

One Building's Life: A Plenary Address

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The Rio Grande Depot was **born** in 1910. Notice I said born—not built. It sounds a bit outlandish doesn't it, referring to the depot's birth. We, of course, all know that buildings are not a living species. As my dissertation advisor Neil Harris once put it—and I have to say that I am relying heavily on his observations here—structures cannot assume “moral responsibility, speak, write, or perform in the manner of human beings.” We breathe, we observe, we reproduce; buildings do not. But I am going to go out on a limb and claim that structures of wood and stone—the ones we live in, work in, relax in, worship in—possess life cycles, marked by celebrations of birth and christening—like cornerstone-layings and ribbon-cuttings—and rites of death—such as public demolitions. What is more, buildings are animated by the people who use and inhabit them; they demonstrate “signs of life” (to borrow a phrase from Harris).

If we consider historic buildings from this perspective, then their fates and fortunes seem much more like our own, don't they? None of us, after all, wants to be regarded as washed-up, dilapidated, fit only to be replaced for a newer model.

Is it possible that, like humans we know who have lived full lives, buildings of a certain age have something valuable to tell us? Can the stories culled from their “lives” teach us something about ourselves, about how we interact with each other, or how our society and economy work, or what we value, or ultimately how we live? I would submit that they do. And because we are here in this building today, celebrating its hundredth anniversary, let me share a few details about its life with you in the time I have left. The most literal-minded among us will want to say that the depot was built to discharge a purpose, namely to act as a functional interface between the city and an increasingly sophisticated national industrial complex of trains, tracks, and people, and that it later became home to a number of branches of state government. But the more imaginative observer will recognize that the depot has lived a life, and to understand fully its place in Salt Lake’s contemporary built environment and the city’s history we have to acknowledge that life; The Rio Grande Depot was born, reached maturity, cheated death, and, ultimately, was reborn.

That the Rio Grande Depot was even conceived was something of a small miracle, considering the fact that the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad (or D&RG), the company that led the effort to build the depot, never intended to move into Utah from its Colorado stronghold in the first place.

The railroad's founder, William Jackson Palmer, originally meant to build and operate a railroad on a north-south axis, sticking close to the eastern slopes of the Centennial State's mountainous spine in order to connect Denver with El Paso, and perhaps, in time, even Mexico City. It was not until 1883 that the Denver and Rio Grande became a formal part of Utah railroad history, when its crews and crews from a related company, the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railway (known as the RGW, or simply as "the Western"), met near Green River, Utah, after laying track eastward from Salt Lake and westward from Denver.

Competition unmistakably shaped the depot's origins. Since the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, the Union Pacific or UP enjoyed a virtual regional monopoly in the territory. In describing the rivalry between the UP and the D&RG, the *Salt Lake Tribune* claimed the companies were locked in a "freight war," and the paper reported a "good deal of trouble brewing" between the competing railroads. Tactics were cutthroat. When the UP reduced fares into Salt Lake in an attempt to "freeze out its rival," the Denver and Rio Grande countered with free rides between the capital and Ogden. Not surprisingly, Utahns happily welcomed the interloper railroad and cheered the likely profits that would accrue for them from the D&RG's competition with the UP. The *Tribune* summed up the

typical Utahn's sentiments by stating that the Rio Grande would be a "new outlet for Utah to the whole East" and, more grandly, a "new artery of commerce."

By the early twentieth century, the escalating competition between the Union Pacific and the Denver and Rio Grande played itself out in a new arena: building construction. This was especially the case in Salt Lake. Tension and competition functioned as a spur to creativity. In 1909, the Union Pacific completed its imposing mansard-roofed station at South Temple and Fourth West (now a prominent fixture in the Gateway shopping center). Designed by D. J. Patterson, the station was striking in its grandiosity. An imposing pair of towers guarded the front of the structure, while the rest of the building was ornamented with domed ceilings, stained glass windows, and ornate carved gargoyles.

