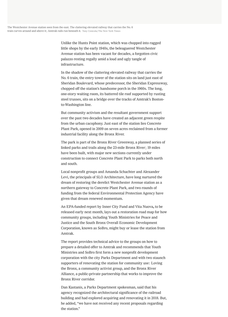


The Morris Park station is upscale indeed something like an elaborate mansion here — perhaps an alternative to the nearby Bronx Psychiatric Center. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The station has been crudely painted to resemble a giant American flag. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The Morris Park station, used by a gun club, has been crudely painted to resemble a giant American flag. But it originally looked something like an elaborate mansion here — perhaps an alternative to the nearby Bronx Psychiatric Center. Its exterior features arched windows and dates crowned with colorful terra-cotta hands that also rise under its eaves.

Gilbert was notable as a very early user of polychrome terra cotta, first on the 200 Broadway Chambers Building, and then on the Woolworth Building, and Bartow-Pell Mansion, and the Bankhead's now-Gulla Jones Bankhead Building, he was also the heavens with gorgeously encrusted mantelle, or corners, of blue and yellow terra cotta.



The Harlem River station is a dreamworld, mermaid, wanderlike beauty where original red-slate roof was replaced a contrasting patchwork bridging to support cover. Magnus Carrier and James Chase plan to convert it into an outdoor/indoor cover. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The two Gilbert stations currently proposed for rehabilitation, which sit on bridges straddling southern Amtrak rails at Westchester Avenue and Hunts Point Avenue, were also vitally important to the neighborhoods. A study of their potential reuse was produced by the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company, which later provided the ornamental for the Woolworth Building.

Both stations were featured in a 2014 Atlantic Terra Cotta bulletin, which asserted that its product was popular for train stations because it was "fireproof" and its "impervious" glazed surface was easy to cast and gave "little opportunity to the adoption of germs and anthrax to use walls for the impaired efforts that are so many public toilets."

Glazed terra-cotta figures of the Tony Sarg Marionettes, which were made by the Atlantic Terra Cotta company, adorn the Hunts Point station. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The elegant, decaying station at Westchester Avenue and Sheridan Boulevard, standard, is by that is either glorious or spooky, depending on the time of year and quantity of horses, is rendered in the style of an Italian palazzo. Featured in a 1909 Architectural League exhibition, Gilbert's station design was "universally admired," The New York Times reported.

In the south, the Hunts Point station, on Hunts Point Avenue near Longwood, is a Spanish Mission structure with a tile-roofed pavilion whose emergenbal, and slate roof were housed a contrasting patinated verdigris copper cornice. "French Renaissance in style, it might have been the royal stable of a French king," Christopher Gray, an architectural historian and former "Streetscapes" columnist, wrote in 2000.

Magnus Carrier, who grew up in the area, has bought an easement from Amtrak with her husband, James Chase, for one dollar, which allows the couple to develop the station. They plan to convert it into a multipurpose event hall called Ecoutandis with money from a Bronx Borough President's office and a $250,000 Kickstarter money. They are working closely with the Sam Schwartz Preservation Office to the hopes of qualifying for tax credits.

Most of the polychrome terra cotta on the south facade, facing the street, was ripped out decades ago for aesthetics. But the terra-cotta figures of the Tony Sarg Marionettes, made by the Atlantic, is largely intact, including a lovely Dutco bather boy, a little floatsing a red diamond against a blue background. The developers plan to rehabilitate that historic fabric.

A new station is planned just north of the old one, one of four Metro-North stations to be built in the Bronx as part of a $2.87 billion project that will enable New Haven Line trains to reach Grand Central. Mr. Carrier and Mr. Chase anticipate that the "everyone arriving will be looking right at the back facade" of the old station, said Sky Salgura, the principal of Studio V Architecture, which is designing the project. "And that will become the front door of the neighborhood."

Mr. Carrier, a Bronx native, beyond the remaining original terra-cotta figures, he plans a contemporary storefront of glass and steel "that is open to the street to support Bilgura's mission to transform the building into a cultural hub."

The Westchester Avenue station more than the road. The sidewalk-level railroad tracks that carried the No. 6 train can be glazed and alarm. A. Seidman with his beloved B. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Under the Hunts Point station, which was chopped into ragged pieces by the Cross Bronx Expressway, the Westchester Avenue station has been vacant for decades, a hopeless-cow palazzo resting squarely amid a loud and ugly tangle of infrastructure.

In the shadow of the clattering elevated railway that carries the 6 train, the Westchester Avenue station, at the corner of Sheridan Boulevard, shows predecessor, the Sheridan Expressway, chopped off the station's handsome porch in the 1960s. The long, narrow waiting room, in battered disrepair and supported by rusting steel trusses, sits as a bridge over the tracks of Amtrak's Boston-to-Washington line.

But community activists and the resultant government support have kept the station's roof intact, and its interior has been spared from the urban cataphora. Just east of the station lies Concrete Plant Park, opened in 2000 on acres across reclaimed from a former industrial facility along the Bronx River.

The park is part of the Bronx River Greenway, a planned series of parks and paths that will stretch from Yonkers to the Bronx. Tracks have been built, with major new sections currently under construction to connect Concrete Plant Park to parks both north and south.

Local nonprofit groups and Amanda Schachter and Alexander Levi, the principals of SLC Architecture, have long nurtured the dream of restoring the derelict Westchester Avenue station as a gateway to the park. Last year, they received a preliminary funding from the federal Environmental Protection Agency have given that dream renewed momentum.

