The Cincinnati Union Terminal stands as a metaphorical gateway to the city and serves as a reminder of Art Deco at its best.

(Photograph by Michael Isaacs)
Railway Designs by
Fellheimer and Wagner, New York to Cincinnati

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In a mid-1930’s photograph Alfred Fellheimer (1875-1959) and Steward Wagner (1886-1958), principals in the Fellheimer and Wagner Architectural firm, pause amidst the modest “period” decor of their New York office. Perhaps they were enjoying a smoke and a moment of conversation while recalling a decade of past commissions that culminated in a spectacular railway design for Cincinnati.

Assuredly, during the 1920’s, they had been quite active. Like so many other American architects, they were Beaux-Arts eclectics, who strove to create contemporary architectural symbols by blending selected historical motifs and modern structural techniques; they wanted style to explain a building’s purpose.\(^1\) Yet, Fellheimer and Wagner were also exceptional technocrats who confronted the architectural, engineering, and economic problems related to the railway station or terminal—the building type which was to become the source for their reputation as transportation specialists.\(^2\)

Focusing on these railway designs or career highlights is interesting and important, but this only provides one-half of a story unless these buildings are placed within a historical and aesthetic context. In alignment with the mainstay of American architectural activity during the 1920’s, Fellheimer and Wagner built a moderately successful architectural firm by favoring a cautious break from the “shackles of the past” which was so widely discussed in the literature of the decade as the potential basis for a much desired and truly modern American architecture.\(^3\)

As their proposals and commissions reveal, Fellheimer and Wagner could undertake a variety of civic, commercial, and residential projects and fulfill a range of individual and corporate demands essentially because their approach to design was stylistically eclectic and structurally diverse.

As they explored the associations different styles carry, it became possible from them to convey “the meaning of the function” of a particular building type: the stability of saving money in a Federal style bank, the quaintness of living in a Tudor apartment house, or the monumentality of experiencing an Egyptian inspired office tower.\(^4\) Similarly in their 1920’s railway proposals or designs located from the East Coast to the Midwest, styles range from Classical to Art Deco in inspiration and often serve as purveyors of American middle-class values—as symbols of bold strength or power and modernity.\(^5\)

These architects were pragmatic rather than visionary. Of utmost importance to Fellheimer and Wagner were stylistic literacy or readability, rather than archeological exactness, and the practical, economical resolution of traffic-flow patterns with “multi-level, multi-use spaces.”\(^6\) This pragmatism served them well; it enabled them to visually affirm the varying urban and suburban purposes of railway buildings. And later, it even allowed them to begin exploring the transition from railway to airport design.

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Alfred Fellheimer and Stewart Wagner were principals in Fellheimer and Wagner, the architectural firm, selected to design the Cincinnati Union Terminal. (Photo courtesy Wank, Adams and Associates hereafter referred to as WAS.)
So, in 1922, when Fellheimer asked Wagner to join him in partnership they proceeded in a manner characteristic of twentieth century American architectural firms to assure efficiency by separating responsibilities and dividing labor among the firm members.7 Fellheimer became the rational initiator, the overseer of planning schemes, and the businessperson and Wagner became the more romantic designer, sensitive to and knowledgeable of historical modes. Or as Walter F. Wagner, a draftsman for the firm from 1923-1924, said:

He [Fellheimer] was a rather quiet, and fastidious man... who was basically responsible for the concept of the firm's work. He did not make sketches or in any way put ideas on paper. This was Mr. Wagner's area of operation. He made the very preliminary sketches and turned them over to draftsmen for development.9

The fascination with railway design was most directly inspired by Fellheimer's academic and professional experiences prior to 1920. A Chicago native, he graduated from the University of Illinois in 1895, having been fortunate to attend the school during the years Nathan Ricker was Chair of the Department of Architecture, 1873-1910, and Dean of the College of Engineering, 1878-1905.9 Ricker brought a knowledge of European architectural thought namely, rationalism, to this midwestern institution, developed an innovative architectural curriculum consisting of theoretical and applied courses, and in 1890, established the first American degree program in Architectural Engineering.10 As one of its first graduates, Fellheimer fully accepted the emphasis on “principles of scientific construction” and he persistently described himself as an architect-engineer.11

Probably in 1898 Fellheimer joined the then well known Chicago firm, Frost and Granger, noted for their civic designs and particularly their midwestern railway stations. Here, he acquired his initial “experience” in adapting Beaux-Arts planning and new engineering principles to “railroad design.”12 So, before the turn of the century, Fellheimer had received an American architectural education, innovative according to the standards of the day, and actual professional experience too. Then, by 1903, he had accepted a junior partnership with Reed and Stem, a St. Paul, Minnesota firm also known for its railway work, and at that time the beneficiary of the significant commission for the Grand Central Terminal in New York City, which was erected between 1903-1912 with Warren Wetmore as Associate Architects.13 This Beaux-Arts Classical masterpiece with its monumental precisely articulated spaces, pronounced symmetry and modeled facades significantly impressed the young Fellheimer but it was the ingenious accommodation of train, subway, automobile, pedestrian, and freight traffic with ramps and multi-leveled spaces as well as the monetary benefit of selling air rights for this urban site development that remained especially important in his mind. These were also the essential contributions

The design of the Queens-Bellaire Bank, Queens Village, New York conveyed “the stability of saving money in a Federal style bank.” (Photo courtesy WAS)
Fellheimer and Long, and Stem also completed several suburban stations reflecting different symbolic functions, such as the picturesque intimate shelter or the formal gateway, for the New York, Westchester and Boston Railroad in Mamaroneck, White Plains, and other New York towns and cities. In response to these designs, another critic, J.H. Phillips, praised their fresh interpretation of historical modes and particularly recalled "the Florentine type...[which] is exceptionally frank and sincere in its freedom from meaningless ornament." In addition to these favorable comments, both reviewers also expressed a preference for stylistic simplicity which they felt was manifested in the firm's work. By 1920, this simplicity also became evident in the dissatisfaction expressed by professionals and laypeople with the predominant selection of classicism for railway buildings.17

