

Transport and Urban Quality.

The redevelopment of stations as an occasion for urban renewal.

The research tackles the question of the renewal and reorganization of railway stations in the perspective of their enhancement as new urban centralities. This is a process already under way in many European cities and, together with the transformation of the station into a complex node, also involves the completion of operations of conversion and upgrading of railways areas that affect the surrounding urban fabric. In the Emilia-Romagna Region these projects are now proceeding, as is shown by the intense forms of intervention that affect nearly all the station sites. On the whole, the station context seems to be one of the places of major concentration of forecasts of growth, though the structuring value does not seem always to be grasped in full. The study of the whole brings out clearly the strategic dimension that all these transformations possess in relation to both the separate urban dimensions and to a more comprehensive view of the regional system.

The object of the research was thus to observe and comprehend the scope of the transformations under way in the different medium-small cities of the region, to then develop guidelines and principles for general projects that will cope with the complexity of the issues in their various functional, morphological and user aspects. The study was there conducted with reference to the most significant projects conducted in European cities that have similar developmental and infrastructural characteristics: as they are well established, their results can be clearly assessed.

On the basis of the analyses carried out certain outstanding issues were identified in the planning of projects for the renewal of the medium-small stations in Emilia-Romagna.

The urban context generally appears as an area of physical and social decay, poor in functional terms and distinguished by an urban fabric with an indefinite identity; a marginal area of transit, unsafe and therefore unattractive to the rail travellers and the broader urban users. And yet the analysis of its characteristics confirms the idea that underlies the research: namely that it is an area with a great potential for enhancement, because of its position, accessibility, and its suitability for conversion of its urban fabric.

The relations between context and station are have different features on the side of the railway towards the city and on the side facing away from it. On the **city side** the station acquires the connotation of an impassable boundary; the avenue and square that frame the travellers' building represent the end of a spatial sequence and network of streets that converge in the centre of the inner city. The station and its environs form a sort of final appendix of the central area, isolated especially in relation to the areas that develop on the far side of the tracks and that seem destined in the near future to be affected by profound and far-reaching processes of functional conversion.

The **back of the station** with the tracks and sidings is undifferentiated and contains heterogeneous structures juxtaposed that often contrast with the unity and coherence of the main building. This type of layout represents a serious obstacle to the organization of the functions of interchange and to the conversion of the station into a urban space of connection and resuturing of the urban fabrics placed on the two sides of the railway. The paths across the tracks themselves lack the spatial characters of urban thoroughfares and even if they are prolonged they hardly create an effective and attractive connection for most users. Moreover the areas behind stations are those that present the greatest opportunities for urban development: derelict industrial sites, urban voids that can be earmarked for important functions, namely to redesign the new urban expansion in the coming decades.

The processes of urban enhancement should thus tend to reduce the connotation of decayed urban margin and periphery of the areas set on the two sides of the station building, along the city-side of the station, enhancing the proposals contains in the planning instruments and programs of intervention. Attention is devoted to the formation of a network of public spaces and paths that will improve the

connections between the station and the inner city, at the same time identifying the opportunities for transforming and recomposing the urban fabric.

The system of **access**, with the main street network, the stops and termini of public transport, nearly always abut exclusively onto the city front of the station, neglecting the side beyond the tracks. It should, however, be noted that many of the projects under way aim to reorganize or reinforce the different modes of access to the station, affecting (with some exceptions) both sides of the tracks. These projects, though significant, do not yet appear sufficient to give the railway areas the role of a link between parts of the city that is necessary for the formation of a new urban pole that will prolong and supplement the system of central places. In the current state and the medium term, the problems of intervention are substantially different on the city side and at the rear.

With respect to the city side, particular attention is devoted to the reorganization of the station forecourt, which is the principal locus for the interchange with urban transport and ensures the building's penetrability to bicycles and pedestrians from the inner city.

In recent years the rear of the station has been the privileged locus for the construction of major interchange facilities, above all car parks for private vehicles and stations for extra-urban bus services. These interventions, conceived in a wholly infrastructural and sectorial logic, in the medium and long term risk becoming factors aggravating the urban decay and functional impoverishment in conflict with the objectives of urban enhancement of the surroundings. These forms of intervention need to be reconsidered in a broader framework of the recomposition of the urban fabric.

In the prospects of transformation **freight stations**, now losing their function, acquire a fundamental role. The transfer or reduction of the surface areas used for moving freight is a possibility that needs to be carefully assessed in the single cases, since it is capable of making available functions and urban uses of extensive areas on both sides of the tracks. In the same way, a technological modernization of the rail network and a different kind of organization of accessory services could make possible a reconfiguration of the areas for facilities, make the rail "barrier" less insurmountable and more easily permeable.

