

Railway stations: A key factor in social integration

In June 2017, a ULI Belgium roundtable discussion brought together political, legal and economic players to discuss railway stations: their history, their concepts, their socio-economic impact, and their role in the development and urbanisation of cities both now and in the future.

Reconciling Brussels with its stations

Speaking on the political vision of the Brussels railway stations and the real estate developments that follow them, **Philippe Close** (former Alderman of Brussels and Brussels MP and newly elected Mayor of Brussels) discussed the introduction of the railway into downtown Brussels, which connected the north and the south of the city in the first half of the 20th century.

Close noted that this railway link ushered in development practices that left an “urban

scar” on Brussels. This “scar”, which foreshadowed the phenomenon of *Brusselization* and the destruction of entire neighbourhoods, was justified by a utilitarian vision of the railway, a vision that resulted in the development of enormous office-lined boulevards, in a typical 1950s approach.

Since 1989, when urban planning for Brussels was regionalised, several questions have been raised around how to heal this “wound”—through green practices, building housing, and creating new public spaces—in order to avoid a mass exodus of inhabitants to the city’s periphery.



Paradoxically, the RER (high-speed suburban railway) project, undertaken in the 1990s with the intention of reducing traffic congestion in the city, is perceived to have increased the risk of people leaving the city.

Today, car saturation introduces a new urban challenge: rethinking stations (and rail traffic) based on the liveability of the adjacent areas and the alternative uses of stations. In this respect, the future development of the Gare de l'Ouest (Molenbeek) plays a pivotal role in both the distribution of transport in the city and the development of a multi-functional district.

This project, which marks a first step toward a reconciliation between the people of Brussels and “their” train, is an opportunity to rehabilitate an important network of small stations (local services) scattered across the region. The redevelopment is expected to reconnect neighbourhoods, offer new park-and-ride facilities, and create a true transportation hub.

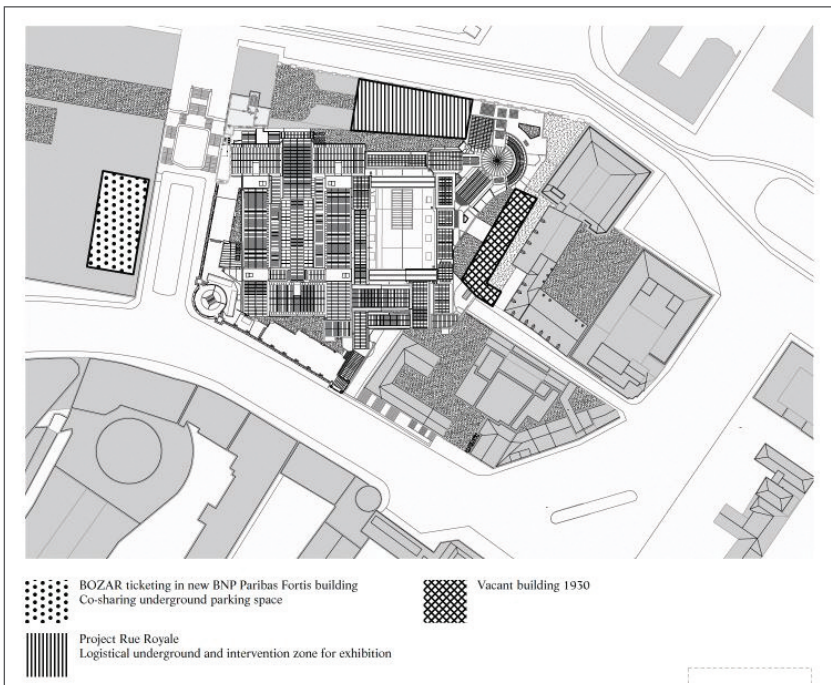
Parallel with this, the three main Brussels stations (North, Central and South) suffer from a triple deficit in terms of visibility, legibility of spaces, and utility.

While **Brussels South (Midi) station** is today the largest and most important station, it is architecturally invisible because it is lost in an urban jumble. In the absence of an obvious destination (housing, offices, shops), the neighbourhood is looking for new opportunities, including attracting start-up companies by converting former industrial sites into modern offices (e.g. the former Philips factories on the Rue Bara turned into an incubator: The Egg).