Simplicity became a virtue considered by many architects and critics as a necessary component in modern form. But for railway designers this characteristic became even more relevant in light of changing economic and political conditions. Even by 1914, as Meeks later confirmed "the extravagant era of station building came almost to a stop..." largely in response to the impact of World War I and the diversion of resources to more strategic demands than City Beautiful monuments.18 And in 1916, Droege acutely observed that service and economy were and would continue to be critically important for the success of American railroads—service to lure customers and economy to assure profits.19 Prophetically, he foresaw, as others did in hindsight, that by 1920, the railroads would lose their "monopoly of inland transportation...as a result of the intensive development of competitors by highway, inland waterway, pipe line, and air."20 Fellheimer must have owned a copy of Droege's well known and well respected book and he certainly would have agreed that service and economy were important elements in efficient designing. Yet he also agreed, in part, with the pre-1919 view held by "architects and corporations, influenced by the ideal of the City Beautiful, [who] wished to contribute splendid, monumental structures to the urban scene....The designers accepted as valid the classic conception that public buildings should be supremely impressive."21 Later, throughout the 1920's, this need for a stately urban symbol remained a compelling concern for the firm.

Fellheimer's development was steady. Two early solo commissions of 1916, the Beaux-Arts Classical Union Station, Macon, Georgia and the proposed plan for the new and enlarged New York Central Terminal, Buffalo, New York, both including ramps and schemes with two or more levels, were initial attempts to assure an efficient interaction between building and city plan.22 Still, these were relatively average achievements for an architect whose reputation as a railway expert focusing on station design and traffic flow was burgeoning. His schedule of commissions was modest but his friendships and associations with railway executives, influential bankers, and lawyers enhanced Fellheimer's professional advancement.23

By 1920, therefore, he was in the position to serve as a railway consultant contributing to a nationwide effort to unify and consolidate railway lines and site improvements.24 In that year the federal government passed the Transportation Act ending its 1918-1920 war effort supervision of the railroads, returning them to independent operation, and inspiring a serious reassessment of railway functioning and profits with new rules for rate-making.

Upon request, and this act itself reflects Fellheimer's reputation, he submitted three important proposals for new stations and site improvements in Chicago to interested railway companies.25 Each study included his newly formed railway-design principles documented with drawings and statistics and partially inspired by "a careful analysis of the good and bad features of the leading passenger
terminals of the country.” These principles, offered in straightforward, utilitarian language, focused on the architectural, engineering, and economic issues which he now respectively defined as expression of purpose as service building or civic symbol; efficient, direct traffic channels relating the station and the city; and provision for air rights.

In his January 1920 Proposed Lake Front Passenger Terminal design prepared for A.S. Baldwin, Vice President, Illinois Central Railroad, Fellheimer distinguished his work from that of the railroad’s chief engineer. He suggested traffic patterns that avoid “cross-currents and retracing of steps” separating train-to-street traffic from internal station traffic and placing “all passenger facilities…at the same floor level…by means of ramps…” not steps, recalling at once Reed and Stem’s contribution to the Grand Central design and Droege’s endorsement of this structural device for moving crowds. For this study, Fellheimer chose a “Concourse Type” plan, like Grand Central, allowing “unrestricted[traffic] flow.” He wanted the concourse to be “roomey, and…enclosed…, to insure comfortable use cojointly with the Waiting Room” thereby accommodating the hurried and the leisurely traveler. The logic and practicality of Fellheimer’s considerations reaffirm Droege’s contention that American stations more than European ones must include “comfort” in order to compete in a country where the railroads are privately run and seriously challenged by bus, and most recently, by airplane.

Fellheimer also wanted the actual station design to function symbolically:

...to express the purpose of the improvements and to emphasize the relative importance of entrances and exits and like features, by magnifying the more important and minimizing the lesser features. Attention should be paid to mass effect which attracts the notice of the general public rather than to details which are seen by the few.

Economical consideration, of course, should be a definite aim, through the avoidance of special elaborate or structural detail.

Here, he enthusiastically recalled the Beaux-Arts attitude “function-form-meaning” where form communicates the meaning of the function and strives through legible symbol to convey the ideas to the public—in this case, of a monumental city gate and a strong dependable railway offering safe travel. And yet, the principal elevation revealed a vast, overly ponderous Beaux-Arts Classical design with bold Ionic columns climaxing in grand, arched portals for taxicabs and for pedestrians. If built, this and other structural features would ensure an efficient separation and channeling of traffic but the style itself, while definitely attracting the notice of the public, seems copy-book dry and economically unconvincing.

Admirably though, by placing considerable importance on the plan itself, “details…may...[be altered] to suit the particular local needs.” Fellheimer aligned the
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formally symmetrical, compartmented spaces and prominent axes with exits and entrances; he blended the Beaux-Arts emphasis on the plan as the beginning of a building with the rationalist concern for its practical use allowing some provision for adaption to actual demands of the site or client. Style is important but its particular characteristics are negotiable to the extent that they must serve function.

Fellheimer could also combine altruism with cost-benefit analysis. In his second Chicago proposal, Study for Joint Terminal Improvement, completed December 20, 1921, he explained that the revenue producing facilities in or above the actual station, made possible in the latter case by selling air rights, were always justifiable as sources of passenger convenience. He sent this scheme to A.S. Baldwin, too, as a “basic plan for the joint improvement of properties on the Chicago Lake Front north of Monroe Street, owned by the Illinois Central and Michigan Central Railroad Companies,” at the opposite end of Grant Park from his 1920 Lake Front Passenger Terminal proposal. For years this lakefront area of prime real estate with its unsightly railroad tracks, known as the South Water Street Terminal area adjacent to the uncompleted Grant Park was a controversial subject. Since the days of Daniel Burnham, the potential contribution this area could make to the civic image and economic prosperity of a growing Chicago was well recognized but the complete solution had not been agreed upon by the city, the South Park Board, and the Illinois Central Railroad.

Fellheimer proposed a re-structuring of this nondescript commercial, freight, and industrial area, where the Prudential and Standard Oil skyscrapers stand today. He wanted to include a freight terminal with lake-rail shipment facilities for both railroads, an Illinois Central suburban passenger terminal, provisions for industrial projects, and an extensive air rights program over the large track area made possible, as it had first been at Grand Central, by the electrification of trains. The plan Fellheimer described as “flexible” yet:

orderly, direct in its placement of basic elements,... striking a proper balance between public comfort and convenience, and economy of expenditure... affording a complete blending with... City development,... obliterating in its “air-rights” development all indication of railroad occupancy...

