

40-Year Watch

By Fred Bernstein

Is intercity bus travel so *déclassé* that Americans can't take a bus terminal seriously? That is the only explanation for their indifference to the poured concrete masterpiece by Pier Luigi Nervi (1891-1979) that spans Broadway at the Manhattan approach to the George Washington Bridge. The structure – a station and attached parking lot, one of Nervi's few completed projects outside Italy – is a superb example of the poetry he wrought from ferro-concrete, exploring, as he put it, "the mysterious affinity between physical laws and the human senses."

In 1999, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which owns the building, announced plans to build a 50,000-square-foot multiplex cinema over the parking lot. It was to be just one more example of an architecturally significant Manhattan building becoming a plinth for a more profitable structure. That, of course, was before 9/11; the plan is now on hold. That is good news for fans of the building, which is 40 years old this year. (This event is marked in the building with a tiny exhibition of black-and-white construction photos.)

The Nervi building is essentially a horizontal platform, raised about 30 feet over the street on angled concrete columns. From the western half of the platform (which is linked by bus lanes to the George Washington Bridge), a second series of columns supports 14 triangular projections – bug-eyed clerestories that explore the otherwise neglected middle ground between Corbu and Gaudi. Striking from the outside (approached, as they usually are, from a drab section of Upper Broadway), they are nothing short of thrilling from the inside, where their concrete louvers funnel light to the waiting areas below with a mixture of precision and insouciance – as if painted by Picasso from a sketch by Escher.

The building was inspired by the Hudson River span; Nervi's structure makes explicit references to the bridge's criss-cross trusses, rethinking one idiom – call it "erector set deco" – in another. From above, the roof resembles one of the bridge's towers, pushed and pulled like taffy.

As in his better-known Palazzo dello Sport in Rome, Nervi revels in structural predetermination – the tracery of his vaults is as inevitable as the ribs of a wood canoe – and in the plasticity of ferro-concrete (his movable forms were made of the same material as the finished building).

The Port Authority (which attributes the building to "John M. Kyle, chief engineer, and Pier Luigi Nervi, consulting engineer" on a plaque in front) has, of course, tinkered with the building over the years. Recent changes to the retail/ticketing concourse (below the bus platform) include materials that would have been anathema to Nervi. A Port Authority spokesman said the PA has spent \$14 million on capital improvements to the terminal since 1999, and that it "remains open to development opportunities at the site." For now, the building retains its power to inspire. The columns supporting the terminal roof are triumphant – their tapering forms and striated surface suggest



Nervi's 1963 George Washington Bridge Bus Station

sequoias, yet without the slightest hint of kitsch. Above, concrete is rendered nearly weightless. The building is on par with Saarinen's TWA terminal at Kennedy Airport, another reinforced concrete masterpiece that seems on the verge of leaving the ground. But unlike Saarinen's building, which has achieved iconic status, Nervi's is under-appreciated. It has something to do with location, but a lot to do with the fact that taking a bus to New Jersey (rather than, say, a plane to Paris) is something most New Yorkers prefer to do with eyes wide shut.

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