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► **To cite this version:**

Filippo Lambertucci. Infra-Malls - Ambiances for new identities of mobility fora. Ambiances in action / Ambiances en acte(s) - International Congress on Ambiances, Montreal 2012, Sep 2012, Montreal, Canada. pp.557-562. halshs-00745031

**HAL Id: halshs-00745031**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00745031>**

Submitted on 24 Oct 2012

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## Infra-Malls

### *Ambiances for new identities of mobility fora*

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**Abstract.** *Stations, airports, subways, ports, as forcedly loaded with people and therefore with potential clients, are attracting more and more commercial activities, overturning the relationships where the commercial dimension almost justifies the transportation dimension: or rather, prevails in terms of character, image, model. The nodes of mobility become in fact new centralities; spaces created in the past to host and celebrate movement are drained of their symbolic dimension, so the chance to express identity could pass through the construction of specific ambiances by the means of sensitive features, recognizing a strong shifting towards interiors of spaces and functions traditionally inhomogeneous and connected by external spaces.*

**Keywords:** *infra-malls, mobility*

### Characters for ambiances

Within the framework of a general loss of identity of public urban spaces, mobility is undergoing a rich period of in-depth analysis and revisions that concern its same foundations. Mobility nodes in fact have become more and more complex both at functional and spatial levels and new urban centres are growing around them, attracted and nourished by the flows generated by the transport system.

It is important to underpin the extent of this switch that determines either the success or the decline of public spaces and in particular the nature of the nucleus that nourishes them; until sometime ago, the configuration of public transport networks was determined by the functional and spatial nodes of the towns, whereas today it is around the mobility node that the basis for animated public spaces are set. Collective mobility has changed both in terms of the nature itself of transport means and in what concerns the network system and functioning model, that are able to design a territorial and urban geography that runs parallel to that of the physical town (and historical in particular). The growing central role in the dynamics of contemporary towns has undoubtedly strengthened the functional dimension of railway and subway stations, but at the same time it has questioned their symbolic, formal and figurative identity, that had always been a bit ambiguous.

We should not forget that many of the ambiances that characterise mobility spaces derive from the buildings that host them, that is to say the identity features of the constructions together with the demonstrative aspects shown as a whole; the mobility spaces we are talking about are stations, subways, ports, airports and all the possible combinations originating from mutual hybridizations: places that were created to connect towns and transport systems, they have always suffered from – or enjoyed double identity, always between the technical or mythic world of machines and the well known and consolidated one of the town. This ambiguity appeared since the birth of the first railway stations, the first examples of collective mobility; here, the technical space of trains seems to take on new and specific

traits: the machine dimension finds its place in the large iron and glass tunnels that will represent the image itself of railway transport for a long time, an image that will be captured and used by artists, novelists and filmmakers.

The attractive atmosphere formed by the machine and its hovel seems to find its identity and its role in the urban imagination, also thank to a very intense sensorial contribution given by the machines' noise, whistles, the iron smell, the grease, the combustions and an overall excitement for the trip's expectation, all this gathered and amplified under the reflection of the large and lighting vaults.

Though it represented one of the biggest innovations on the urban scene, the transport space always remained behind the scenes, relegated to the rear of the town.

The symbol itself of what modernity could be at the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century was pushed back behind the façades of the buildings according to two different modalities: the first one, following the Anglo-Saxon tradition, based on a pragmatic-utilitarian attitude that confines within a technical dimension the definition of spaces that derive essentially from the industrial buildings world rather than the one of public buildings; the other one, derived from the French tradition, recognises an urban role to the new buildings but without recognising them any modernity; in this way a filter is placed before the gallery of machines, the travellers' building, that will act as an intermediate point with the town and its architecture, but with no specific identity traits.

Just like tribunals or ministries, long halls and galleries appear, dangling waiting places that later on will be filled. (Colquhoun, 1995)



Figure 1. Left: Keleti Station, Budapest. Right: Fashion event in Hlavní nádraží, Praha

In the travellers' building the monumental aspect of the trip is celebrated, maybe uncertain in the type-morphological syntax but with strong rhetoric traits that maybe we do not have today; the cathedral ambiance of the historical images of the New York Grand Central Station show a sacredness still free from any commercial activities.

And it is not by chance that Zumthor opens his famous conference "Atmospheres" with an image representing a waiting space of the Broad Street Station in Richmond, evoking the atmosphere notion itself. (Zumthor, 2006)

What can we see? A big space, maybe made bigger by the photograph, almost empty except for some basic architectural elements giving simple yet dense light and shadow effects; neat polished wood, shiny floors, the moving lampshade on the benches evoking a sober elegance that is reflected on the few bystanders, all concentrated in their decorous role of passengers whose steps almost echo today.

Trains, machines are elsewhere, in a sort of technical underworld.