Even the passenger station, planned for one or two levels, was below ground. The result was an unusual yet practical study—feasible, at least, on paper.

Architecturally, Fellheimer was convinced that: pleasing effects may be secured, without deadly uniformity or... heavy overhanging cornices, extraneous detail and ornamentation. An effective mass-effect and skyline is produced, without sacrifice of utilitarian requirements of modern buildings of this type, and the now generally adopted principle of setbacks is indicated, as fixed by the New York City Zoning Law, and likely of adoption by the City of Chicago in the near future

Significantly, he again stressed simplicity—an economy of means—and, for the first time, a careful yet intent willingness to dissociate himself from a strict adherence to historical revivalist styles previously applied by himself and others to railway or commercial structures. Style, he was beginning to believe, can contribute to a feeling of modernity with setbacks as well as quality of stability with masses; it can confirm the integration of successful railroading and commerce, of service and product, provided it is a contemporary yet non-radical idiom. But, despite this talk, the aesthetic impact of the Joint Terminal Improvement study is at best cautious. The Gothic inspired projecting piers and vast Classical arcades are impressive but they create overly narrow vertical proportions that are too weak for the scale of the total complex of buildings. The tall attic stories are also disturbed by fussy idiosyncratic detailing. Fellheimer, at this point in the early 1920’s, typifies the American architect who, in an effort to be practical and tasteful, readily accepts steel-cage construction, but finds grappling with styles troublesome yet necessary for the conveyance of architectural meaning.

Perhaps this quandary was the partial source for Fellheimer’s acceptance of Steward Wagner as an associate and, in 1923, as a partner in the Fellheimer and Wagner firm. And yet, Wagner was no radical as the Fellheimer and Wagner submission to the Chicago Tribune Competition indicates. Their heavy, setback form with its pyramidal apex
and battered facades lacks visual synthesis although a message is clearly discernible. The timeless, stable quality of Egyptian architecture is simulated in an attempt to enhance the public image of a newspaper devoted to timeless concerns—truth and fortitude. Trite? Perhaps, but this connotation is decidedly characteristic of the didacticism inherent in 1920's eclectic architecture.

Wagner was born in Marlin, Texas and after some local training, moved to New York, enrolled in drawing and design classes at Columbia University, 1907-1909, and attended the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, Atelier Hornbostel, 1907-1910. Concurrently, he worked for the Harry Allan Jacobs firm, New York, 1907-1909, and the Architectural Department, Board of Education, Newark, New Jersey, 1909-1910. He was a member of two prominent New York Beaux-Arts firms: H. Van Buren Magonigle, 1910-1912, and Tracy and Swartwout, 1912-1914, before practicing alone until he joined Fellheimer.

An accomplished example of Wagner's solo work is the Town House, Hempstead, New York, 1918, executed in the Georgian Revival mode to recall the colonial heritage of this Long Island community and perhaps the civic function also associated with its inspiration, Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Pronounced symmetry, modillioned cornices, quoins, and other classically inspired details reveal Wagner's stylistic knowledge.

Even after joining the firm, Wagner accepted solo commissions. Often, these were residential. But when he worked on the extensive civic and commercial projects, such as the railway designs, it was truly a joint effort between the two principals. Wagner would use his ability to adopt styles and manipulate space to assure the fulfillment of Fellheimer's goal: "utility, efficiency and honesty of expression." Intensive building demands in the 1920's granted Fellheimer and Wagner the opportunity to bring their ideas to fruition. As the architects for the New York Central Railroad and occasional designers for other lines, they erected numerous small stations in the East, Midwest, and South and three major ones in Boston, Buffalo, and Cincinnati.

For each railway commission, Fellheimer conceived the idea, Wagner sketched, developed, and enriched it and then the draftspersons completed the stylistic and engineering elaboration. Frequently, according to Walter Wagner, "all the engineering work—electrical, plumbing, ventilation,...track layout, etc. was done by our own staff." Specialization within the firm itself allowed efficiency assuring "ready-to-be-built" schemes.

Fellheimer and Wagner's work contributes to a general tendency apparent in twentieth century railway design—an "integration of a wide range of basic [structural] techniques." This integration enabled them to confront the diversity inherent in the "terminal complex" which Condit describes as:

- a station building and a shed or canopies to cover tracks or platforms...subsidary structures and mechanical appurtenances: facilities for handling baggage, mail and express; steam and electrical generating plants; interlocking and signaling equipment; coach yards and engine terminals,... frequently offices and hotel rooms [and maybe] bridges and viaducts...to bring rail lines...of the city into a single focus. ...Finally, the very existence of this diversion of elements, along with the monumental character of the urban gateway, compelled architects and engineers to think of the big station as a major focus in the whole metropolitan complex and hence to treat it in the wider context of city planning and civic art.43

Among the basic structural changes apparent in Fellheimer and Wagner's work and in most railway design by the 1920's was the use of the economical butterfly shed or platform canopy as a replacement for the earlier Bush shed and the still earlier single span of the train shed prominent in the nineteenth century.44 Having lost the vast shed as an identifying characteristic and symbol of a train station, Fellheimer and Wagner and their contemporaries devoted renewed attention to the headhouse and its large interior as a source for railway symbolism and strove to clarify its relationship to the platforms and trains using subways, bridges, and ramps.

In recognition of these developments, for the small Romanesque inspired New York Central passenger station, Erie, Pennsylvania, 1927, Fellheimer and Wagner arranged two equally prominent entrances so the traveler would feel comfortable approaching from either direction and would be led "directly to a central rotunda or lobby" and then to the passenger subway and train platforms. For their New York Central Union Passenger Station, South Bend, Indiana, 1929, they planned a classically detailed yet bulky form whose massive barrel vault effectively spanned the central concourse space confirming the shift from emphasis of train shed to headhouse seen initially and more spectacularly in the Union Station, Washington, D.C., 1903-1907, by Daniel Burnham.