Not far behind the UP was the Denver and Rio Grande. The railroad and its allies were calling for a "union depot"—or a station that brought together two or more railroads—on Salt Lake's west side as early as 1899. But it was a difficult sell at first, convincing the city council to allow the company to build its depot. Streets would have to be closed and new tracks laid, significant changes that some area residents opposed. They claimed, according to an article in the *Deseret News*, that their property would drop in

value because of the closed roads, construction would interfere with traffic, and new tracks would ultimately endanger people's lives. Citizens of Salt Lake's west side wanted the railroads to have "ample facilities," explained one man in an 1899 public hearing, but not at their expense. "We ... desire to have the privilege of crossing our streets," the man argued, "without being blocked by waiting trains. What is needed is a proper number of viaducts." It was his final comment, though, that best outlined the social and political stakes of the issue. "It has been charged that the railroads were on the west side before the people were there," he declared. "This is not true. Many people resided over there long before the railroads came." What the outspoken man at the meeting seemed to be saying was that the railroad's corporate boosters were trying to write residents out of their own neighborhood's history, and he was simply making sure that they remained a prominent part of the area's story.

Supporters of the railroad were equally resolute in their arguments *for* the depot. At the same public hearing where foes of the proposed building aired their views, a few businessmen, representing more than a hundred of their fellow entrepreneurs, rose in defense of the depot plan. One of the businessmen, F. J. Fabian, argued that the "whole city should not be made to suffer for one locality." Other interests stood to benefit greatly from the

station. Indeed, “a number of large business concerns were interested in the building of a union depot,” Fabian declared.

In the end, the depot’s partisans won out, though delays meant that advanced planning for the project would not begin in earnest until 1906, with the choice of an architect. Indeed, by the new century’s first decade, it appears that little progress had been made on the project. When the city council began dragging its feet in 1902, the D&RG was forced to post a bond worth \$100,000 as a show of good faith and to guarantee its part in the project.

To return to the lifecycle metaphor, conceiving the station appears to have been the easy part: the depot’s gestation would be long and its birth hard. While the planning process for the building was not the task of a single person, Chicago architect Henry Schlacks probably wished by the end that it had been. Best known as a designer of religious buildings, including St. Paul’s Church in Chicago, Schlacks was born to German parents who emigrated to the United States following their home country’s botched 1848 democratic revolution. After finishing his secondary school education in Chicago, Schlacks secured a place as an apprentice in the renowned architectural firm of Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan, where he learned

the basics of the architect's craft, and then polished off his training with a two-year stint at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Interestingly, Schlacks did not follow in the modernist footsteps of his tutors. He chose instead to infuse his Chicago commissions with a Gothic flavor that seemed more in step with the sensibilities of thirteenth-century Europeans than nineteenth- and twentieth-century Americans. (On St. Paul's in Chicago, Schlacks worked as his own contractor, enlisting, in time-honored premodern fashion, the labor of the local parish's German Catholics.)

It is intriguing to contemplate what motivated Henry Schlacks, a designer of Gothic Midwestern churches, to compete for the commission on Salt Lake's Rio Grande Depot. I think it was money; I can imagine Schlacks concluding that there was more profit to be made out west, especially from supposedly deep-pocketed railroads, than what could be had in Chicago's increasingly tight architectural market. And it was not as though the depot commission would be something entirely new for the Chicagoan. He had designed at least one other railroad station, namely the Denver and Rio Grande Depot in Grand Junction, Colorado. (The plans for the Grand Junction station demonstrate just how versatile Schlacks was as an architect;

that depot, constructed in 1905, had a terra cotta veneer and was also decorated with Italianate Renaissance revival features.)

