

Stations and Urban Development

13 June 2019

The roundtable session “Stations and Urban Development”, held by ULI Belgium in Brussels on 13 June 2019, addressed an issue very much of our time. Many municipalities, including Brussels, are implementing measures to get people out of cars and into “softer” forms of transport, and in response, transit stations are changing.

In his opening remarks, Alain Flausch, former secretary general of Union Internationale des Transports Publics (UITP), an international organisation for public transport authorities, said railway stations are a cornerstone of urban development. He also noted that with millions of passengers passing through them every day, stations constitute a major marketing opportunity – a theme that recurred several times during the roundtable.

Vienna’s new station

Vienna transformed its main railway station via a public/private partnership; both partners made presentations to explain how the Austrian capital went about the work. Siegfried Burger-Schattauer, director of construction and real estate development at Austrian railway operator ÖBB, said the objective in creating the new station, Wien Hauptbahnhof, was to replace two previous “end stations” with one major transit station. Because many transport systems within the city begin or end in this district, it was important to consider the overall vision and concept for the district as well as to undertake an environmental impact study.

The city wished to see construction of a whole new district, largely residential. One aspect that needed to be considered was how building this new station with a shopping mall would affect other stations in the city.

The project involved the demolition of buildings on 60 hectares of land, with the added complication that the property was close to a residential district. The new facility would include a shopping mall, car and bike parking, bus and taxi stops, and other elements, and the creation of housing for 13,000 people in the surrounding area. Burger-Schattauer pointed out that it was crucial to have a steering committee to guide this work, as well as to have partners who are specialists in each of the domains – a retail specialist for the shopping mall, for example.



Professionals from across Brussels discuss the impacts of changing transportation needs.



Vienna: ©ECE.

Communication

A key element of success was to have a close relationship with the city authorities and to be transparent in communications with the city residents. Plans were available for all to see, and an ombudsman was accessible 24 hours a day to deal with questions from the public. This

led to issues being addressed very early and, above all, meant the public was involved in the project, which thereby became their project. It was pointed out that all the workers on the site were proud of the project and became ambassadors for it, and even taxi drivers vaunted its benefits to their passengers.

From the private side of the Vienna partnership, Christophe Augustin, managing director of retail specialist ECE Real Estate, contractor for some of the construction and management, provided details on how the site is much more than just a transit station. Of the total 110 hectares of land, just under half was for the railway infrastructure, and the remainder for other functions. He noted that all passengers walk past shops, cafés, restaurants, and other shops in the station, representing a significant sales opportunity. This benefits not only the shop owners, but also the rail operator, which gains revenues from activities other than selling train tickets.

Customer experience

ECE's objective in creating and managing the retail element was to create a good experience for passengers/shoppers, Augustin said. The starting point for the mall was an analysis of the catchment zone so the station would become a retail destination in its own right rather than just rely on train passengers, who often have little time to spare. The architectural design had to ensure open sight lines, and the shop operators have to take the nature of their environment into account in their offerings and promotions. The retail mix, therefore, is oriented more toward rapid-purchase items and cafés than fashion.

The layout also has to ensure that rapid connections can be made between the modes of transport. Augustin added in regard to the need for these analyses, steering committees, communication channels, and other elements of the planning: "Get it right first time: later changes are very expensive."



Philadelphia: ©SOM.



Roundtable participants listen to remarks from Michel Delbaere, President of the Belgian National Pact for Strategic Investment.

Functional repositioning

Peter Jackson, director of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, used a number of case studies in his discussion of the functional repositioning of railway stations. Any change to a station involving its size or the addition of functions constitutes a functional repositioning, he said.

In Canary Wharf, London, the starting point was an almost uninhabited zone with a tiny railway line. It has taken three decades, but Canary Wharf now has a population of 100,000 and is served by three rail lines: the tube, the Docklands Light Railway, and (soon) Crossrail. A million people are now within easy reach of the district.

In Philadelphia, the need was functional repositioning of the Penn Station, located in the university district of a city with a thriving central business district and centre. The station needed to absorb some of the activity from the city centre. The decision was made to modify the station rather than move it, adding more activities by building over the railway lines. This enabled part of the centre of activity of Philadelphia to shift to this district. Within the station, the use of natural light and a new central concourse has enabled new economic activities, which generate revenues and taxes.

In Florida, the case study projects involved providing more intermediate stations, which led to the emergence of densely populated residential areas and creation of new economic hubs. These areas proved so successful that the rail works themselves were funded by the new economic activity, Jackson said.

He noted that railway stations are vital to economic activity, but repositioning them is hard work. Multiple stakeholders are involved and the process can take decades. But it is all worth the effort in the end: the results have tangible benefits for local residents.

What about the future?

Ian Mulcahey, managing director of Gensler London, took a look at the future. He noted that just before the Industrial Revolution, the U.K. had connected all its cities with canals. Then the steam engine was invented, bringing trains, and the canals became obsolete.

Transport system designers face the same problem today – the threat of obsolescence. While new airports are being designed, Richard Branson is testing a "Hyperloop" concept – a train that is faster than a plane. This continual increase in speed – with faster trains and TGVs and other advances – will also affect new stations. People will not spend 30 minutes in a station for a 20-minute journey.

To complicate matters, driverless cars are on the horizon, allowing people to work while going from place to place, and Uber is planning a series of mini-airports in city centres that take passengers to the real airport in a drone-like vehicle.

Other trends, however, are shifting in favour of railway stations. Online shopping, for instance, is bringing retailers from out-of-town shopping centres, which require a special trip, to the places where people are going anyway – railway stations. "St. Pancras

has become a shopping destination with a railway station appended to it”, Mulcahey pointed out.

In addition, with the advent of mobile working, businesses wish to be located in or near stations, and business people are choosing to meet at stations rather than in their classic offices.

Mulcahey believes that the potential of stations is still largely untapped, and that the next big change in functionality will be in connecting parts of the city together rather than merely serving as a terminus for a trip.

Investment

As president of the Belgian National Pact for Strategic Investment, Michel Delbaere has advised the Belgian government on investment policy. Though he admitted he had little to do with the topic of the day, his thoughts on investment apply to railways and real estate. Investment plans must be disruptive, he said;

there is no reason to simply do what has been done before. Plans have to be sustainable, have to originate from the bottom up, and above all must benefit the public.

He confirmed Mulcahey’s remarks: it takes so long to get the administrative permits for a project that by the time it is time to start construction, the reality may have changed and the plans become obsolete.

Sustainability

The concluding presenter, Patrice Couchard, general manager of stations for Belgian rail operator SNCB, noted that though sustainability had received little mention during the roundtable, it is critical. The development in and around the main Brussels Midi international and national railway station is aiming for an Excellent rating from BREEAM green building rating system. The aim in this zone is to create a whole city district, a plan in line with the scope of the Vienna project.

The new stations will be digital and connected to the internet – for the benefit of both the station and its retailers – and will enable a digital relationship between the clients and their station, Couchard said. They will be multimodal and will also have superb architecture to provide an excellent passenger and shopper experience. Stations, he concluded, are at the core of the way people live and work.

Conclusion

The roundtable highlighted the way in which a train station, once nothing more than a platform enabling people to get on a train and go somewhere else, has become a living and working destination, a city enabler, a part of people’s lives.

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