Fellheimer and Wagner's urban proposals and buildings substantiate the firm's reputation as "passenger and transportation circulation" specialists and reveal important stylistic developments, too.45 Their proposal for a transportation complex in Philadelphia, ca. 1927, included a complicated site plan emphatically integrating a symmetrical, hieratic...
The firm’s submission to the Chicago Tribune competition used the timeless stable quality of Egyptian architecture in an attempt to enhance the public image of a newspaper company devoted to timeless concerns. (Photo courtesy WAS)

Fellheimer described his plan as a complete blending with city development “...obliterating in its ‘air right’ development all indication of railroad occupancy ...” (Photo courtesy WAS)

arrangement of prominent axes with city streets, bridges, and a river. The multi-leveled arrangement of streets and arcades respectively planned for pedestrians, passenger and freight trains, and other ground transportation accents the centrally located skyscraper or revenue-producing tower. With a remotely historical flavor, Gothic verticality meets Classical restraint in a romantic monumental composition—truly eclectic—and reminiscent of Eliel Saarinen’s proposed Lake Front Development, Chicago, 1923, which was published in the American Architect that year and was influential to Fellheimer and Wagner. In both conceptions, setbacks and continuous mullions and piers enhance the verticality. A contemporary historian, Sheldon Cheney, described this feeling as “the expressive ‘drive’ and ‘lift’” of buildings which he noted was so obvious in New York by 1925 in designs we now label Art Deco.

Fellheimer, it may be recalled, spoke positively of the New York Zoning Law in his Study for Joint Terminal Improvement, 1921; this implied a receptivity to setbacks. And, it also aligned with his fondness for contemporary French (Art Deco) design known in architectural circles via publicity for the Paris exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes, 1925. Therefore, it comes as no
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The New York Central Union Passenger Station, South Bend, Indiana had a classically detailed yet bulky form whose massive barrel vault effectively spanned the internal concourse space. (Photo courtesy L. Stanford)

surprise that Art Deco flavors the major late-1920’s stations at Buffalo, Boston, and especially Cincinnati.

Of the three major stations, Buffalo, 1927, and Cincinnati, 1929, remain the more impressive structurally and symbolically. The Boston and Maine Railroad, North Station, 1928, is a timid Art Deco form nevertheless described in its promotional booklet as “imposing modern American architecture, solid in proportions, simple in detail...[and] a major convenience for the public.” As part of a larger urban plan there was no provision for an architectural scheme with the magnitude possible in the other two cities.

In Buffalo, after years of debate, railway officials accepted a site two miles from downtown for the New York Central Railroad, Curtiss Street Improvement, the Central Passenger Station. At that time, in the mid-1920’s, Fellheimer transformed his 1916 scheme into a “distinctive design.” He incorporated technical innovations and an efficient layout in a modern urban gateway praised as a symbol of “cooperation between public authorities and private interest; between civic pride and private enterprise.” As both “railway station...[and] magnificent office building,” the focal point in “the remaking of a new center of a city,” the station anticipated urban and commercial expansion. Fellheimer’s architectural, engineering, and economic principles work together here.

The logical and practical “double-level,” “concourse” plan provided spacious main and train concourses, waiting room, and other passenger service facilities on the same level above the tracks and contiguous with the raised plaza that leads directly to nearby streets and residential and commercial districts. The careful distinction and clear articulation of external, stable masses reflect the function of the large, defined internal spaces recalling the monumentality and the logique integral to Beaux-Arts design although the effect is best understood in an aerial view. Other stylistic traits reflect the influence of Fellheimer’s European travel in 1927 and both partners’ growing interest in continental developments in architecture. By June 1926 the firm had broken from the stark utilitarianism of its 1925 scheme and had completed plans, elevations, and sections which are practically identical to the extant building.

The arch and the tower, as gateway and landmark respectively, furnish “station character” of a kind Fellheimer admired in several expressionist European stations and in the Central Station, Helsinki, Finland, 1904, 1910-1914, by Eliel Saarinen. Decorative detailing is timidly Art Deco in spirit and assures, via stylization, that the station spoke of modern and efficient travel. Buffalo embodies some of the
Fellheimer's and Wagner's proposal for a transportation complex in Philadelphia accented the centrally located revenue-producing tower. (Photo courtesy L. Stanford)

In Buffalo, the New York Central Railroad, Curtiss Street Improvement, Central Passenger Station was the focal point in the "remaking of a new center of a city" and the station anticipated urban and commercial expansion. (Photo courtesy L. Stanford)
calmness of the firm's earlier designs and hints of the simplicity and streamlining seen emphatically at Cincinnati.

If the architectural, engineering, and economic concerns of Fellheimer and Wagner expressed integration at Buffalo, then they express synthesis in the Cincinnati Union Terminal complex, 1929-1933. Here as part of a huge urban planning scheme were the passenger terminal and tracks as well as a mail express terminal, an engine house and coach yard, two viaducts and an Ohio River bridge; this consolidated seven railway companies and overcame, after many years, the track flooding from the Ohio River.

All of these components were united visually by the impressive arch and huge semi-dome of the terminal itself which stood as an engineering marvel and a metaphorical gateway to the city and which today serves as a reminder of Art Deco at its best. The terminal is a masterpiece praised as the last of the great "metropolitan station[s], as...[they] were developed in the final phase of railroad expansion, ...[bringing] to a close the traditional [Beaux-Arts] concepts of monumentalism in building and civic art."

The entire scheme also embodies the results of cooperative planning in architectural design. It was the outcome of decades of preliminary studies and required an exchange of ideas among Fellheimer and Wagner, the Cincinnati Union Terminal Company, the Cincinnati Department of Public Works, and other professional consultants. Prophetically, this exchange assured the fulfillment of the Art Deco ideal of a marriage of fine and applied arts and industry. As Fellheimer wrote in 1932:

"Large attainment is necessarily the result of cooperative effort. Only small accomplishments are entirely individual. The habit of full cooperation with, and, a helpful attitude toward the work of others, to the end that the whole may be a composite expression of the best that is in all who have had to do with the project is assiduously cultivated."

