

Node and place:

The spatial embedding strategy in railway terminus area redevelopment

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Khaisri Paksukcharern

University College London, UK

Abstract

The key contemporary development strategy for major transport nodes like railway termini is to transform them into urban places. However, this rarely seems to be the case, and the resolution of this disparity, which Bertolini and Spit (1998) refer to as the 'node-place' problem, in practice means redesigning what are currently regional-to-local transport nodes to also function as local pedestrian nodes. This is a complex design task, made more difficult by the fact that termini, although often located in strategic inner urban areas, are also frequently scarred by railway structures and are adjacent to large wastelands or blighted neighbourhoods. Not surprisingly, there are as yet few success stories, and conversely many cases where attempts to address this problem through design have fallen below expectations.

The argument proposes that the 'node-place' problem is fundamentally a spatial one. Using the methodology of space syntax, together with Hillier's compound theories of how vibrant urban places are progressively formed by the influence of the urban grid on natural movement (Hillier et al., 1993), and the subsequent influence this has on land use patterns (Hillier, 1996) and centre formation (Hillier, 2000), the spatial structure and functioning of eleven mainline railway terminus areas in central London are analysed. The synthesis of studies of increasing precision: historical figure-ground analyses of station areas; syntactic analysis of station contexts and the influence of the station on that context; detailed observation of movement patterns and rates in station contexts suggests that only the spatial organisation which balances all related pedestrian / transport networks and urban entities can solve the predicament in the development of railway terminus areas.

On the basis of all analytical results, it is argued that the key to the successful creation of an urban place out of a transport node is the same as that which prevails in cities in general; namely that spatial configuration is critical, and that the spaces inside and outside railway termini have to become an 'integrated part' of the local system of pedestrian movement. In order to achieve this, space has to be re-engineered to overcome the current tendency of stations to work as urban 'negative attractors' through the effect of the large blockages they impose on the development of local patterns of natural movement, in spite of the station being in itself a 'point attractor'. A node can become a place when it also becomes a 'configurational attractor' in the local network. The spatial embedding of railway terminus buildings in their urban contexts is found to be crucially related to the percentages of non-passenger and

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ucftkpa@ucl.ac.uk

non-transport facilities inside the station concourses. The configurational attractor like Liverpool Street Station has a mixed-use environment where types of station user and activity are converged and never been left vacant for most times of the day.

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