

The development of station clusters in medium-sized cities: a new angle on territorial issues and local policies

Emilie Roudier

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Central stations have long been items on the fringe of the urban fabric and dedicated solely to rail transport and its activities. However, they are now considered urban items with strong potential (Delage, 2013) and strategic transport nodes (Richer, 2008). With the aim of transforming the interiors of passenger buildings and organising the approaches to stations and / or their neighbourhoods, projects have grown in number in and around central stations over the last 20 or so years. Those projects are characterised by what are often multiple challenges (transport, urban planning, economic development, urban regeneration, and value-added property development) and complex interactions between players, especially due to the fragmentation of competences between institutional players (the state and the region, EPCI (Établissements Publics de Coopération Intercommunale - public establishments for inter-municipal co-operation), and municipalities) and the involvement of rail-industry players (SNCF Gares & Connexions, SNCF Réseau, and SNCF Immo).

Operations relating to stations in the Paris area and in regional metropolises have received the most media coverage and been the most studied (Barre and Menerault, 2001; Terrin, 2011). Several projects have also been initiated in medium-sized cities, but those are part of territorial and political contexts that are very different from those of large cities.

Our thesis bears specifically on those projects implemented in medium-sized cities, and is based on a comparative approach to

work done in Périgueux, Saintes and Saint-Omer. Over and above the challenges relating to developing stations and their polarities, our research endeavours to show that those projects represent a support, an entryway for studying territorial challenges that are characteristic of medium-sized cities and the action framework of the local authorities in those territories (constraints, resources, reference frameworks, etc.).

REDEVELOPING STATIONS, THEIR APPROACHES, AND THEIR NEIGHBOURHOODS IN MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES

Central stations in medium-sized cities: favoured project opportunities

Development projects relating to central stations are legion in medium-sized cities. Over the last ten years, we have found listed over 40 projects that have been initiated and / or completed. The latter are spread across national territory, as is shown by those launched in Saint-Brieuc (Bretagne), Dreux (Centre-Val de Loire), Angoulême (Nouvelle Aquitaine), Charleville-Mézières (Grand Est), Le Puy-en-Velay (Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes), Beauvais (Hauts-de-France), and Dole (Bourgogne-Franche Comté). Those actions do not concern just stations served by high-speed trains; quite the contrary, to a large degree, they concern stations served by regional express trains and InterCités trains.

Variety in the scope of projects

The projects implemented cover a variety of scopes in terms of space as well as in terms of area. Some projects cover only the reorganisation of approaches to the station buildings (forecourt, parking areas, public areas, etc.), generally with the aim of improving access to the station and transit between modes of transport (as at Brive-la-Gaillarde, Le Puy-en-Velay, and Dax, for example). Others have a project scope widened to cover the whole of the neighbourhood or the nearby urban fabric, with a view to planning housing, offices, businesses, and facilities, especially on former railway rights of way (as at Châlons-en-Champagne, Périgueux, and Creil). At Saint-Omer, a more specific project was implemented in the conurbation in order to restore and reorganise the historic passenger building, which is of large size. Hence, the scope varies from one project to the next, but they all have a common objective: redeveloping the station and its polarity.

Local authorities' long-standing interest in such redevelopment

Depending on the scope, the projects are generally borne by local authorities and governed by policies on organising travel, urban regeneration, and economic development. Launching them is also encouraged by regional schemes (*Contrat de Plan État-Région* – State-Region Planning Contract), or by national injunctions that have been gradually put in place since the 2000s, encouraging co-ordination in urban planning and transport (*Loi SRU (Loi relative à la Solidarité et au Renouveau urbains* – Urban Solidarity and Regeneration Act), *Lois Grenelle* (the Grenelle Acts, which concern the environment)) and housing construction (*Loi sur la mobilisation du foncier public de 2013* – 2013 Act on the use of Public Land). Thus, medium-sized cities' interest in such projects is not new. Local authorities had already shown a special interest in those projects during the “20 villes moyennes témoins” (“Control group of 20 medium-sized cities”) experiment carried out by the *Délégation Interministérielle à l'Aménagement et à la Compétitivité des Territoires* (DIACT – Interministerial Delegation for Territorial Development and Competitiveness) between 2007 and 2011. The 20 medium-sized cities selected included several that were supported for projects that involved the station or the surrounding areas (Montauban, Le Puy-en-Velay, Creil, Châlons-en-Champagne, and Saint-Omer).

PROJECTS AT THE HEART OF MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES' TERRITORIAL AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES

Analysing the planning of such redevelopments is an opportunity to highlight and to study territorial challenges that are characteristic of medium-sized cities, as well as the action framework of local authorities that carry out those projects.

