

NORTH DOWNTOWN RIVER DISTRICT

UNION STATION



UNION STATION AT A GLANCE

Project Type:
Rehabilitation and revitalization of historic train station and redevelopment of the surrounding neighborhood

Location

800 NW Sixth Avenue

Owner:

Portland Development Commission

Management:

*Bureau of General Services,
City of Portland*

Architects:

*Van Brunt & Howe,
original building design;
A.E. Doyle, major remodel circa 1930;
Robert Dortignacq, historic preservation
and rehabilitation*

Although it received numerous offers to transform the station into alternative developments, PDC never wavered from its original concept to retain the building's essential function as a passenger train station. PDC looked to examples of other train stations around the country that had been rehabilitated into hotels or retail complexes. Many cities later regretted their decisions to abandon their downtown depots and were struggling to lure Amtrak back downtown. Union Station was also a symbol of Portland's long-standing commitment to rail transportation.

Another important reason for maintaining it as a functional rail station was that the station site was an integral part of the city's designated Transportation Center – linking city and interstate bus

systems with light rail. The center includes the Greyhound Terminal, that was relocated next to Union Station along with the city's bus Transit Mall, across the street. Tri-Met located its bus layover facility close by. The train station is a five minute walk from the city's existing light rail line, and a station for the recently defeated proposal for a South/North light rail line would have been built here.

Instead of immediately redeveloping the rail yards, PDC decided to concentrate first on renovating the station, which would be used as a launching pad to make broader improvements to the surrounding Old Town and Chinatown neighborhoods, north of the downtown.

Background

Designed by the Kansas City architectural firm Van Brunt & Howe, Union Station opened in 1896. The station and rail yards have operated continuously since then although rail activity diminished considerably in the 1980s. The 1988 Central City Plan envisioned significant redevelopment of the yards property. In 1985, the Portland Development Commission (PDC) obtained an option to purchase the station and surrounding property as a possible location for the Oregon Convention Center. The center was instead built across the river in the Lloyd District. However, PDC purchased the station and 31-acre site in 1987 from Portland Terminal Railroad Co.

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Station Improvements

PDC invested some \$5 million in interior and exterior improvements to the station, that had been sorely neglected for the previous 90 years. These improvements – which were made incrementally over a ten-year period – included major restoration of the main lobby area, installation of alarm and fire sprinkler systems, asbestos removal, interior and exterior lighting upgrades, repainting of exterior masonry, and painting.

The station building, a Portland Historical Landmark, was also listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Portland's best known architect Pietro Belluschi remodeled parts of the station in 1930, when he was employed at the A.E. Doyle Co. architectural firm. PDC restored passenger platforms and two of the original passenger train sheds as well as the trademark blue and gold neon signs, "Go By Train" and "Union Station," on top of the 140-foot tall clock tower. The four-sided clock – each face measuring more than 12 feet in diameter – was also refurbished.

The restrooms and tenant spaces were renovated, including the office space on the second and third floors that are now leased to a mix of some 40 small professional offices and nonprofit tenants. Because Union Station is one of its premier depots, Amtrak was motivated to build a First Class Passenger Lounge on the first floor, their only facility of this type on the West Coast. PDC managed construction of the lounge.

PDC negotiated agreements with Amtrak and the freight rail companies to upgrade the lines. Rail tracks through the site were rebuilt and consolidated to improve the efficiency and safety of train operations, which also expanded the size of the adjacent development site. On the parcels designated for future housing, abandoned railroad tracks were removed and the area was cleared for development.

Neighborhood Improvements

PDC used these station improvements to leverage a series of extensive neighborhood improvements designed to spur private investment and economic development in this north downtown area that had languished for many years. These improvements included:

- Extension of the Fifth and Sixth Avenues Transit Mall north to Union Station.
- Construction of new roadways to and from the train depot.

- Renovation of the North Park blocks with development of new open spaces and connections to the waterfront.
- Storefront facade improvement and street lighting programs.
- Construction of new public parking garage and heliport in Old Town.

These improvements, made over a decade, were then followed by a number of PDC-sponsored mixed income housing developments in the Old Town neighborhood as well as a Classical Chinese Garden that will be completed in 2000.



PDC deliberately delayed developing the station area vacant lands until the adjacent neighborhood had grown sufficiently healthy to support the new development. In 1995, PDC brought on housing developers and started to parcel out sites for redevelopment. Thus far, some ten acres have been parceled out of the original 31 acres, and have been released for development of a Tri-Met layover facility, Food Innovation Center, and nearly 600 new residential units.

Management & Operations

PDC contracted out management and leasing to a private property management company until the city's Bureau of General Services took over these responsibilities in 1999. Soon after PDC renovated the station, the project was operating in the black. Today it generates net income of about \$500,000 a year. The principal tenant is Amtrak. Tenant space is 100 percent leased and a waiting list exists for the Class C office space on the second and third floors. New tenant leases for these spaces range between \$10 - \$12 a square foot. To retain flexibility, lease terms are short and average two years in length. PDC pays property taxes for the share of the building occupied by private tenants.

Financing Sources

Most of the station improvements accomplished during the first five years of renovation were financed with tax increment funds, whereas the more recent improvements were paid for with money generated from station operations. Federal transportation funds were used for improvements to the Transit Mall.

Experience Gained

■ Investing in the station and developing the surrounding yards is likely to fail unless improvements are made to the adjacent neighborhood. It would have been a big mistake to have attempted to immediately develop the vacant land in the station area without first making improvements to strengthen the community as a whole. PDC learned this lesson from the many examples of rail yard redevelopment efforts across the country that did not look at the larger picture first.

■ It may be tempting to transform a defunct train depot into what seems like a more glamorous development, such as a shopping center, which frequently results in pushing passenger rail service to an "Amshack" at the edge of a city. However, if the shopping center fails – as many have – and the city decides to transform it back to a train station, it's enormously difficult to bring Amtrak back downtown.

■ There is tremendous nostalgia associated with historic rail stations. Many older citizens remember traveling to Portland for the first time by rail and arriving at Union Station. Historic depot buildings also elicit great pride and sense of ownership. Whenever the clock in the tower stops or a janitor carelessly removes a trim element from a window, PDC hears immediately about it from a concerned citizen. Thus, train station redevelopment projects tend to attract a high level of public scrutiny.

Schedule

Station Purchased:	1987
Station Renovation:	1987- ongoing
Neighborhood Improvements:	1987 - 1997
Redevelopment of Rail Yards Property:	1996 - ongoing