



April 26, 2009

## One last chance for ghost depot

Set a deadline for redeveloping the Michigan Central Station before forcing its razing

Call it the ghost of southwest Detroit.

More than 20 years after the last train pulled out of the Michigan Central Station, the towering, 18-story ruin haunts Detroit's booming Corktown neighborhood, nearby Mexicantown and a promising, burgeoning downtown.

Once the world's tallest train station, the gap-toothed, airy facade is now a menace -- a magnet for vandals, and because of its sheer size and visibility, a spooky symbol of the city's decay.

The depot got to this sorry state with the help of two key abettors: Ambassador Bridge owner Manuel Moroun, who has owned the structure since 1996 and done practically nothing to maintain or improve its condition; and the City of Detroit, which has allowed Moroun to neglect the depot, largely without penalty.

Neither party has met its obligation to the historic building, or the surrounding neighborhood. But now a perfect storm of renewed public interest, government money and Moroun's professed desire to make use of the property have created the opportunity for movement.

It's time to either make the depot useful or remove it from the city's landscape.

The ghost of southwest Detroit shouldn't be allowed to haunt its neighbors, or this city's image, for another year.

### More on the Michigan Central Station:

- [Jeff Gerritt: Detroit's 'Ellis Island' still impresses](#)
- [Interactive: Explore the depot's exterior](#)
- [Interactive: In-depth look inside Michigan Central Station](#)
- [360 degrees of the Michigan Central Station in Detroit](#)
- <http://freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?category=videonetwork&videoID=1103082367>>Video: Free Press editorial board examines the depot
- <http://freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/gallery?Avis=C4&Dato=20090425&Kategori=NEWS&Lopenr=904250807&Ref=PH>>Photo gallery: Michigan Central Station train depot
- <http://freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/gallery?Avis=C4&Dato=20090425&Kategori=NEWS&Lopenr=904250808&Ref=PH>>Photo gallery: Michigan Central Station in 1982
- <http://freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/gallery?Avis=C4&Dato=20090425&Kategori=NEWS&Lopenr=904250809&Ref=PH>>Photo gallery: Postcards of Michigan Central Station

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Michigan Central Station is an architectural gem and a real slice of Detroit's history -- what one resident called "our Ellis Island." Still, in its highly visible decay, the station has become more than an eyesore: Featured in Camilo Jose Vergara's "American Ruins," the depot has morphed into an iconic, international symbol of Detroit's decline.

Think about it: If you come into Detroit from the south, along I-75, or across the Ambassador Bridge

from Canada, the depot is one of the first structures you see along the skyline. It's a shabby welcome mat for the city, and a ghastly front door to the southwest Detroit neighborhoods that surround it.

At Bagley and 16th Street, Kenneth Koehler and his wife, Tomasita Alfaro-Koehler, have operated the Honey Bee Market for 13 years. Back in the mid-1990s, one house stood on the block. Now, the neighborhood is full of rebuilt and new homes.

It's the kind of vibrant, integrated community that aspires to define southwest Detroit.

But the depot, just two blocks south, casts a pall over everything. "Everyone's praying that something will happen," Kenneth Koehler said.

It's a common sentiment in southwest Detroit.

"For people and businesses considering southwest Detroit, the first question is what's going on with the train station?" said Timothy Thorland, executive director of Southwest Housing Solutions in Detroit. "There's really no answer."

## Legacy of neglect

Former Mayors Dennis Archer and Kwame Kilpatrick entertained various proposals for redeveloping the site, including turning it into a casino or the city's police headquarters. But nothing came of them. Mayor Ken Cockrel Jr. has been even more inept. He deserves credit for forcing an overdue debate on the depot, but has embarked on a fundamentally flawed plan to demolish a registered historic building with federal funds, without even talking to the depot's owner, Manuel Moroun.

Meanwhile, as the depot deteriorated, the city, under three administrations, has resisted aggressive enforcement of building and demolition codes against Moroun. The building almost certainly violates the city's dangerous building ordinance and, as such, could have been subject to a demolition order years ago.

That constitutes incompetence on a level that mystifies. Moroun is a private owner with millions in his pockets that could have been leveraged to maintain, or even redevelop the depot. If the city can't hold him to city codes, what hope would it have with the thousands of troubled structures with questionable ownership or owners who are penniless?

The depot's deterioration and the horrible local economy probably rule out much in the way of redevelopment now. But there is still an opportunity to save part of the historic structure, get rid of the crumbling tower, and turn the 14-acre site, with ample green space, into a catalyst for development in the area. The city and Moroun just have to work together.

The time is right. Mayor Cockrel's proposal to use federal stimulus money to demolish the depot and recoup the costs from Moroun has at least reignited public debate about the structure, and prompted a move by City Council to fast-track demolition proceedings against Moroun.

Both ideas have serious drawbacks, but if Moroun can be drawn into the conversation, a plan that works for everyone seems attainable.

## The way forward

Dan Stamper, president of Moroun's Detroit International Bridge Co., told the Free Press that, if the train station needs to come down, Moroun would pay for it. It's absurd to use taxpayer dollars for tearing down a building that its billionaire owner is willing to pay for himself.

The \$3.6 million Cockrel wants in stimulus funds wouldn't cover the costs of demolition, anyway. John Adamo Jr., CEO of Adamo Demolition Co. in Detroit, estimates that removing the building, including environmental work, would take at least \$5 million. Other experts put the tab at closer to \$10 million.

Moreover, Cockrel's plan to recoup the money by suing the owner is a pipe dream. Court is the last place you want to see Moroun, whose lawyers could delay any action for years while running up a fat legal tab for city taxpayers. Even if the city could put a lien on the subsidiary company that owns the depot, Control Terminals Inc. of Warren, the company likely has few, if any, assets besides the station

-- worth about \$350,000, according to tax records.

Finally, the mayor's plan ignores the property's listing on the National Register of Historic Places. That prohibits the use of federal money to demolish the building without an exemption from the National Park Service. The owner, however, is free to tear it down.

The best use for stimulus money on the site could be for a redevelopment plan centered on the station at the foot of the depot's tower. With its ornate columns and grand spaces, it could easily anchor a retail space, and help spur development along Michigan Avenue.

For merchants and residents in southwest Detroit, it's imperative that something be done. Leaving the depot in ruin any longer hurts the neighborhood and the city.

If the structure cannot contribute to Detroit's rebirth, it should no longer define its decline.

---