The same underworld where are relegated the subway networks that begin to appear towards the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century; due also to technical limits, hypogenous spaces are

limited to basic elements and dimensions, and also in this case they will follow two distinctive orientations: either the utilitarian or the decorative one.

Within this context a good example is given by the two opposite cases of New York and Moscow subways: in the first one the Anglo-Saxon utilitarian and pragmatic approach builds minimal spaces in an anonymous and quiet modality, whereas in the second case, a symbol and formal attitude brings underground the language and figurative models of the surface world.

The New York subway spaces are simple, efficient and plain: spaces to be passed through rapidly “among” the private spaces of a society that voluntarily does not have many public spaces; but the reduction at formal and symbolic level will bring the underground spaces to become the symbol itself of urban degradation and alienation (see paintings by Tooker or Rothko).

On the contrary, the subway Stalin decided to build in Moscow in the 1930s has a symbolic and figurative programme that eliminates the technical expression in favour of a monumental character that gives these places some exceptional features that are appreciated and sought-after still today.



Figure 2. Left: Leipzig Hauptbahnhof. Right: Hoog Catharijne shopping mall and Utrecht railway station

### From passengers to clients

The spreading of mass transportation represented one of the most radical and permanent typological-functional changes in urban areas; the proliferation and articulation of mobility spaces turned mass transportation into a widespread network that brought to distant villages as well the global features of the experience of collective and personal journeys, although facing troubles to identify veritable shapes for its physical frame.

Although initially often located at the suburbs of the city, railway stations were soon included among outstanding urban areas, as witnessed by postcards; as modern urban public spaces declined, the spaces of mobility are – in consideration of their nature – full of users and therefore of potential clients. This determined a process of occupation by commercial activities, initially nearly parasitic, and then increasingly programmatic, to such an extent that nowadays we might wonder what is the present feature or atmosphere of a station or of an airport.

Is it still possible to recognise them as peculiar places? As a matter of fact, we witness a sort of flattening of features and a growing standardisation of the image of these spaces, closer and closer to the shape of a shopping centre due to the growing and often overwhelming presence of large and small shops.

“Throughout our world consumer goods propelled by hyperbolic advertising techniques serve to supplant our consciousness and diffuse our reflective capacity”, says S. Holl, inviting us to think about this “background noise” that is altering our perception of space. (Zumthor, 2006) If on the one side the complexity of mixed-use is a current practice and an acknowl-

edged pre-requirement for a suitable activation of public spaces, on the other side it is true that the commercial dimension too often took on a prevailing role in the determination of the atmosphere of a mobility space.

In this sense, for instance, an exemplary revitalisation process involved many German historical stations where, as in Leipzig, Hannover, Karlsruhe, the travellers' building was literally transformed into a shopping centre, to such an extent that the signs of the promoter replaced the name of the station itself. According to the same principle, the stations of Milan and Rome were modified, as well as many other stations in Europe and in the four corners of the world, like Paris and Washington; more radical urban renovation processes see stations and railway parks in the outskirts of the city being placed at the centre of operations in which the cross-over node is conceived as a spectacular commercial node, as it is happening in Switzerland, Netherlands, Japan, and again in Berlin, with the new Hauptbahnhof. (Lambertucci, 2007) In Rome, where the new Tiburtina Station was recently inaugurated – which features a bridge-shaped model intentionally conceived as an urban connection space – one of the designers asked to public to be patient until all shops are opened in order to fully enjoy the expected effect.



Figure 3. Left: Soccer World Championship at Den Haag Railroad station.  
Right: Christmas market at Munchen airport

## Infra-malls

What is going on? On the one side the idea of a journey has lost its contours of fascination exercised by the vehicle, but also the subtle anxiety that travels inspired with their aura of unknown and detachment. On the other side, the technical aspect took on less heroic contours, having considered that the means of transport and the spaces hosting them are increasingly clean and aseptic like precision tools; airplanes are a means of transport like any other one, and trains do not hoot anymore, they probably do not produce any other noise, and smells certainly diminished. In these conditions, the means of transport are only one out of the several offers of these service centres that we might define as Infra-Malls; here, in fact, the access gates to rails or to flights are increasingly hidden in the crowded sequence of shops and fast-foods that, in the process of global standardisation and imitation, tend to comply with relentlessly uniform perceptive-communicative standards and spatial and distributive approaches. (Lambertucci, 2010)

The smell of iron fillings, of kerosene and of engine grease was replaced by the odour of industrial food fats, the machine noise by music and advertising; in large halls there are no more lost steps, since there is no time to waste, and waiting time was replaced by consumption time. In this way, galleries become animated department stores, exorcising the little sacredness that some buildings were able to evoke. The places that are not transformed do not have a better future: the famous TWA terminal by E. Saarinen at the JFK airport, considered as unsuitable for the new needs, has remained unused for many years, too beautiful to

be demolished, too precise in shaping the liturgy of an unattained modernity and however soon become obsolete, as it is depicted in the extraordinary photographs taken by E. Stoller in all its sacredness which is impossible to desecrate.