His endorsement of cooperative planning reasserts the character of the working methods of this firm and the receptivity of its principals to advice and counsel. These factors help to explain the evolution of both the plan and the style of the Cincinnati Union Terminal—an evolution which reached maturation after Fellheimer's and Wagner's June 1928 acceptance of the commission. The Cincinnati Union Terminal Company offered the project to this firm because of its considerable reputation in the railway industry.

Since the turn of the century, civic and railway officials in Cincinnati had been discussing the urgent need for a union terminal serving the city's seven railway lines. By 1912, C.A. Wilson, a Cincinnati railway expert and engineer was already working for the railroads to formulate plans. His unpublished 1912-1913, 1918, and 1923 drawings contain the nascent organizational scheme for the Fellheimer and Wagner design. In 1923, the Cincinnati Railroad Terminal Development Company formed to study the feasibility of this project using essential features from Wilson's 1919 scheme.

Under the auspices of this company, on July 14, 1927, the seven participating railroads signed a legal agreement to form the Cincinnati Union Terminal Company which would be the "instrumentality...used in carrying out the general plan." This included purchasing Bald Knob for landfill, constructing the Western Hills viaduct, and renovating Lincoln Park as a terminal approach. The company also became responsible for the hiring of the architects and made Wilson's plans available to them.

By January 1929, Fellheimer and Wagner had provided spacious main and train concourses, waiting room, and other passenger service facilities on the same level.

The Buffalo station embodied some of the calmness of the firm's earlier designs and hinted of the simplicity which appeared emphatically at Cincinnati.

(Photo courtesy L. Stanford)

The double-level concourse provided spacious main and train concourses, waiting room, and other passenger service facilities on the same level.

(Property courtesy L. Stanford)
preliminary plans, models, and specifications to present. Their terminal scheme was a two-level concourse “through” type featuring a huge arched entry with separate, flanking curved ramps for trolley, bus, or taxicab, all set perpendicular to the 413 foot waiting room concourse. Remarkably, without backtracking, a passenger could enter the building, purchase a ticket, check baggage, shop, lunch, sit and wait, and then, via another ramp, approach and board the scheduled train. This purposeful mastery of traffic circulation is emblematic of Fellheimer and Wagner’s work. And yet, the exterior remained more cautious with its massive forms dressed in a drab classicism reminiscent of the tentativeness present in the early Buffalo designs.

Thus far, what Fellheimer and Wagner had done was to undertake the major task of infusing Wilson’s plans with life and imagination rendering them architecturally feasible by fluidly separating freight, passenger, and vehicular traffic and administrative or commercial facilities. Using the same geographical site, the architects also situated the terminal entrance so it would face east towards Lincoln Park and downtown Cincinnati.

Fellheimer studied Wilson’s 1912-1913 drawings such as number 31.021 showing a plaza and a station with an integrated waiting room and concourse. He also saw the 1919 and 1924 plans in which the station is positioned exactly where it was finally built—contiguous with McLean, Hopkins, and Dalton avenues and Kenner Street. In Wilson’s 1919 plan number 32.150, all tracks run perpendicular to the concourse and long separate drives for autos and streetcars lead to and pass under a large porte cochere which, in turn, leads to the station concourse. But, awkwardness still exists at all the transition points—from street, to station, to baggage, and to trains. Fellheimer made these transitions breathe. Most likely, he recalled lessons learned while working with Reed and Stem on the 1916 Union Station in Detroit, Michigan where the tracks run perpendicular to the concourse. He must have re-examined the well-known 1913 design by Jarvis Hunt for the Kansas City Union Station in Kansas City, Missouri. In 1920 he had even included these two stations in his book, Proposed Lake Front Passenger Terminal, Chicago, Illinois.

Interestingly, both the Cincinnati and Kansas City designs were inspired by a need to avoid flooding. Both face a plaza or esplanade and include a separation of express (freight), baggage, pedestrians, and street traffic. But the fluidity of the Cincinnati plan is made possible by the funnel shape, and the consistent use of multi-levels and ramps which especially recall Fellheimer’s formative experience as a young architect working on the Grand Central Terminal.

The stylistic choice for the terminal itself, this “temple of transportation” was also an evolutionary development towards a style that visibly explains the meaning.
The concourse featured a huge arched entry with separate, flanking curved ramps for trolley, bus, or taxicab, all set perpendicular to the 415 foot waiting-room concourse. (Photo from Cincinnati Buildings Department, Cincinnati, Ohio)

In Wilson's 1919 plan all tracks ran perpendicular to the concourse and long separate drives for automobiles and streetcars passed under a porte cochere which led to the station and concourse. (Photo courtesy L. Stanford)

Wilson's drawing number 31.021 showed a plaza and a station with an integrated waiting room and concourse. (Photo courtesy L. Stanford)
of the building's function and speaks of efficiency and modernity. According to the architectural drawings, sketches, and models and Henry M. Waite, Chief Engineer, Cincinnati Union Terminal Company:

*At first,... we [italics mine] planned a classical design with pillars, cornices, pilasters, and pedestals. It would have been cold and costly. It would have cost many times what the present terminal cost.*

Waite made this comment in 1933. Among the sketches to which he referred were those published in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* on June 2, 1929. Admittedly, these would not have been published at that time without agreement among those responsible for approving the stylistic design of the terminal. The relatively bare, full centered arches and groin vaults do seem stark and uninviting. Interestingly, they do bear a striking resemblance to preliminary Buffalo sketches substantiating the contribution of the Fellheimer and Wagner firm's staff.

The stylistic evolution is worth pursuing and once again early drawings and models are important. A January 23, 1929 plan and an undated model which appears to be its mate, are useful. The model shows arches whose rhythmic movement is controlled by heavy massing and does not reveal the unified rhythmic quality of the final design where the arch as leitmotif is the module for the rotunda plan as well as the windows, doors, driveways, and decorative detailing. The development of this final version was still several stages away. Fellheimer liked the January 1929 and the June 1929 versions and in August 1929, construction began.