Redeveloping station access: travel modes in medium-sized cities

Redeveloping station access by various transport modes calls for a study of the travel modes used by station users, and for those travel modes to be put into perspective with those of the inhabitants of the city and the conurbation. The objective is often to improve access to rail services and to modes of transport for current users and new future users alike.

In medium-sized cities, daily journeys are undertaken largely by car (Gart, 2015). Urban public transport (buses, or buses with a high level of service) are often poorly used and developed. As for active modes (cycling and walking), they often have limited dedicated layouts, and they still compete with cars for short journeys. Intermodality, i.e. the successive use of several modes of transport during a single journey, is also less common in medium-sized cities than in large cities (Certu, 2011).

Hence, in medium-sized cities, working on defining developments for parking cars is a delicate matter, especially in terms of regulation, location, and car-park capacity. The objective is to meet current journey demand as well as develop access to rail services using alternative solutions. In Saintes, bus stops are located at the entrance to the station, the forecourt car park has been reorganised and regulated, and another free car park has been laid out, this time on a railway right of way a little further away from the passenger building.

Moreover, the work done focuses more on creating conditions that favour the emergence of intermodal practices than on optimising existing intermodality that has already been developed between trains and heavy, high-capacity modes like the metro or the tram.

Developing station access is the opportunity to confront and consider the predominance of cars in those territories, and the difficulty of bringing about change in travel habits (Gart, 2006; Gart, 2015).

Complex projects faced with increasingly rare local-authority resources

Implementing those projects is based on significant budgets of the order of several million euros, even for the smallest operations. Buying former railway rights of way and constructing new buildings are amongst the most expensive aspects of those projects, especially given the price of land and the work needed to depollute and secure sites. Financing agreements generally involve multiple partners, and vary in accordance with the exact scope, but the share of the *inter-communalités* (public establishments for intermunicipal co-operation) and of the municipalities relate to significant budgets for authorities that are directly affected by the fall in territorial grants. Lower financing ability can lead to a reconfiguration of programming and to a reduction in the project scope as originally planned. In Périgueux, part of the planned developments involves reviewing and enlarging the existing pedestrian bridge that crosses the railway lines, whereas the local authorities initially wanted to build a new pedestrian bridge. Accordingly, the scope was reduced and reviewed after several months of negotiations with partners in relation to financing the project. However, reconfiguring the project is not an impediment to action: the planned developments involve a faster work schedule, and, to a certain extent, they are more in line with local authorities' ability to act and to raise financing.

Redeveloping station clusters and the centrality crisis of medium-sized cities

As access points to the transport network, stations are already places where flows are concentrated, so they are transport clusters. However, carrying out those projects generally aims at developing stations' polarity functions to make them full centralities in the medium-sized city and even its conurbation, by concentrating offers, services, and housing beyond its railway function. Defining those projects often involves studying the position of the station relative to the city centre, the

quality of routes between the two polarities, and the composition of the business and service offers. Railway stations are usually located one or two kilometres from the town centre. Historically, they have been developed on the periphery of city centres in order to reduce the disturbance linked to rail transport (pollution, smoke, noise, etc.), and to construct the necessary infrastructures on vast non-urbanised plots of land.

This study of the links between railway station and city centre is part of a "centrality crisis" context affecting medium-sized cities. For 15 years, their city centres have experienced phenomena of commercial devitalisation that have been more or less marked depending on the cities, as well as phenomena of vacant housing, to the benefit of municipalities set on the periphery. As such, many local authorities have focused their policies and actions on revitalising their city centres.

Redeveloping station clusters in cities often raises the question of complementarity and competition between those two polarities, especially when it is a question of developing activities and businesses. For example, in Saint-Omer, complementarity between the services offered in the future station building and those of the city centre have been a concern for the local players involved in the project. This means that when that redevelopment is carried out in parallel with other projects planned for the city centre, it is possible to observe competition in relation to their implementation in a context of limited financing from local authorities.

In addition to those three examples, studying those projects also enables a study to be made of the situation of territorial engineering in medium-sized cities, local authorities' ability to reorganise in order to complete their projects, and the necessary linkage between regional and local policies.

Our thesis seeks to take a fresh look at redevelopment in relation to station clusters, through a precise analysis of the projects carried out in medium-sized cities, which have long been overshadowed by projects carried out in metropolises. Our research into those operations highlights the singularities that are specific to the context of medium-sized cities, both territorially and

politically, and they attempt to identify the characteristics of implementing those projects in those territories. Local authorities' enthusiasm for those redevelopments certainly invites reflection on the common

challenges that face medium-sized cities, but it also prompts study of the circulation of best practices and references between medium-sized cities, or between large cities and medium-sized cities.

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