**Holyoke Train Station Restoration**

The Holyoke train station has been purchased and the new owner is eyeing the possibility of restoring the building.

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**BY DUSTY CHRISTENSEN,**Daily Hampshire Gazette

HOLYOKE, Mass. (AP) — The 19th-century architect Henry Hobson Richardson is widely regarded as one of the giants of his field, often mentioned in the same sentences as figures such as Frank Lloyd Wright.

Richardson’s work can be found across the Northeast, including in Holyoke, where in 1883 he built the [Connecticut](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/connecticut) River Railroad Station at the corner of Lyman and Bowers streets. The granite and brownstone building is an architectural and historical gem, but it has long sat derelict, some of its boarded-up windows covered with graffiti, and no plan in place to preserve it.

However, the H.H. Richardson train station now has a new owner who purchased the building for $10,000 at the end of October. And although new owner David White stressed in an interview with the Gazette that he still doesn’t have “any clue exactly what we’re doing with it,” he said restoration is the goal.

“It’s certainly a lovely building, and we look forward to bringing it around to better condition and being more attractive,” said White, whose Race Street Properties LLC bought the building from Holyoke Gas and Electric. “We have a group of people who are interested in doing some restoration. We think that the building has to be restored.”

A 2014 report by the Center for Design Engagement noted that the train station was the “de-facto ‘Ellis Island’” for the industrial city, which by 1890 had the third-highest percentage of foreign-born residents in the entire country. The building had a separate “emigrant’s room,” the report notes, where doctors likely administered smallpox vaccinations.

As nearby High Street became the city’s business district, the report said, Main Street and the area around the train station became “a key rallying area for the city’s working class, ethnic minority enclave.”

“Bands and parades convened at the station to commence or conclude festivities; immigrants from Canada associated the building with their first moments in the United States; lastly, the station’s telegraph station became a hub of communication with the outside world and the meeting place for reuniting immigrant families and friends,” the report states.

By the 1960s, though, rail travel was losing popularity and the building was repurposed. Perry’s Auto Parts bought it in 1965 and operated a machine shop inside for many years. But by the early 2000s, the building sat vacant. In 2004, the nonprofit Preservation [Massachusetts](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/massachusetts) included the station on its yearly “Most Endangered Historic Resources” list.

In 2009, Holyoke Gas and Electric purchased the property for $350,000 for possible expansion of transmission cables.

“We recognized several years ago that it didn’t fit into our long-term strategic plan,” said James Lavelle, the utility’s manager. He said HG&E has put out requests for proposals three times in the last four years, and only this last time received any interest from buyers.

Lavelle said the building’s new owner would be able to put work into it that the utility can’t afford. The slate roof now needs replacement at an estimated cost of $1 million, according to Lavelle. He added that the new owner expressed a strong interest in shoring the roof up before winter.

The city contracted with the Center for Design Engagement in 2014 to examine new uses for the building, which is in the Holyoke’s “Innovation District.” The firm participated in three community dialogues on the future of the Depot Square area, and its final report details four types of potential uses for the building: food, commercial, community and educational. Among the suggestions in that report are a restaurant, an indoor public market, business incubators, coworking space, a community history and arts center, and a green technology training site.

The report also found the roof had been maintained over the years, meaning no major water infiltration and subsequent damage had occurred.

The chairman of the city’s Historical Commission, which works to make sure historic preservation is considered when development is planned, said that over the last few years the commission has kept the train station at the top of its list of most significant projects. Even so, when Holyoke Gas and Electric sold the building, the news came as a surprise for the Historical Commission, Richard Ahlstrom said.

Going forward, Ahlstrom said he and the Historical Commission would love to see the former station renovated and restored. One key step commission members would like to see, he said, is having the building placed on the National Register of Historic Places. To receive that designation, which would qualify the property for tax incentives to reduce the steep price of restoring the building, the property needs to be surveyed. And the city has already won a grant to conduct a planning survey of buildings in the neighborhood, including the station.

“We’ve been trying to do what we can to raise the profile of the building and establish the importance of the whole neighborhood,” Ahlstrom said. “A big part of the Historical Commission’s projects and work is to facilitate grant proposals or make sure developers have access to money that’s available for very expensive projects like this.”

Marcos Marrero, the city director of planning and economic development, said the Center for Design Engagement study was one of several steps the city has taken to incentivize development of the building. Going forward, there are other ways his office can help.

“It’ll kind of depend on the type of project,” he said.

Ahlstrom and fellow Historical Commission members Chris Gauthier and Frances Welson showed off the outside of the building Friday.

“It’s a really significant building, not just for Holyoke but for the country,” Welson said.

White, the new owner of the building, acknowledged that “a lot of money” needs to be raised to restore the station to its former glory. He said it was his understanding HG&E wasn’t in a position to spend that money.

“We’ll be looking for perhaps a little more cost-effective plans and stuff like that,” White said.

Information from: Daily Hampshire Gazette (Northampton, Mass.), http://www.gazettenet.com

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