An EPA-funded report by Inner City Fund and Vita Nuova, to be released early next month, lays out a restoration road map for how the Westchester Avenue station, the Bronx Parks Department, Amtrak and the South Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation, known as Subco, might buy or lease the station from Amtrak.

The report provides technical advice for the groups on how to prepare a detailed offer to Amtrak and recommends that Youth Ministries and Subco find a new nonprofit development organization to lead the effort, and that Subco and Youth Ministries supporters of renovating the station for community use: Loving the Bronx, a community activist group, and the Bronx River Alliance, a nonprofit that has partnership that works to improve the Bronx River corridor.

Dan Kaminsky, a Parks Department spokesman, said that his agency recognized the architectural significance of the railroad building and had explored acquiring and renovating it in 2018. But, he added, "we have not received any recent proposals regarding the station."

Hunts Point's long-derelict station is a gateway to adjacent Concrete Plant Park, which is part of the Bronx River Greenway, a planned series of lightweight, green-friendly trails and parks that will be stretching south and north to a residential square. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Based on community feedback, the EPA-funded report said that the preferred redevelopment concept would be to restore the historic tower and waiting area to their original locations for public use and to add a pedestrian bridge and ramp from the station down to Concrete Plant Park. Much-needed bathrooms could be put in the tower.

The concept preferred by Youth Ministries would be to rehabilitate the tower in place as an extending park entrance, while providing a lightweight, enclosed bridge and walkway into the park, where the waiting room would be rebuilt as a year-round events and education space. This and other concepts have been developed by SLC Architecture with private grants.

Another concept for the station's tower and waiting room rehabilitated for public use in their original location, with a pedestrian bridge and ramp from the station down to Concrete Plant Park. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Youth Ministries sees the acquisition of the station by a nonprofit group as "an anti-gentrification strategy" that prevents a "predatory developer" from taking the station, and David Shaffer, the group's executive director.

Among other uses, Youth Ministries hopes to employ the revamped station as a place where children can be taught how the local environmental justice movement organized conditions in their own neighborhood.

This is a story Mr. Shaffer knows firsthand. When he was growing up in Soundview, near the Gilbert station, in the 1980s and '90s, the Bronx River was a dumping ground. As a teenager, he joined other neighborhood kids in a cleanup campaign, which led organizations he now heads. A coordinated activist effort by dozens of groups ultimately resulted in the removal of 700 tons of garbage, 80 cars and 2,200 tires from the river since 1997, according to the Bronx River Alliance.

A coordinated grassroots movement also bear back a state plan to expand the Sheridan Expressway, while Youth Ministries waged a successful campaign against a proposed garbage transfer station. Its capping an environmental victory for a community long plagued by pollution and asthma, New York State completed a $75 million restoration of the Sheridan Expressway, including a pedestrian highway into a more pedestrian-friendly boulevard. The state has since begun a massive, $17 billion project to transform the neighborhood by reconstructing the interchange of Sheridan Boulevard and the Bruckner Expressway.

Given its strategic and symbolic location between the Sheridan and the park, the old Westchester Avenue station "is the nexus, and it's the gateway to the Bronx River Greenway," Mr. Shaffer said. "This will be a dedicated space for environmental education and stewardship."

Amtrak is open to proposals, but the clock is ticking.

Alexis Freeman
Alexis Freeman Gill is a writer who blogs about city architectural history. ALexisfreemangill@Gmail.com

More than a decade ago, Amtrak wanted to demolish the station, but after the Bronx River Alliance convoyed the community's concerns, the agency hired a preservation consultant to mediate and work with the group. Amtrak now with local stakeholders and the Parks Department to discuss the station in 2012.

Champions of redeveloping the Westchester Avenue station, from left: Amanda Schachter, of SLO Architecture; Nilka Martell, of Loving the Bronx; David Shuffler, of Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice; and Alexander Levi, of SLO Architecture. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

"Amtrak remains receptive to whatever plans the B.R.A. (or any other group) has for the station and is willing to entertain proposals from interested parties for restoration of the station under the condition the recipient must renovate the building, so it no longer poses a safety and structural threat to Amtrak," Jason Abrams, an Amtrak spokesman, said in an email.

He added that Amtrak remained "very concerned" about the station's structure, and that the railroad had received no concrete proposals.

"While we would like to work out a solution for the future use of this historic station," he said, "our primary responsibility is to ensure the safety of our employees and passengers, and we may have to resort to demolition if plans are not received in the near future."

As with most dreams hatched by nonprofit groups, one of the thorniest challenges is how to pay for any station revitalization. A private 2018 feasibility study estimated project costs at $10 million to $15 million, but Mr. Shuffler said he believed the work could be done for $8 million to $10 million, funded by private grants, financing and public money.

"One of my priorities for the new year is to advocate for the inclusion of Cass Gilbert's Westchester Avenue station for listing on the National Register of Historic Places" to "lay the groundwork for the refurbishment of the station" by qualifying such a project for tax incentives, said Rep. Ritchie Torres, a Democrat who represents the South Bronx in Congress.

He added that he suspected that money from the bipartisan infrastructure bill passed by Congress in November could be allocated toward the station's rejuvenation.

If the project succeeds, footsteps will echo daily off the station's terrazzo floors for the first time in more than 75 years.

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