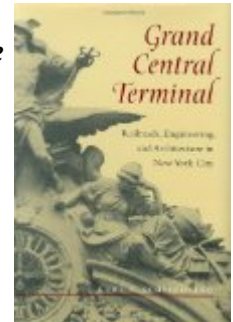


Kurt C Schlichting. *Grand Central Terminal: Railroads, Engineering, and Architecture in New York City.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. xiii + 243 pp. \$26.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-6510-7.



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Anyone who has stood in the Grand Concourse during rush hour knows the power of Grand Central Terminal--the energy fueled by the tide of commuters, the flow of arrivals and departures, the presence of New York City just beyond the station. The space is so powerful, so energizing, so overwhelming--for both good and bad depending upon one's inclinations or mood--that it often feels like a force of nature. But as Kurt C. Schlichting reminds his readers, Grand Central is more than a site that stirs up romantic imaginings or urban frustrations; it is a remarkable structure constructed at a specific moment in time to serve the drives and ambitions of particular men.

Schlichting seeks to reveal the specifics of the terminal's past and to make visible these men and the innovations in business, technology, and design that enabled them to build "The Greatest Railroad Terminal in the World" (p. 144).

In order to capture the personalities and visions that shaped Grand Central, Schlichting divides his study into four chapters, each offering a different point of view and focusing on a different cast of characters. The story begins with Cornelius Vanderbilt, known as "The Commodore," and his acquisition of the Harlem Railroad, the Hudson River Railroad, and the New York Central. In "The Commodore's Grand Central," Schlichting celebrates the business smarts and competitive drive that enabled the Commodore to assemble this "railroad empire" in six short years between 1863 and 1869. The Commodore was so taken with the empire he had built that he decided to build a passenger terminal equal to his accomplishment--"an appropriate passenger terminal in the heart of New York... a terminal with panache, proclaiming to all New York the power and might of his vast

rail empire" (p. 30). Thus, Grand Central Depot at 42nd Street--the first Grand Central--was born.

Schlichting argues that Grand Central Depot with its technologically advanced train shed of iron and glass and its classical station building of stone and brick embodied the contradictions of its age. When it opened in 1871, "the juxtaposition of the classical and the machine age created a stark contrast" (p. 33). Not surprisingly, the structure became a popular tourist attraction and a powerful symbol of the advantages offered by modern rail travel. But as Schlichting shows, the fate of the depot and Vanderbilt's rail empire also embodied the worst excesses of Gilded Age America. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Vanderbilt heirs were more interested in spending the family fortune than adding to it, and the once-grand depot was decried as "one of the most inconvenient and unpleasant railroad stations in the whole country" (p. 53).

Much as the first Grand Central reflected the ambition of the Commodore, the new Grand Central Terminal that replaced it reflected the careful planning of William J. Wilgus, chief engineer of the New York Central. Schlichting tells Wilgus's story in "The Engineer's Grand Central." In some of the most interesting stories of the book, Schlichting describes the planning and building of the new terminal on the site of the old depot. Drawing upon Wilgus's papers, Schlichting details the innovations of design (a two-story underground terminal), of planning (separation of activities within the terminal and the use of ramps to maximize flow of passengers), of technology (electric-powered trains), and of business (the use of air rights to generate income) that made Grand Central Terminal unprecedented. Wilgus seems to have anticipated every contingency that would arise in the new terminal's construction and operation, and in many ways, he is the hero of Schlichting's story.

In "The Architect's Grand Central," Schlichting situates Grand Central within the built environment of its historical moment. He places the ter-

minal in the context of the Brooklyn Bridge, the New York City subway, and the first skyscrapers; its achievements are of the same order. According to Schlichting, "Grand Central reflects the fledgling efforts of Americans to organize a systematic response to the conditions of the swelling of the American city, to beautify and bring order out of chaotic growth" (p. 116). The terminal imposed its own order on the city around it--redirecting the flow of traffic, transforming Park Avenue into a grand boulevard, encouraging the construction of fashionable hotels and new office buildings. But again, Schlichting makes certain that his readers understand that the terminal's ability to shape the city around it is the product of planning and human creativity--the work of engineers and architects.

Schlichting closes his study with a consideration of "New York's Grand Central" in which he details the decline of rail travel, the rise of the suburbs, and finally the renovation of the station to its earlier grandeur. In the end, acts of men (and, for the first time in Schlichting's text, a few women) led to the terminal's decline in the 1970s and its renewal in the 1990s. The great terminal has "been saved by a collaboration of private and public efforts, and the public of New York City continues to rush through its tunnels, ramps, and corridors and to mingle on its Grand Concourse" (p. 222).

Schlichting does a wonderful job picking up where the renovation of Grand Central left off. His study peels away our contemporary expectations and experiences and reveals the layers of history and acts of men that served as the foundation for this great structure. He uses illustrations to great effect, and the book itself is beautiful; its format and content capture the author's admiration for the terminal and the men who made it. The description of building the new terminal on the site of the old depot without disrupting train service is an example of the type of detail that makes the book a delight to read.

Schlichting provides rich material for scholars interested in engineering, architecture, urban design, and business, but the social or labor historian will be frustrated by some key omissions. Who were the men who did the work of building the new terminal? What did the process look like on the ground rather than in the boardroom? By ignoring these questions, Schlichting not only frustrates some specialists, but also compromises his study's ultimate goal. He is so taken with the heroes that he has found that he forgets that even great men seldom act alone. At a few points in the text, Schlichting notes the presence of workers or of the growing disparity between rich and poor, but in the end the public seems to be missing from this story of one of New York's greatest public spaces. The inclusion of more social history would have added much to a story that by the nature of its subject reminds readers that the best history is often synthetic. Despite leaving many heroes unsung, Schlichting recounts a heroic story well worth the telling.

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