The **Central Station** (designed by Victor Horta) occupies a remarkably strategic position, just steps away from the Grand Place. While it is architecturally visible, its surroundings—which consist of *faux-vieux* buildings—detract from its appeal. These buildings are the product of a backward-looking approach of the 1990s and are detrimental to the area’s public spaces, which must be completely rethought even if the current mixed-use approach is working fairly well.

Brussels North Station is the product of a utilitarian vision. Despite being part of a multi-modal transport hub, it is located in a tertiary neighbourhood whose occupants are essentially “anonymous”. In the absence of any identity and architectural visibility, professionals in the area leave this urban space deserted outside of the working day.

Today, it has become clear that effective railway stations should be developed within an overall city project and should take more than just travel into account. The upcoming real estate projects along the North-South connection and the canal demonstrate that whatever the performance or aesthetics of a railway’s infrastructure, this infrastructure must have a close involvement and relationship with public space.



Top picture: The Bozar/BNP masterplan in Brussels evokes the spirit of architect Victor Horta: combining cultural and office spaces. Bottom picture: The Bozar/BNP masterplan envisages a sharing of services while making the most of the original Brussels streetscape.

Vision and Execution

Refining this vision, **Iwan Strauwen** (Head of Architecture at BOZAR) reminded the group that the history of the North-South connection involved a succession of projects with several motivations, including territorial symbolism (unification of the country) and a fascination with new technologies and major civil engineering works.

While this history was a turbulent one, it appears to be in line with today's metropolitan vision in which mixed, dense developments are organised in networks around railway and subway stations.

For **Yves Rouyet** (Strategy Expert at the Strategy Department of *Perspective.brussels*), this raises the question of how to treat the public spaces around the stations, an issue that is essential to creating liveability in cities.

In other words, railway stations should no longer be places solely dedicated to transport, but should instead act as urban spaces and provide facilities to host attractive cultural, scientific and commercial activities. This means that instead of financing transport alone, more focus should be placed on financing urban development.

To create liveable neighbourhoods around railway stations, the BBP (Brussels Planning Office) and its partners (some of whom come from abroad, such as the French urban planners who worked on the Gare du Midi or the architects from the AUC agency in France who worked on the Lyon Part Dieu) must adhere to a specific planning process.

This process allows time for dialogues with key stakeholders; including neighbours, commuters, and railway and subway operators; making it possible to understand critical issues and formulate recommendations. The next step is to agree on a plan that is based on the vision of city authorities but still retains the flexibility to change course if needed.



The concourse at London Kings Cross St Pancras.



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Learning by Example

The group discussed the lessons that can be learned from three of the world's most highly regarded railway stations: Saint Pancras, London; Grand Central, New York; and Antwerp Central Station.

These stations are so successful because they are **visible** (urban landmarks), **legible** (easy spatial organization for the user), and **open** - both to the public spaces outside and to internal traffic.

Following these examples, railway stations should use simple materials and surfacing while offering clear traffic patterns for customers in order to be both appealing and

practical. At the same time, the ground floor must provide easy access to public spaces. Some ways to achieve this include allowing the organisation of events, creating a strong external/internal link via retail offerings, and using public spaces outside the railway stations for cultural activities, such as concerts and markets.

For railway stations to take full advantage of surrounding public spaces, they must ensure that these spaces are accessible to passengers. If passenger flows are buried underground, or if retail offerings are confined to internal shops, then it will be difficult to make the best use of these public areas.

“Condemned” to multi-functionality

Continuing the discussion, **Henri Dineur** (Chairman of the Board of the Palais des Congrès) recalled that, given the scarcity of land, Brussels can no longer be content with creating single-use spaces, and that any space—including railway stations—is therefore ‘condemned’ to multi-functionality. In other words, stations cannot be mere drop-off points for commuting government office workers.

The “train/office” vision (popularised in the 1990s) is now outdated. Railway stations can have a positive effect on nearby commercial and residential functions, and vice versa. To take advantage of this dynamic, reorganising and promoting small, local stations (which are currently underutilised due to lack of intelligent marketing) is essential to make certain neighbourhoods more attractive and trigger real estate development.

According to **Pierre Laconte** (Foundation for Urban Environment), this vision makes rail one of the keys of improving mobility within the city. However, implementation is difficult due to the lack of a platform for regular exchanges and discussions with principal players, such as designers, users, and planners. This lack of communication

has resulted in misunderstandings, which in turn have dissuaded potential users from choosing this mode of transport.

