Stations as Nodes

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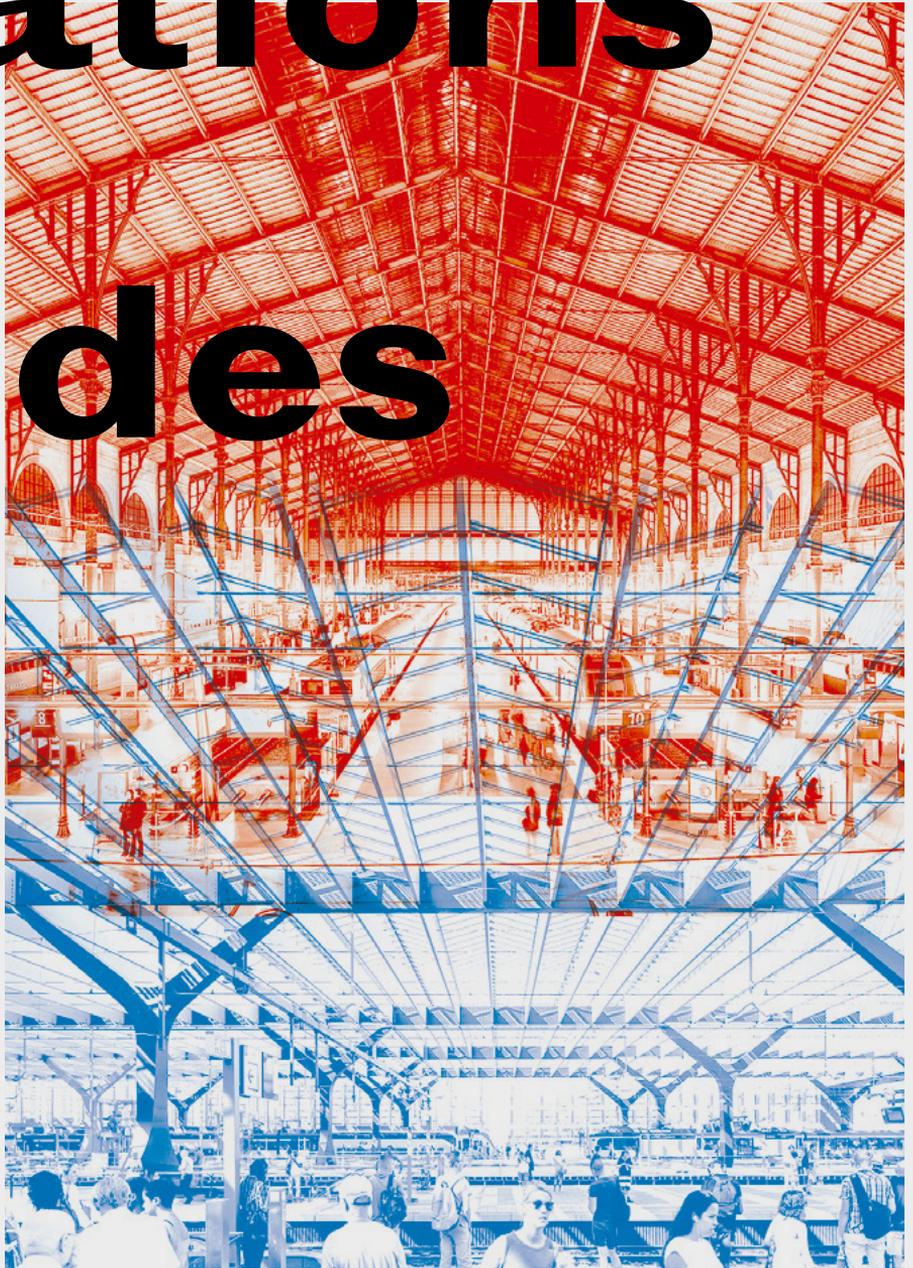Tom Kuipers
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exploring the role of stations in future metropolitan areas from a French and Dutch perspective