But others were not so accepting. Although there was cooperation and an exchange of ideas among the Fellheimer and Wagner staff, members of the Cincinnati Union Terminal Company, and the Cincinnati Department of Public Works, the stylistic treatment lacked sufficient impact. A sleekening of the overall massing, or “streamlining” as the terminology of the day would have it, could achieve the curvilinearity necessary for a feeling of visual movement which would embrace the traveler and translate in his or her mind as a synonym for contemporary travel—comfortable, convenient, and fast. To this end, Fellheimer and Wagner and the Cincinnati Union Terminal Company decided to seek additional stylistic advice. In 1930, Paul Cret, the well respected, internationally known architect from Philadelphia began serving as a consultant. He was a friend and a former teacher of Edgar Tyler, the Fellheimer and Wagner staff architect who was based in Cincinnati, and he was also a friend of Steward Wagner. Cret belonged to the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design; he frequently attended chapter meetings in Philadelphia and “Judgements” in New York.
where both Wagner and Fellheimer were members. But friendship and reputation were not the only reasons for selecting Cret. His own stripped classical designs, often accented with stylized, subtle Art Deco motifs and moldings, provided likely models for the terminal’s stylistic flavor perhaps because their visual presence inspired a feeling of traditionalism made modern.68

With the rotunda arch enlarged to prime symbol, a physical feat made possible by Fellheimer and Wagner’s engineering staff, the visual tempo increases.69 Traditional limestone facing blends with modern aluminum as curved ramps meet curved floor patterns and outside flows inside to the rotunda. There, the polychromed concentric bands of the semi-dome and the archivolts of the arch complement the brilliant mosaics and fulfill the Art Deco ideal, a marriage of the fine and applied arts and industry. Mosaicists, sculptors, and painters decorated the building architects and engineers designed, and railway executives approved.70

Noting the importance of cooperative effort here, it seems less possible to accept the idea presented by Condit that “the senior partners...placed the responsibility for the design of the terminal in the hands of a relatively young and not widely known architect Roland Anthony Wank(1898-1970).” It is also difficult to agree with Condit that Fellheimer and Wagner had to be coaxed by the Cincinnati Union Terminal Company to permit inviting Cret to serve as consultant.72 Fellheimer and Wagner would have welcomed such counsel. Perhaps, it is most fair to clarify Condit’s words and assume that “responsibility for the design” refers to the stylistic treatment Wank probably developed in consultation with Cret.

Wank joined the firm January 17, 1927, stayed a year, and was present during May 1927 when the Buffalo plans were revised to include Art Deco details. Then, he left for Europe until April 1929 when he returned and reasserted his position as junior member until May 1933.73 Most likely he was an important stimulus with fresh ideas particularly concerning the interrelationship of the arts espoused by both the Bauhaus and Art Deco. Recalling that Fellheimer did not put ideas on paper and that Wagner was immersed in the “styles,” the need for Wank’s contribution seems evident as long as it is remembered that the traffic flow resolution unmistakably reflects Fellheimer and Wagner’s ongoing interest in the transportation building design. And, it should be noted that the principals never lost their authority to say “no.” A sketch by Max Keck, sculptor, submitted for the exterior relief figures personifying Transportation and Commerce proves this fact. The sketch is addressed in

A 1929 plan and an undated model, which appears to be its mate, showed arches whose rhythmic movement is controlled by heavy massing but does not reveal the unified rhythmic quality of the final design. (Photo courtesy Gibson Yungblut, Cincinnati, Ohio)
The polychromed concentric bands of the semi-dome and the archivolts of the arch complement the brilliant mosaics and fulfill the Art Deco ideal.
Fellheimer's handwriting to: “SW ...submitted by Max Keck for approval. AF.”

With this working relationship, Fellheimer's statements regarding cooperative effort come to life and assume credibility because they are rooted in the actual working methods of the firm. Style is to explain the building's function and if collaboration is needed for this to occur, then so be it.

Today, the Cincinnati Union Terminal has relinquished its role as a gateway to the Queen City. And actually it never fulfilled that role as much as wishful thinkers in the late 1920's would have hoped. Even while the terminal was being built the automobile was beginning to surpass the train as a preferred mode of travel. And, coupled with the impact of the Depression, the hope of having the terminal link with downtown Cincinnati via rapid transit vanished. Although Fellheimer allowed for additional track space, designed the concourse foundations to support a future eight-story commercial building, planned for technical alterations to accommodate the transition from steam to electric trains, and although he yearned for commercial expansion around the esplanade, little growth occurred.

What remains is behemoth from a bygone day known to some in the light of preservation efforts, but usually ignored by automobile passengers who swiftly traverse Interstate 75 without even a second glance.

It should be remembered that Fellheimer and Wagner had little control over this change in status from temple of transportation to relic. Or, did they know more than they wanted to admit? Certainly they could not have foreseen the extent of the impact of the Depression on architectural commissions. But, would they have included plans for a small landing strip in the terminal complex if they had believed otherwise?

The Cincinnati Union Terminal should serve as an exemplar of a climactic moment in both the history of American architecture and of a moderately successful architectural firm. It is a contributor to the culmination of the development of hieratic monumental Beaux-Arts planning schemes as urban symbol updated with the streamlined flair of Art Deco. And, in that capacity, the terminal serves as a "last hurrah" for a planning approach that was soon supplanted by the open volumes and free spaces of the International Style. For Fellheimer and Wagner, the Cincinnati Union Terminal is the climax of their railway designs and probably of their careers; it is the structure that makes their history atypical. Here, at Cincinnati they masterfully set the conditions for their architectural, engineering, and economic goals to mature together.

The exterior reliefs personifying Transportation and Commerce say it best. The male and female figures glide towards one another, their movement capped by the rotunda arch, they inform us that they will move passengers, freight, and trains. With their svelte bodies they assure us efficiency and economic success are forthcoming. In hindsight, this did not happen because 1920's optimism became 1930's economic hardship. But, for Fellheimer and Wagner their careers could and did develop; they saw "architecture as a business" and continued designing civic and commercial buildings and airport schemes with special emphasis on traffic flow. They, like their architectural colleagues, knew that architecture would only be successful if it invites use. And the understanding of this use is dependent on style. That is why they maintained their belief that style must be allowed to do its job—to serve as the meaning of function.

