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Dusting off the depot: Moroun making good on cleanup

*TOM GREENWOOD**/ The Detroit News*

One staggering step at a time, the Michigan Central Station is showing signs of life.

Fueled by funds from Ambassador Bridge owner Matty Moroun, workers toiling since early spring have removed tons of debris, broken glass, caulking and asbestos from the derelict building.

While workers do the grunt work, architect and feasibility experts are constantly on-site, evaluating the future of the once-elegant structure off Michigan Avenue in Corktown.

"Can it be saved? Of course," said Elisabeth E. Knibbe of Ann Arbor-based Quinn Evans Architects.

"Structurally, the building is very sound. I've seen buildings brought around that were in much worse shape than this. I'm confident it can be saved."

But after decades of neglect, why now?

Some suspect it might be a publicity stunt by Moroun to win the public over in his fight with the Michigan Department of Transportation over its plans to build a bridge between Windsor and Detroit.

Joe Rashid, who lives on 24th Street behind the station, questioned Moroun's motives but is keeping his fingers crossed.

"I guess the true test will be after a vote on the New International Trade Crossing," said Rashid, 30.

"If he continues working on the building after the vote, then I guess he's being genuine for once.

"I love the station and think it can be saved, but how much better off would it be if it hadn't gotten into this condition in the first place?"

Phillip Cooley, owner of the popular Slows Bar BQ, dismissed those rumors.

"I've heard that talk, and I think the Morouns are smarter than that," Cooley said.

"New windows and a new roof won't do it. I think Nora Moroun (Matty Moroun's wife) has a real affinity for the building and is also looking at the family's legacy.

"Personally, I'm very excited about what's going on over there."

Preservation plan

The Morouns purchased the 18-story depot in 1996 and have since faced unrelenting criticism for letting it fall into disrepair, even though trains stopped running there in 1988 and it was already in decline.

"We decided that we weren't going to tear it down, instead we were going to preserve it through a multi-level approach," said Matthew Moroun, the son of Matty Moroun.

"In order to preserve it, we have to clean it up, replace the windows and the roof to keep water out of the building. We also intend to secure it to keep people out."

Since the spring, the family said it has spent nearly \$1 million on preservation efforts.

"We're closing in on a million pretty fast just for cleanup, removing the broken glass, asbestos and caulking," Matthew Moroun said.

"We expect it will take anywhere from 18 to 24 months to get to the point where we can take a realistic look at what can be done with the building."

Knibbe said there is no set timetable for installation of the new glass and roof.

"Measurements have to be taken, glass has to be ordered plus we're still clearing debris from the roof," said Knibbe, who helped restore the Fox Theatre, Fort Shelby Hotel and old Wayne County Courthouse.

Majestic concourse

A look inside the depot generates awe paired with a Pompeian sense of history and former grandeur.

The concourse — now marred with graffiti and scarred by vandalism — is vast and majestic. Marble arches support a vaulted ceiling more than 60 feet high before leading to a hall that housed a ticket office and shopping arcade to accommodate as many as 4,000 travelers who once arrived there daily.

Bathed in shades of black, white and gray, the interior is a good 20 degrees cooler than outside and the wind whistles in through hundreds of glassless windows.

The depot, whose construction began in 1913, was modeled after the Roman Baths of Caracalla, circa 212 A.D.

In a case of history repeating itself, those baths were also sacked and destroyed by vandals, but in the year 600 A.D.

The terminal "was designed by the same firms that designed Grand Central Terminal," said Scott Griffin of the New York City firm of Ramscale Inc., which is doing a feasibility study on the use of the train depot.

"This building is the holy grail of those who are devoted to historic preservation."

Knibbe and Griffin said they see huge potential in the station and in the city.

"Both are a blank canvas," Griffin said. "For decades New York was the center of creativity, but New York is over."

"Real estate there is so expensive that it's impossible to take risks, so it has become a place that just sells things, like Singapore."

Griffin said Detroit has the infrastructure, the work force and a low cost of living.

"I believe Detroit will be the next New York," Griffin said.

In the long run, Griffin and Knibbe said they see artists, businesses and perhaps even residents occupying the building.

"The view from the upper floors, including the roof, is spectacular," Knibbe said.

"You can see all of Detroit, the Ambassador Bridge, the river and Canada. It's unbelievable."

'Encouraging step'

Dan Lijana, spokesman for Detroit Mayor Dave Bing, said upgrades at the terminal are "an encouraging step."

"The city needs all property owners to be a partner in eliminating blight and revitalizing neighborhoods," Lijana said.

One longtime Moroun critic, state Rep. Rashida Tlaib — who represents southwest Detroit where the station is located — said she welcomes efforts to revive the building.

"I, along with a lot of residents, have been longing for something like this to be done with the building," Tlaib said.

"Residents have complained that blight brought crime into the area and has made Roosevelt Park, which is right in front of the building, unsafe sometimes. While we welcome redevelopment, I'm just sad that it took years of screaming to do it."

Tlaib said she hopes the Morouns will institute neighborhood meetings to garner ideas for the building from residents.

"I would urge them to also work with local artists to renovate the building," Tlaib said. "And I hope they focus on local help to renovate the building."

Matthew Moroun said repairing the building will be a long and costly process.

"There's no silver bullet for the building," Moroun said. "That's a dream."

Amid all the graffiti in the concourse, one faded graphic did express a dream.

It said: "SAVE DETROIT."

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