With similar difficulties, some are also wondering on the future of the old Tempelhof airport of Berlin, whereas the airports all over the world, although trying in any possible way to create a way to make them spectacular and peculiar (for instance, in Singapore with the use of large and green areas and natural lighting) offer the flavour of a particularly claustrophobic déjà-vu, due to the repetition of the international brands in larger and larger commercial spaces.

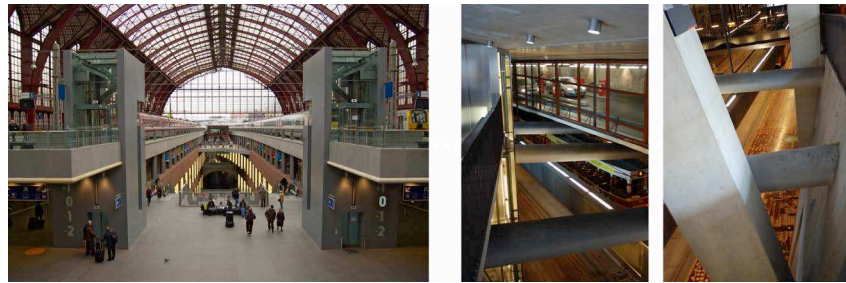


Figure 4. Left: Antwerp Centraal. Right: The Souterrain Tram Tunnel, The Hague

### Which perspectives

The most remarkable feature of mobility spaces is probably the duplicity implicit in the fact of being threshold and at the same time border and anticipation of what will come next. After exorcising the mystery of journeys and vehicles, after eliminating or heavily reducing the character of city gate and of “lying between”, what remains is however the strength offered by frequentations and by the complexity of relations.

Those who got off at the Utrecht station as from the end of the 1970s did not find themselves any-longer in the anteroom of the city, but already at the centre of one of its more lively venues, the Hoog Catharijne shopping centre that was the ancestor of what we see nowadays: entering a city or leaving it does not require anymore a space celebrating that moment.

People go to stations (including undergrounds) and also to airports (see the airport/square of München) looking for services that are not necessarily linked to travels. The anxiety of detachment is gradually replaced by the comfort of finding signs they are familiar with; reassuring signs, smells, noises and music providing a continuity of one’s experience, the same continuity that is eroding the notion of place, challenged by the standardisation of the same environmental factors. Air conditioning has, in fact, homogenized the quality of the air under the most disparate latitudes; light quality is undergoing the same treatment: more and more far away from the (pleasant) natural variability, artificial light outlines too often conformist configurations, slave of misunderstood commercial and security requirements. Light, temperature and air quality are then factors under a strict and standardised control, and are rarely used by emphasising their main features, to awaken surprising feelings, as it was attempted with the nebulisation cycles of the tropical garden in the gallery of the Atocha Station in Madrid by R. Moneo, or with the lighting cycles at the Galerie de l’Évolution in Parigi by Chemetov & Huidobro.

A sign not to be underestimated, however, comes from the growing search for station spaces, being it train galleries or travellers’ waiting halls, for events and installations looking for

atmospheres that are clearly still present in those spaces with a permeating character and for which, it appears, we continue to feel nostalgic. The large historical building devoted to mobility are evidently still able to offer symbolic and ambient values that are instead flattened, in recent new or refurbished buildings, by the conformism and homogenization of ambient factors often unable to support coherently the architectural characters.

It will be probably necessary to go back to the root of the notion of place, and to recognise – beyond the supremacy of the architectonic object, too often considered as salvific in itself – also the role of ambient factors in redeeming the identity of spaces from the imposition of that “background noise”, as S. Holl warned us.

Where to restart from, then, to identify a valid notion of place for complex nodes whose main characteristic is precisely to be trans-typological hybrids, to stir and to question the identifying features of the parts they are made of?

We should probably pass through a new approach for the light design, more careful to the natural-artificial relationship, more daring in the features, more incisive in terms of comfort and sustainability, more conscious of its role in making the sense of the place; a new approach able to manage the typo-functional complexity avoiding the inexpressive continuum generated by simple accumulations as too often outlined by solutions that abdicate too simply to the (outdated) iconography of the shopping mall.

But above all we must tackle a structural revision of the spatial and architectural semantics of mobility, able both to develop spatial models, such as the renovation of the station of Antwerp (J. Voncke *et al.*), and rework the palette of materials and design practice, as it does OMA in the Souterrain Tram Tunnel in The Hague.

In the context of redefining a *genius loci* where the *locus* is no longer an entity defined and reassuring but will have to be re-invented every time, the atmosphere will play a central role as place-maker.

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