THE STATION SPACES

The **passenger building** obviously constitutes the principal point of contact between the complex of railway areas and functions and the city. In all the cases examined, the passenger building forms part of a more or less continuous built front that comprises other structures with different functions but all closely linked to the railway, generally heterogeneous and not noteworthy as architecture. This front forms a true urban boundary, which reinforces the barrier effect of the railway and contributes strongly to the morphological decay and functional impoverishment of the context. While the architectural quality is highly variable, the urban façade nearly always is intended to have a "representative" function. In their typological configuration, the stations of the cities analyzed reflect a conception of the train service that is largely obsolete: the sporadic and occasional use of trains that no longer matches the current modes of use of the service mainly by regular passengers.

The building should therefore be rethought in its functional typological features to censure a direct relationship with the urban context, facilitating as far as possible access to the trains and favouring the interchange with other forms of transport. This means multiplying the accesses and making them more attractive on both sides, but above all on the side facing the city, increasing the spatial continuity of the ticket offices with the station forecourt through an architectural improvement that renews the public image of the station and makes it more attractive, at the same time preserving and enhancing the valued qualities of the existing building. This upgrading needs to be combined with work on the setting to reshape the forecourt, to give life to a fluid and continuous public space of elevated urban quality. The passenger building will thus have to be conceived as an extremely permeable structure. The passenger facilities will need to be reorganized and set in this context, improving the interface and

communication systems, equipping the station with extensive rest and leisure spaces of good quality, going beyond the narrow concept of the waiting room. In this context it will be advisable to extend the commercial and service spaces for the rail passengers and also a larger public who will use the station facilities not only for access to the trains but also as spaces of urban connection and intermodal transport.

The criteria stated above lead to a radical transformation of the significance and functions of the paths that traverse the railway tracks. These paths need to be seen as **urban spaces of connection** between the two sides of the railway station and hence between the parts of the city currently separated by the belt of tracks. These functions will be secured by passages under the tracks or footbridges, depending on the opportunities provided and the specific conditions of the different stations and the urban context, through an improvement of the existing structures or, more often, with the formation of new routes.

Finally it is now essential to provide a functional improvement of the conditions of access to the platforms, through **mechanized vertical links**, to provide connections at grade with the city on both sides of the station and to reach the level of the platforms. The latter will have to be improved, above all to promote more intensive use of the rail service. So consideration will have to be given to the need to raise and extend **platforms** so as to make the waiting area more comfortable and facilitate access to the trains, reducing the time it spends in the station.

Plans and projects under way

The analysis of the numerous programs, plans and projects under way in the station areas shows that the strategic aspects, opportunities for urban transformation and the concept itself of enhancement are being grasped and interpreted in different ways. This is all the more evident if one considers the great number of players that are active in the ambit of the station. The different sectors of the municipal administrations, the managers of the TPL lines (commuter trains) and the various companies of the RFI (rail network), as well as private operations, grasp different opportunities in the processes of upgrading the station ambits, pursuing objectives and arrangements that are not always in harmony with each other.

In the **Master Plans** examined, the station and railways areas are considered as a sort of filter and a potential threshold between the central area and the areas where the greatest opportunities for urban development and conversion are concentrated, because of the presence of derelict facilities to be reclaimed or transformed and favourable conditions of access. All the situations examined are affected by conversion projects, and nearly all are defined in the form of the urban master plan. The projects analyzed, proposed by the cities, comprise the area of the station or, at the very least, the areas immediately abutting onto the belt of tracks, showing that these parts of the city are considered essential and rich in potential to designate a new phase of urban development. A recurrent feature of the **Urban Master Plan** is the notable extension and dimensions of the areas to be realized with a mix of functions, but in only a few cases does it seem to have the features to constitute new strong urban and territorial centres. The morphological question of overcoming the barrier of the railway tracks and reuniting the two sides becomes an essential aspect of the urban strategy, which only partly and in a few cases is taken into consideration. The interventions, planned and completed in agreement between the RFI (Medium-Sized Stations) and local authorities, generally tend towards the enhancement of the immediate setting of the passengers' building and a modification of the modes of access to the platforms. In some cases, through these actions, the aim is to achieve a continuity between the inner city and the peripheral or industrial areas of urban upgrading with new routes, though these are largely extraneous to the passengers' spaces. As a rule the infrastructural projects are related to intervention that aims to improve **communications**. Numerous projects planned are for the construction of new roads, intermodal car parks, and bus terminals, so characterizing the station areas as points of interchange between long- and short-distance forms of transport.

Compared with this overall picture, the projects completed as part of the **“Progetto Medie Stazioni”** of the RFI are limited essentially to restyling the passenger building and only partly reflect the aim of adapting the facilities to the new needs of users.

Analysis of the existing projects essentially reveals, as the fundamental issue, the coordination of the projects that the different operators (from the Railways to the local authorities) plan and carry out separately, inside and outside the railway area, each on the basis of their own sectorial and managerial interests. This raises the need for a **unified project** that will define a strategic vision of the whole, projected into the medium-long term, for the transformation and enhancement of the station, freight yards and adjacent areas.