A 'placeful' station? The community role in place making and improving hedonic value at local railway stations

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A B S T R A C T

In recent years, railway stations have come to be seen as non-places within society, points of transit and nothing more. The role of the station in place making is disputed with stations seen as both creating and destroying a sense of place within a community. Our study is located within the railway stations of Scotland and explores how local communities have been empowered to reclaim, customise, and re-appropriate stations to simultaneously create a sense of place and better promote their community to the outside world. Drawing on ethnographic research we refute the notion that stations are somehow 'placeless'. We show how through a process of legitimisation, a sense of ownership and appropriation of the station environment, communities are able to transform the station, improving hedonic value and recapturing a sense of place.

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1. Introduction

'The railway station is one of the rare public buildings produced by the industrial revolution which illustrates admirably, over a hundred and fifty years, the gropings, fluctuations and transformations of our Western society. Stations reveal the myths and realities of the epic times we live in. A veritable microcosm of industrial society, a public place where all social classes rub shoulders, the station has been throughout its history at the heart of the present, the many faceted mirror of a striking array of achievements'

[Dethier, 1981, p. 6]

In the UK, arguably the birthplace of the modern railway, railway stations have a deep rooted sense of history. Railway stations are gateways (Hamilton and Alexander, 2013) or 'attractive points of entry' (Pels and Rietveld, 2007, p. 2044) that link urban environments to the outside world and play an important role in place marketing (Warnaby, 2009b). However, outside of large cities with their grand flagship railway stations the role of the urban or rural station in society receives less attention but is, arguably, no less significant. In our research we investigate the importance of local railway stations to their communities and explore how legitimised community involvement at railway stations can contribute to a reclaimed sense of place, or placefullness as we will refer to it.

The importance of place is central in modern society and operates in us as the "geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere, one antidote to a prevailing alienation" (Lippard, 1997). The growing importance of place in society is increasingly recognised at the corporate level with strategies such as localisation (Värlander, 2007) enabling firms to better understand a market, and provide customers with offerings which appeal to specific local demands. However, the implication

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here is merely that company representatives be given some degree of flexibility to adapt 'global' strategies to fit the 'local'. The idea of placefullness in these contexts is deliberately embedded by an outside agent in order to make an offering 'fit' a local setting (Williams et al., 2004). We argue that placefullness is, in fact, something that can develop from within a community and this paper aims to *explore the mechanisms by which communities can create a sense of placefullness at local railway stations*.

Our study explores the railway stations of Scotland and how local communities are empowered to reclaim, customise, and re-appropriate stations to simultaneously create a sense of place and better promote their community to the outside world. The paper proceeds by exploring the role of the railway station in local economies and considering competing arguments of place and 'non-place'. We then consider the potential for the community to play an active role in creating a sense of place (or placefullness). We use ethnographic methods to consider the relationship between a public transport provider and community groups who 'adopt' their local railway stations. We use the term community to denote community of place where members are connected through their geographic location. Our research shows that, with firm support, community groups are legitimised and make a meaningful contribution to their localities by creating placefullness and transforming stations to sites of heritage, aesthetic value and social support.

2. The railway station in society

2.1. Railway stations: place and non-place

During the rapid growth of the railways in the mid to late 19th century, stations grew from "a 'gate' at the city fringe to the status of palace in the very heart of the city" (Maillard, 2001, p. 14). Increasingly, these flagship buildings took on an important and symbolic role in urban development (Warnaby, 2009b) and phrases such as 'volcanos of life', 'palaces of modern industry' and 'cathedrals of humanity' (Dethier, 1981, p. 6) all suggest emotive and significant roles in society. Additionally, the architectural refinery of many railway buildings served "to communicate the achievements of the railway to a broad public" (von Buch, 2007, p. 267).

However, in the post war years the railway industry, particularly in the UK, declined with the infamous 'Beeching cuts' exemplifying negative attitudes towards railways and in line with an increasingly car based society (Wolmar, 2007). The latter part of the 20th century saw lines closed, stations de-manned and station buildings demolished. This attitude is summed up by Flanders and Swann in their song 'The Slow Train' which mourns the loss of many local railway stations "no churns, no porters, no cat on a seat".

In recent years various authors have acknowledged the positive impact stations have on cities from an economic perspective and also as an attractive location for service industries (Pels and Rietveld, 2007; de Graaff et al., 2007). Grand buildings once cited for closure like St Pancras in London have been renovated and given a central role in the development of a high speed European network, mirroring the activities of the French TGV railways in the latter part of the 20th century (Maillard, 2001, p. 14). Indeed, "by reappropriating some of the architectural archetypes of the past, the modern station is starting over as a symbol of travel and a pleasant place for the customer" (Maillard, 2001, p. 14).

Changing traveller's mode of travel from car to rail is seen as a key strategy of the EU (Brons et al., 2009) and improving transit and terminal service quality is recognised as an important factor influencing traveller behaviour (Cascetta and Cartenì, 2014). The recent mobilities paradigm suggests that time spent in inactivity (such as waiting at stations) is as important as the time spent in motion (Bissell, 2009). Ultimately, Warnaby (2009b) sees transport infrastructure as having significant potential in creating awareness of – and changing perceptions of – places in the minds of a target audience.

Railway stations perform a range of functions in society beyond the instrumental activity of facilitating the boarding of trains in that, "they are part of community life" (Edwards, 1997, p. 26). Station design, therefore, served the communities in which they were set and station architecture and embellishment "mirrored the different roles that the railway played in society – economically, politically and socially" (Edwards, 1997, p. 26). Railway stations (unlike airports perhaps) need to be better integrated into a community and are characterised by heterogeneity (Bissell, 2009). Stations act as a symbolic presence (Edwards, 1997; Lee, 2003) and railways can lead to economic growth and the revitalisation of urban areas (Edwards, 1997). In rural areas stations:

Do much to sustain small towns in the countryside by reinforcing the local economy and providing a magnet, albeit on a small scale, for future growth. Country stations are often the main social and business focal point of rural areas, locations where tourist services are promoted...both a means of access to other places and a centre for local enterprise and cooperation.

[Edwards, 1997, p. 42]

However despite the societal importance of the railway station noted above, the gradual retraction of the railway in the 20th century, and a more functionalist approach taken by architects and planners (Dethier, 1981), it is unsurprising that railway stations can be seen in a negative light, a non-place:

"Railways, like other modern communication and transportation systems, pose a theoretical dilemma. Do they alienate or destroy a sense of place...or enable new connections to be made? If the latter is the case, do these new experiences of place sufficiently compensate the loss of more traditional sensibilities?"

[Bishop, 2002, p. 298]