1. The term Beaux-Arts is used here to refer to the essential attitude many American architects held toward design. Their preference was for monumental well defined spaces, prominent hieratic axes, and clearly articulated masses as opposed to the open volumetric spaces of what is now known as the International Style. See: F.H. Bosworth, Jr. and Roy Childs Jones, A Study of Architectural Schools (New York, 1932), p. 180. The term eclectic is used here to describe those architects who readily borrowed elements from numerous historical styles and structural systems which remain distinguishable within the overall form. See: Peter Collins, Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture: 1750-1950 (London, 1965), p. 118.

2. Kenneth Turney Gibbs, "Business Architectural Imagery: the Impact of Economic and Social Changes on Tall Office Buildings 1870-1930," Diss., Cornell University, 1976, p. 208. Gibbs discusses "the shift during the 1920's from the emphasis of artistic concerns to the emphasis of technical matters" such as reducing costs. Fellheimer and Wagner were certainly part of this shift of emphasis although they remained interested in the artistic and the technical; Fellheimer's studies and publications were as important as actual commissions in determining the amount of respect he and the firm
The figures on the exterior relief glide toward each other, their movement capped by the rotunda arch and they tell us they will move passengers, freight, and trains.
could command in railroad circles. By 1923, his principles of railway design had been published in several architectural, engineering, and railroad periodicals or presented as addresses or reports. See: Alfred Fellheimer, “Principles of Terminal Station Design,” American Society Civil Engineers Proceedings, vol. 49, no. 7 (September 1923), pp. 1431-1463 (Symposium including numerous papers, 1431-1606); Alfred Fellheimer, Study for Joint Terminal Improvement, Chicago Illinois, (New York, n.p., 1921), sig. Courtesy of Walter F. Wagner, son-in-law of Alfred Fellheimer and Wagner. Hereafter referred to as WAS. It should be noted that both Fellheimer and Wagner were elected Fellows of the American Institute of Architects (FAIA).


4. J. Lobell, “Beaux-Arts: A Reconsideration of Meaning in Architecture,” Journal of the American Institute of Architects, 61 [64] (November 1975), p. 34. Lobell describes the Beaux-Arts approach to function as “function-form-meaning.” Thus the function generated a form which in turn communicated the meaning of the function, as well as facilitating it. Form communicates meaning because it is stylistically altered.


6. Frank Williams, “Grand Central City,” Architectural Forum, 141 (January-February 1968), p. 50. Williams uses this term to describe the Grand Central Terminal but it is equally suitable for railway designs by Fellheimer and Wagner. And, considering Fellheimer’s enthusiastic praise for Grand Central and his early work for two of its architects, Reed and Stem, it seems appropriate to use this phrase here.

7. “Steward Wagner of Architect Firm,” New York Times, June 28, 1958, 176; “Wagner, Steward,” Who’s Who in America, 23 (1944-1945), 2203; Interview with Karl Schweinfest, Business Manager, WAS, December 27, 1973. Alfred Fellheimer, Studies for State Street Terminal Improvement, Chicago, Illinois (New York, n.p., 1922), sig. Courtesy WAS. Here Wagner is listed as an associate; it should also be noted that their Chicago Tribune design is from 1923. It seems most prudent to say that Wagner joined Fellheimer in 1921 but did not become a partner until late 1922; Spiro Kostof, The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession (New York, 1977), p. 318. Kostof’s exact words are “a separation of responsibility and division of labor.” Most importantly Kostof notes the separation of major decision making from actual drawing or modeling. This was exactly the situation at Fellheimer and Wagner.


11. Bannister, Part II, p. 78. Bannister quotes Ricker here; Schweinfest; Nazzaro; Promotional literature from the Fellheimer and Wagner firm frequently read Alfred Fellheimer-Steward Wagner Architects and Engineers; Fellheimer maintained membership in both the American Institute of Architects and the American Society of Civil Engineers.


14. Stem and Fellheimer, Marshall, pp. 248, 262-263. Reed was responsible for the ramps and the “circularferential plaza,” and an elevated roadway; Meeks, 129-130. He described Grand Central as “their [Reed and Stem’s] masterpiece” and a "brilliant design." The clarity, directness and simplicity of the final building has always been recognized.

15. Schweinfest. The firm was sometimes known as Fellheimer and Long; ”Louis L. Long Architect, Dies on Coast Train,” Minneapolis Tribune, May 21, 1925, p. 1. Long (1870-1925) was associated with his father Franklin B. Long (1842-1913) in partnership and later with Long, Lamoreaux and Long. Both were Minneapolis firms known for civic buildings. Louis L. Long may be the member of Fellheimer and Long and Allen H. Stem Associated Architects; ”The New York Central’s Improvement at Utica, NY,” Railway Age Gazette, 57, No. 2 (July 10, 1914), 52. Here, the architects are simply listed as Stem and Fellheimer; J.H. Phillips, “The Evolution of the Suburban Station,” Architectural Record, 86 (August 1914), 127. The architects are listed as Fellheimer and Long, Architects; Allen H. Stem, Associated. There is considerable ambiguity regarding the actual firm names; Harold D. Eberlein, “Recent Railway Stations in American Cities,” Architectural Record, 86 (August 1914), p. 111.


22. Union Station, Macon, Georgia, 1916, Portfolio of photographs. Courtesy WAS; ”New York Central Passenger and Freight Terminal at Buffalo,” Railway Age Gazette, 61, No. 23 (December 22, 1916), 1138-1140.


is not mentioned here the illustrations and descriptions are identical to those found in the proposal entitled: Fellheimer, Study for Joint Terminal Improvement.

20. Alfred Fellheimer, Proposed Lake Front Passenger Terminal, Chicago, Illinois (New York, n.p. 1920), sig. Courtesy WAS. He refers to the Grand Central Terminal, New York; the Union Station, St. Louis; the Union Station, Kansas City, Missouri and to several others; See also: Fellheimer, Studies for State Street Terminal Improvement, Fellheimer, Study for Joint Terminal Improvement.

21. Fellheimer, Proposed Lake Front Passenger Terminal, "Proposed New Passenger Terminal in Chicago," Railway Review, 65, No. 2 (July 12, 1919), 37-61. The chief engineer's scheme is discussed here; The station was to be located near the present day Illinois Central Station at what is now Michigan Avenue and Roosevelt Road.