I think Schlacks soon realized after taking the depot project that he was swimming with corporate sharks. His relationship with the Denver and Rio Grande over the Salt Lake depot was a complicated one, and sometimes devolved into full-blown antagonism, particularly when the subject turned to dollars and cents. Early in the relationship, things seemed to go rather well. In an April 1906 letter to the D&RG's chief engineer at the time, E. J. Yard, general manager A. C. Ridgway entreated Yard to "kindly render [Schlacks] all assistance you can and furnish whatever data you have if called upon regarding the new passenger depot at Salt Lake City." Ridgway pointed out to Yard that the architect was "to take entire charge of the work, drawings, plans, superintendence, etc.," and he charged the engineer with going over Schlacks' duties and compensation. By May of 1906, Schlacks had completed his initial plans for the depot and submitted a bill of \$2,500 to the D&RG for his services.

The architect learned rather quickly how reluctant the railroad was to part with its money. The first hint of tension between Schlacks and the D&RG had to do with the scope of the project and the architect's payment for it. Even when the two parties at last hashed out a deal over pay,

Schlacks complained that the final figure was “so narrow a margin that it depends upon the time required to put up the building whether there will be any profit in it.” Railroad officials next rejected Schlacks’ initial architectural drawings, refusing to pay for plans that were too “elaborate and expensive” for the company’s tastes. When the matter eventually ended up on the desk of Joel Vaile, the railroad’s general counsel, Schlacks finally surrendered. “I see there is nothing to be gained by correspondence,” grumbled the architect. “I am completing my record of the case which I wish to go over with you personally and I will submit to your judgment in the matter, for I am positive that when you know the facts as they are, you will see the absolute justice of my position.” He requested “a payment on account of at least \$2500 to enable me to meet my obligations with respect to this work, for I am at the end of my resources and am proceeding with considerable difficulty to carry the work through because of the expenditures involved.”

This pattern of wheedling, nagging, and dickering continued through the end of Schlacks’ contract with the D&RG, a bitter cycle that put Edward Jeffery, the Rio Grande’s president, on edge. “The way the preliminaries of this Union Depot enterprise have been conducted is distasteful, inconsiderate and annoying,” Jeffery angrily wrote to general counsel Vaile, “and while

we are willing to pay the Architect what is fair and right, we should not go beyond this.” (I should point out here that Jeffrey was a highly conservative administrator who had been given the reins of the D&RG to curb some of the more profligate practices of his predecessor David Moffat and make the company turn a profit. No doubt he thought he was doing that by keeping Schlacks on a short financial leash.) The relationship between architect and railroad remained strained, with Schlacks often writing to company officials, begging for money he believed he was owed.

Henry Schlacks’ fraught relationship with the D&RG contained within it a deliciously intriguing irony: his brother was none other than Charles Schlacks, the railroad’s vice president. It is possible—even likely—that Charles intervened to secure the depot commission for his brother. This, of course, makes Henry’s nearly incessant clashes with the railroad over even the smallest issues all the more puzzling. (Jeffery went so far as to contest \$105 for watercolors slated for use on the building’s interior.) Could it be that Charles Schlacks had just enough clout in the D&RG’s upper circles to get Henry the job, but not enough to shield him from Jeffrey? Possibly. The fact that Charles Schlacks had left the Denver and Rio Grande by at least mid-1910 to work for the Western Pacific, and then resigned from the WP in protest when railroad higher-ups floated a plan to

combine the WP, the D&RG, and the Missouri Pacific into a single unit, raises the tantalizing prospect that he had earlier been marginalized within the Rio Grande and that he had no intention of falling back into its orbit.

As work on the depot neared completion in 1909 and 1910, Henry Schlacks undoubtedly looked forward to getting paid and finally being liberated from what he surely regarded as a difficult project. But those dreams of a speedy payment, if he had them, went unrealized; the railroad continued to hold out on him. Writing to Gwyn, he advised the company that he could not inspect the depot “owing to the fact that I have not the means,” a not so subtle dig at the company’s parsimoniousness now coming full circle and hamstringing work on the station. What is more, the company’s seemingly lackadaisical response to his pleas for payment forced him to secure a loan to cover his expenses on the project. “You will appreciate that the splendid progress made on the building ... has entailed considerable and expensive work for me,” he wrote. “The large force of men employed on the building has piled up the work tremendously for me at my office so that it was necessary for me to borrow a thousand dollars to carry me through December.” Willing to negotiate his already low bill, Schlacks told Gwyn that if there was “any way in which the matter can be adjusted so as to enable me to go ahead with the work in which I have taken