A multi-functional approach has been adopted by **Paul Dujardin** (CEO BOZAR), who sees rail as a means of connecting cultural hubs in different neighbourhoods. These socio-cultural elements have an integrative effect in that each of these neighbourhoods works in complementarity with others (e.g. a link between the Mont des Arts and the future Museum of Contemporary Art in the Citroen building).

AREP: Designing spaces for people in motion

Daniel Claris (International Director – AREP) presented the mission and work of AREP. This design consultancy (a wholly-owned subsidiary of SNCF with 900 employees and 800 international projects), one of whose roles is the development of railway stations as railway networks evolve, has begun to analyse Brussels and its spaces with regard to mobility.

Claris explained: “Our field of action is the multi-purpose city, with evolving and hybrid functions linked to major technological

transformations—such as mobility, IT, and digitalisation—as well as sociological changes—including globalisation, urbanisation, and the needs of new urban dwellers, like social networking, the sharing economy, and sensitivity to the environment.”

Based on methodology and using multidisciplinary skills, the AREP approach aims to improve—by way of collective thought—the daily lives of people and cities in motion. To do this, AREP essentially “reinvents” each railway station by examining the urban context on seven levels:

1. The wider territory (country or region)
2. The city
3. The neighbourhood
4. The public space
5. The complex urban block
6. The building
7. Interior fittings, furniture, and equipment

According to Claris, each of these considerations must contribute to bringing every transportation site into an optimal relationship with the city and its occupants. At a neighbourhood level, this means developing an architectural concept of openness, visibility, and legibility that will seamlessly integrate the neighbourhood with the station.



Source: AREP La Chine-20170601 Bruxelles ULI



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This integration is achieved by examining flows of passengers and “accompanying” their movements. People need to be able to **circulate** without hindrance (congestion) in **comfortable spaces** (adequate lighting, room to move, practicality) that offer **diverse activities** (shops, culture, entertainment). When these conditions are fulfilled, said Claris, it creates an optimal experience for everyone who uses the station. Claris also noted that the stations of Avignon and Paris Saint Lazare exemplify these qualities.

Urbanisation and railway stations in China

Claris also discussed the impact of rapid urbanisation on railway stations in China. AREP has been active in China for 16 years, and has been responsible for building railway stations in Shanghai, Qingdao, and Wuhan, among other cities.

Claris noted that China’s growing population (currently at 1.4 billion) and expanding economy have caused an increased demand for mobility. To meet this need, railways in China are growing quickly: the country’s high speed railway, which currently spans 19,000 kilometres, is expected to span 30,000 kilometres by 2022.

Since China is so fervently engaged in new construction, the resulting developments—particularly when it comes to railway stations—are often “larger than life”. For example, the Shanghai railway station (a 270-metre diameter ring) offers 12-metre-wide platforms (compared to 6 metres on average in Europe) without any posts or poles for better comfort and smoother passenger traffic.

This trend of large-scale development, which recalls Western building practices at the beginning of the industrial era, also anticipates the enormous influx of people expected to move into cities in the near future. In 2011, 23 world cities had more than 10 million inhabitants. By 2030, this number is expected to climb to 41 cities, 30 of which are in Asia.

Massive structures like the tower buildings in Shanghai’s French Concession neighbourhoods or the Global Center, a multimodal station in Chengdu offering a development site of 1.7 million m², reflect the need for visibility in the ever-growing city. This visibility is particularly important for transport sites, which are essential to the daily lives of city dwellers.

Rapid urbanisation is also leading to new types of city configurations, such as the integrated urban complexes of Jing-Jin-Ji,

the Yangtze Delta, and the Pearl River Delta. These “megacities” are home to approximately 100 million inhabitants and offer travel times of less than an hour via train from the periphery to the centre.

Conclusion: Creating value through multi-functionality

Over the course of the roundtable, participants explored many ways to make railway stations into places of exchange, multi-functionality, economic and cultural value creation, and effective density.

Examples from China demonstrated how new neighbourhoods can be integrated with railway infrastructure, such as multimodal stations in densely populated urban areas like Hangzhou Qibao (metro depot development) and Shenzhen HongShuWan (mixed use development).

Improving transport and mobility in cities—and fostering the vibrancy and liveability needed to make transport hubs successful—requires the understanding that a city is a living organism in constant motion. Taking this dynamic into account on both a city-wide and neighbourhood level will allow for the creation of intelligent, successful mobility infrastructure.



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