22. Fellheimer, Proposed Lake Front Passenger Terminal; Droge, p. 31.

23. Fellheimer, Proposed Lake Front Passenger Terminal. Fellheimer defined three types of American railroad passenger terminals. The Waiting Room Type "where the Waiting Room is made the focal center," the Composite Type "where a separate large room is provided for the exclusive sale of tickets, baggage checking...with separate Waiting Room and Passenger Concours;" and the Concourse Type "where a large general passenger Concours is provided for sale of tickets, with all dependent facilities opening therefrom,..."


25. Fellheimer, Proposed Lake Front Passenger Terminal.

26. See note 4; Droge, pp. 8, 19. On page 19, Droge also quotes E.A. Delano who in 1909 as president of the Wabash Railroad spoke of the railway station as "...the modern portal;" Meeks, pp. 164-165. Meeks states that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the desire was to "attract" the traveler with the "sturdy grandeur of the stations." By the 1920's this monumentality was also used to symbolize modernity and, ironically, efficiency.

27. Fellheimer, Proposed Lake Front Passenger Terminal.


29. Fellheimer, Study for Joint Terminal Improvement.

30. Ibid.


32. Steward Wagner, "The New Hempstead Town House," Architecture, 41 (December 1920), 361-364; Pls. CXC, CXCI, CXCII; Steward Wagner, Scrapbook, n.d. courtesy WAS. This item is in poor condition. A photograph of Independence Hall is included in this book. From the kinds of materials found here, it seems as though he stopped adding new items circa 1935.


34. Some of the other commissions Fellheimer and Wagner received were: New York Central Railroad Company, Passenger Station, Youngstown, Ohio; Boston and Albany Railroad, Passenger Station, Springfield, Massachusetts; Toronto Hamilton and Buffalo Railway, Passenger Station, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada; and others.


37. Ibid.

38. Meeks, p. 122. The butterfly shed "covered only the platform...." "Each [Bush] shed unit covers two lines of track and half of a platform on each side, in one low reinforced concrete span." By 1914, it was in full use.

39. A Railway Passenger Station at Erie, Pa." Architectural Record, 63 (May 1929), 468. The city of Erie provided this plaza and broad street approach; See also: George Sepechus, "Do You Remember?" Erie newspaper article, 1932. Erie Public Library, Erie, Pennsylvania.


42. Carl Condit, American Building Art, p. 17.


44. The seven participating railway lines were: the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago and St. Louis Railroad Company, the Louisville and Nashville Railway Company, the Norfolk and Western Railway Company, the Cincinnati, New Orleans and Texas Pacific Railway Company, the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Company, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company, and...
the Pennsylvania Railroad.

61. "Heart Attack," *The Enquirer*, Cincinnati, Ohio, June 4, 1935, p. 8; interview with George F. Roth, George F. Roth and Partners, Inc., Cincinnati Ohio, July 27, 1977. Roth immediately recalled that C.A. Wilson was a prominent engineer affiliated with the railroads in Cincinnati; *The Cincinnati Union Terminal* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce, 1933), n.p. C.A. Wilson is described as a consulting engineer, from 1912-1927, on the page showing photographs of "A few of the many men who developed earlier studies of the Cincinnati Union Terminal Project."

62. At one time, these railway drawings belonged to the Cincinnati Union Terminal Company.


64. Although the Union Station, Detroit, Michigan, is dated 1916, the plans were completed several years earlier. The official names of the architectural firms who designed this station are Reed and Stem and Warren and Wetmore, the same firms which were responsible for the Grand Central Terminal a decade earlier. It should be remembered that Charles Reed died in 1911 and that by 1914, Fellheimer was already practicing under the name Fellheimer and Long and Allen H. Stem Associated, Architects.


68. By this time, Cret's own work revealed a significant amount of stylistic experimentation; drawings from 1929-1931 include styles ranging from Classical to Art Deco to Gothic. See: Drawings numbered 300, 224, 227, 228, 230, Paul Philippe Cret Papers, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

69. Carl Condit, *The Railroad and the City* (Columbus, 1977), p. 249. Condit describes the rotunda as "the largest semi-dome ever constructed for a permanent building, and the smaller is a semicircular cylindrical vault that extends forward from the dome to the plane of the facade."

70. Among the most important contributors were Wimold Reiss who was responsible for the mosaic program in rotunda and the concourse which depicts Cincinnati past, present, and future. Reiss was most likely responsible for the sophisticated lighting scheme of the rotunda, too. It should be noted that when most of the concourse was razed the mosaics from that portion of the terminal were transferred to the nearby airport. Pierre Bourdelle created linoleum panels for the Ladies Waiting Room Area as well as several murals. See: Frances Crotty, "The Cincinnati Union Terminal and the Art Deco Movement," in *Art Deco and the Cincinnati Union Terminal*, pp. 16-17.

71. Condit, *The Railroad*, p. 214. See also: p. 276, note 17 for biographical information regarding Wank which is accurate with the exception of the statement that Wank received a Gold Medal from the American Institute of Architects for the Cincinnati Union Terminal design; Letter, from Stephanie Byrnes, Assistant Librarian, The American Institute of Architects, Washington, D.C., August 16, 1977, collection of L. Stanford. Byrnes concurred that there was no AIA Gold Medal awarded to Wank.


73. Employment Records, Fellheimer and Wagner. Courtesy WAS.

74. Max Keck, Sketch for figures of Transportation and Commerce, undated. Courtesy WAS.

75. The foundations for the terminal are more extensive than they needed to be. The commercial building would have been erected, most likely, atop the checking lobby. The transition from steam to electrical power for trains required the inclusion of third rails and one or more centrally located power houses.

76. By the mid-1930's, Fellheimer and Wagner were devoting their attention to airport design. See: Fellheimer and Wagner, "Airport Design," unpublished manuscript, ca. 1940. Courtesy WAS.


In August 1929 construction began and by early 1932 the prime symbol, the massive rotunda arch made possible by Fellheimer and Wagner's engineering staff was clearly definable.