so much pride, I will be glad to make such concession as you yourself or those who have the actual knowledge of really what work I did, would think justice.” A telegram—unpunctuated and in all capital letters—was more pleading in its tone: “I DO NOT CONSIDER IT FAIR TREATMENT TO WITHOLD MY MONEY AS YOU KNOW I AM DOING A LOT OF WORK IN CONNECTION WITH THIS JOB WHICH IS NOT IN MY CONTRACT AND FOR WHICH I AM MAKING NO CHARGE AND WHICH WORK I AM DOING JUST TO HELP MATTERS ALONG AND I FEEL I AM ENTITLED TO SOME CONSIDERATION I EXPECT AT LEAST A PART OF MY MONEY IF NOT ALL.”

We should pause a moment and try to figure out what Henry Schlocks’ bumpy relationship with the D&RG can tell us about American values at the onset of the twentieth century. By this time, few of the nation’s regions remained untouched by industrial capitalism. (And of course the railroads were a primary impetus behind this transformation.) The country’s captains of industry, men whose names are still familiar to us today—Carnegie, Rockefeller, Gould, DuPont, and others—had more or less succeeded in harnessing America’s vast industrial potential, for their own profit, and, they said, for the nation’s as well. Seen from this angle, the captain of industry is the epitome of America’s much vaunted creative spirit.

Of course, one person's captain of industry, however, is another's robber baron—the callous exploitation artist bent on squeezing every last dime out of his profit-making schemes, even as he makes all-out war against his competition in a bid to stay economically viable. These two sides of the same coin—a denomination we might call the American character—are evident in the drive to build the Rio Grande Depot. On the one hand we have the D&RG hiring a relatively well known Chicago architect to design and erect an architecturally-significant structure that would not have to play second fiddle to the UP's station (which you'll remember was also being designed and built at the same time, just up the street). Yet the profit motive that kept the D&RG brass awake at night also caused them to rein Schlacks in, in a bid to better weather the economic trials of the time and maximize profits. Great creativity versus hyper-pragmatism. Both aspects of the American spirit. Both American values. Both evident in the building of the depot.

In the end, the efforts of Schlacks, Gwyn, various railroad officials, hosts of contractors, the depot work crews, and others involved in the construction process produced an attractive, imposing structure by any measure. But it had been a costly endeavor. According to one Salt Lake newspaper, the bill for the entire project had run close to \$800,000. For the

railroad that would share the depot—the Denver and Rio Grande (which was only just emerging from lean financial times and fallout from a rash of highly-publicized train accidents) and the Western Pacific, still a mere babe of a railroad—this was a hefty outlay, and may explain why some of the more elaborate plans for the building, such as a set of murals, were never executed. Nevertheless, the Salt Lake depot *was* an impressive structure. According to the *Salt Lake Herald-Republican*, one of the station’s most striking features was the greenish-blue glass housed in the giant arched windows that filtered light into the waiting room. The large room was also decorated using a color scheme of reddish-brown and gray walls and deep brown ceilings. Such a combination of light and color, concluded the *Herald-Republican*, “gives the room a dignified quietness.” Colorado-Yule marble formed a five-foot-high base around the building’s exterior, with terra cotta and red brick covering the rest of the outside walls. Red tile formed the roof. (And we, of course, can see all of these features today.)

