

# Our Penn Station Moment

by David Hanna

Fifty-five years ago the demolition of New York's Penn Station began. It would take three years, and great effort to destroy this architectural landmark and cart away its rubble. At the time, New Yorkers would come to stare in disbelief at the spectacle - moved by bearing witness to this colossal act of civic vandalism, but largely unable to articulate their feelings. Out of this moment emerged the historic



preservation movement (which ultimately saved Penn Station's sister station, Grand Central Terminal, from the real estate developers' wrecking ball). Jane Jacobs's successful grass roots movement to preserve Greenwich Village from becoming the location for an east-west expressway across lower

Manhattan, also resulted from this event. But Penn Station was still gone. By all accounts one of the grandest expressions of fine art, civic pride, and utility ever erected anywhere in the world. It is now preserved only in black & white photographs and in the memories of the shrinking pool of people who actually used the station when it still existed. The lesson here is clear: once it's gone, it's gone.

Madison is now facing a similar moment in its own history. The proposal to demolish the Lyons Theater building on Lincoln Place, and replace it with an apartment building, presents the community with a challenge of the first order. And the emphasis here is on "community" not "town." A town is a political entity; a community is a group of interconnected people. For many here there was a sense something terrible had happened when they saw the marquee go dark and the

posters advertising coming attractions removed. The elements that compose the character of a given place are often intangible. The design of a building is as much about its purpose as its lines, and the materials used in its construction. The old Penn Station told visitors and newcomers they had arrived in the greatest city on earth. It told New Yorkers, however humble, that they too were part of something larger and ennobling.



To compare a city of 8 million to a borough of 16,000; and a grand train station to a modest theater building might seem out of proportion. Yet it is in the relation of the buildings to the populations they serve that the comparison becomes apt. The theater identifies Madison as a town with a sense of history, an appreciation for both high and low art, and most importantly a town that possesses a sense of community. Some would dismiss this as mere nostalgia. But in fact it is shared memory - from one generation to the next, creating a sense of place. It takes decades to create this. And in this case it would take days to destroy it. Where did this all begin? It's worth taking a look back at a time few if any in Madison can now recall.

In 1925, impresario J.J. Lyons used his own money to construct a theater worthy of "one of the coming commuter towns in the New Jersey suburbs." Architect Hyman Rosensohn incorporated a mélange of styles into his design, a "shaped parapet with a central peak and battlements and a dentate wooden marquee with an interior



coffered barrel vault and a half octagonal box office." The overall effect was a unique, signature structure that anchored the downtown district from the moment it opened its doors. Initially screening silent films starring the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Rudolph Valentino, and Greta Garbo, the theater shifted from "movies" to "talkies" in the late 1920s. In the 1930s, newsreels shown prior to the main feature, brought a world at war into the collective consciousness of Madisonians; while the Marx brothers and Shirley Temple provided welcome diversion from the grim news from Europe and China. Color films became increasingly common in the post-war period, and the

town's residents thrilled to Alfred Hitchcock's tales of suspense, James Bond's narrow escapes, and a golden age of musicals produced by Hollywood. How many Madisonians had their first kiss in the darkened theater or looked on in awe at a "galaxy far, far way" "a long, long time ago" as a child? How many laughed, cried, cheered, or held their breath, together? Destroy the theater, and you're destroying more than a building.

The developers who built an office tower and an updated version of Madison Square Garden atop the subterranean railroad tracks after Penn Station had been demolished, certainly believed they were improving both the profitability and utility of a giant piece of real estate. There is no doubt the developers and their



architect, in this instance, feel similarly about their proposed project on Lincoln Place. But good intentions don't absolve one from being wrong. And this is all wrong. An apartment for well-heeled Millennials can be built in Madison without demolishing the Lyons Theater. One is not contingent upon the other. One also could imagine that the future Madison residents the developers hope to attract, might appreciate the charm and convenience of a historic theater close by. As for the argument that movie theaters are a thing of the past, the data simply doesn't support this. Between 2015 and 2017 box office receipts exceeded \$11 billion, *annually* - a record for a three-year period.

Save the theater. Save our history. Recognize the urgency of the situation. As the New York Times lamented years later, "Until the first blow fell, no one was convinced that Penn Station really would be demolished, or that New York would permit this monumental act of vandalism against one of the largest and finest

landmarks of its age of Roman elegance." Will we?