The neighborhood around the new railroad station immediately began to boom. Rumors about plans for a brewery and a pair of hotels in the area began circulating even before the depot was finished. According to one source, one of the hotels was slated to be a modern, four-story affair while the other was projected to rise as high as five stories and include spaces for

stores. The expected spike in travelers making their way through Salt Lake City and residents coming to stay would necessitate new infrastructure—hotels, restaurants, stores, and local transportation options—and Salt Lake’s capitalists were happy to oblige by investing in this new future. Some may have been deterred by the significant rise in property values brought on by the depot’s construction, but many were unwilling to pass up the opportunity for big profits and snatched up the most desirable lots quickly. “People with money are after locations, and in many cases are paying unusually large prices,” reported the *Telegram*. Even property on Main Street several blocks away rose in value with the station’s opening.

Of course, the west side neighborhood that became the Rio Grande Depot’s home was not a geographical *tabula rasa* on which real estate developers and speculators made their mark free of social disruptions and political ramifications. The area was already occupied and contained a community that grew and diversified as immigrants from around the world rode the rails to Salt Lake in search of work. For these immigrants, the city’s railroad stations became “gateways” to the neighborhood, and many newcomers settled quickly in the vicinity of the D&RG station. Indeed, the neighborhood around the station was proof that Salt Lake remained a city of immigrants even after the first wave of British and Scandinavian Mormon

converts made their way here. Greeks, Italians, Japanese, Armenians and Syrians all made their homes near the depot. Greek Town clustered along 2nd South between 5th and 6th West, while the Armenians and Syrians tended to live directly behind the station near the intersection of 3rd South and 5th West; Japanese immigrants carved out a community further away, near where the Salt Palace now stands. With so many ethnicities represented in such a small district, the area around the depot must have been a vibrant place, with the smells of a thousand kitchens, coffeehouses, grocery stores, and saloons mixing in the crisp Utah air; walking around the depot, one could have taken in the pleasing aroma of savory roasted lamb, udon noodles, souvlaki, gnocchi, and boeregs (or Armenian cheese-and-spinach pies) in the space of only a few blocks. Later, in the 1920s, a new set of immigrants—this time from Mexico—moved north to work on the railroads, and many ended up settling near the Rio Grande Depot. Maria Delores Lopez, a native of Chihuahua, remembered living in the station’s shadow. The Denver and Rio Grande employed her father, who worked at the depot until his retirement, and all of her brothers. Lopez characterized the neighborhood she lived in as “mixed,” with African Americans, Greeks, Mexicans, and Italians all living near each other and working together.

Economic depression and global war ultimately pushed the depot into a new stage of life and marked its final ascent from a sort of early-twentieth-century adolescence to an experienced maturity. The dreary days of the Great Depression took their toll on the nation's railroads and depots. As one scholar has pointed out, more than a few railroad stations fell victim during the Depression to "deferred maintenance and demolition by neglect." The Rio Grande Depot may have been especially vulnerable in the 1930s. Previous decades had not been kind to the D&RG. Financial difficulties in the 1910s brought on by George Gould's meddling had forced the railroad into receivership. By the time it was sold in 1920 and reorganized to become the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad Company, otherwise known as the D&RGW, the physical condition of the company's assets had deteriorated to an unsafe level, and the pace of its recovery in the 1920s hovered somewhere between glacial and nonexistent. Then the Great Depression hit and operating revenues fell precipitously across the industry. It was world war that saved the railroads. Following America's declaration of war on the Japanese, Germans, and Italians in 1941, the railroad companies seemed to spring back to life, and stations across the country were forced to deal with a burgeoning wartime ridership. In the case of Salt Lake's Rio Grande Depot, the station soon was servicing as many as fifteen

or twenty trains, full of military personnel, a day. Added to these passengers were civilians who had been forced to garage their cars due to wartime tire and gasoline rationing. The building sometimes became so crowded with traffic that railroad employees made incoming trains wait for hours beyond 4th South before letting them in to disgorge their passengers. In addition to these trains were the grim “Mortuary Specials” bringing the war dead back from distant battlefields. Such trains invested the work that went on in and around the depot with a new gravity. “These Mortuary Trains,” remembered a D&RGW station master, “were all like 25, 30 cars and they were all painted gray, all sealed up and it just gave everybody a funny feeling.”

The wartime renaissance did not last, and the postwar era was marked by a steady decline for the D&RGW and the Rio Grande Depot, as well as hundreds of other railroads and stations. A variety of social and cultural forces contributed to this downward spiral, including America’s wholesale return to its automobiles following the war, the passage of the Interstate Highway Act of 1956 which spurred extensive road-building across the United States, the movement of people out of the cities and into new suburbs not serviced by trains, and the rise of commercial aviation. In this context, cash-strapped railroads could not keep their depots in good repair, and some

decided simply to tear them down and replace them, with what one writer has called “dreary, nondescript boxes.”

Over time, the Rio Grande Depot fell into disrepair and appeared, like other railroad stations around the nation, to be on its way toward oblivion. Passengers had become a financial burden on the D&RGW; they simply cost too much to transport. More money could be made by shifting to freight-only operations. As a consequence, the company cut back on passenger service, and thus felt less and less motivated to maintain its Salt Lake hub. Eventually, the railroad faced an historic decision: either tear the station down, in order to avoid liability in the case of an accident, or sell it. The D&RGW chose the latter, and in 1977, it sold the depot to the State of Utah for a dollar. The state would rehabilitate the station, but it was clear the building would require a lot of work to make it usable again. According to one historian, the station had, by this time, “long been unoccupied except by transients, and it was almost unbelievably filthy and run down.”

The depot’s rebirth came in the form of a decision by Utah government authorities to make it the new home of the Utah State Historical Society, the arm of state government tasked with studying and preserving Utah’s history. Over the years, the Society had been forced to live an itinerant existence, lacking a truly permanent home until the depot’s

purchase in 1977. For a while, the historical society had found a temporary home in the Kearns Mansion, which the state had bought to house Utah's governors; chief executives George Clyde and Calvin Rampton, however, had lived elsewhere leaving the mansion available for the Society's use. It was only in 1976, with the election of Scott Matheson, that the society was forced to move. Its new home was the Crane Building, by all accounts an inadequate space for the Society. In the words of one observer, "the Society occupied the entire first floor and most of the basement, fitting into both spaces about as well as a size ten foot in a size seven shoe."

Restoration work was slow going. (It was not until August 1981 that the restored building was formally dedicated following remarks by Salt Lake City's mayor Ted Wilson and Governor Scott Matheson. It had not been officially dedicated when first built in 1910, at least according to the available sources.) But the campaign to preserve the depot had generated enough political will in Utah that the project ended up a success. This was partly due to the growing influence of historic preservationists nationwide. The 1960s and 1970s were decades of unprecedented growth for the preservationist movement, especially among friends of historic railroad depots. Many had watched in horror as New York's Pennsylvania Station was razed in 1963, and had vowed never to let such a thing happen again.

Luckily, the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966 gave them tools (including the process of protective review) for preserving what they felt were significant symbols of the country's transportation history.

Since the 1980s, the Rio Grande Depot has continued to face changes and challenges, but it has also come into its own as something more than a railroad station. Adaptive reuse has extended the building's life indefinitely. And it is adaptive reuse that enables us to visit and appreciate it today, instead of being forced to tell sad stories about another historic building torn down to make way for something far less interesting. Buildings like the depot are visible, physical reminders of our past—good and bad. They embody the stories of the people who use them.

What happens when a building gets a new lease on life, and, for lack of a better expression, is reborn? What does it do for us, as individuals and as a community? What do we stand to lose if we forget the value of historic buildings? As we wander the halls of the Rio Grande Depot, stopping in what was once its immense waiting room, each of us, I think, will be able to answer that question for ourselves.

(This address was taken, in part, from an article by the same author published in the Summer 2010 issue of the *Utah Historical Quarterly*. All

citations may be found in the article. The views expressed in this address do not represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities or the United States Government.)