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Metropolitan Stations, Places for Change and Innovation

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Metropolises are growing. Hinterlands are changing. People migrate to seek better futures elsewhere. They relocate themselves in order to find better life conditions. Humans move in or out, from city to city, in a desire to change. Some, like refugees, are drifted and forced to flee. In the global manifestation of the present wave of urbanization, new disciplines have emerged to illuminate the 'urban' dimensions of existing ones. Think of urban agriculture, urban behavior sciences, urban computing, urban economics, urban geography, urban informatics, and many more. It seems, that everyone is acting in a fast urbanizing world. Of all, we, a broad group of analysts, designers, and engineers, are particularly concerned with the physical realm in the urbanization processes. Together we face spatial questions: how to keep the city accessible and connected, attractive and livable, and environmental sustainable, with the resources available?

The population of Amsterdam is expected to grow with twenty percent in 2050. One million people will live within municipal boundaries, up to three times more in the larger metropolitan area[1], and between eight and almost ten million inhabitants in the Randstad conurbation.[2] Yet, although not every area will grow and some peripheral cities and regions in The Netherlands will shrink too, we have to find answers to aim for the connected, vital and sustainable metropolis in all cases, particularly in the booming cities. If cities extend, more people will live on large commuters distance from the core, and if skylines will rise, more people live elevated, reluctant to multi-deck elevators. New centralities

will emerge and hybrid solutions are most likely. Of course, we know how to deal with this. One may say: "I am a planner!" "I am an environmental scientist!" "I am a system analyst!" "I am a civil engineer!" "I am an urban designer!" "I am an architect! I know how to do this!" If traffic jams are forecasted, sure one can plan, design and built new ring roads. If the amount of passengers is increasing, one can add some tracks and extend the station building. If people have a street level desire in high-rise, one can simulate this in public sky lobbies. Where do we move and meet in the future...? Many answers are possible, but sure there'll be better environments from one's perspective. We are able to do it. Are we really? With the legacy of the twentieth century, we know we are able to make what one wants, but we have to ask ourselves: can we make the whole? Every profession has its own angle and claims its own space. In addition, non-pros have an idea and a claim too. In the current age of participation, pro-active citizens, and populist society, everyone adds. Processes have changed. Building new roads, tracks, terminals, buildings may face opposition. Paper work is challenged by reality. The last decades have unfolded an unstructured approach to the transformation of our cities. Especially in The Netherlands, we have become aware that "no actor or stakeholder can make metropoles move in one certain direction".[3] People influence space even simply by being somewhere. Their "social trajectories leave digital trails that can be analysed to gain a deeper understanding of collective life". As scientists, we need to work together to make sense of these traces.[4] Next-generation metropolitan solutions require cooperation between disciplines, between actors,

stakeholders and users, as well as between cities, citizens and civil society. Roughly following complexity theory, we are learning to combine systems and networks, including actors and entities with an own dynamic, in order to understand our urban living space and act wisely in every emergent situation. As practitioners we need to work together. As people we do. Interdisciplinary work, as such co-created with the public, is not easy, but for sure it is pushing everyone together. This so-called transdisciplinarity[5] provides us unexpected encounters in the meeting rooms, design labs, as well as in the street. More so, the street becomes a lab and meeting room and vice versa. Multi-layering scientific, technical, and social knowledge help to develop answers and come to changed concepts for the metropolis.

All old-school sources for innovation[6] are present at major human hubs in the growing metropolis. The multimodal Amsterdam Sloterdijk station is one of those places where the pressure on space becomes manifest. Perfect for change. People move in or out, from platform to platform, in a need to change. Most live on distance, some pushed out, others avoiding the buzz. People run to catch the next train or they are forced to wait. They eat something, they flirt or play with the smartphone, they are bored. At this metropolitan station, Amsterdam is about to transform big time. The station area, including offices and some hotels, is designated as the new midst of Haven-Stad. The urban area around it, currently dominated by harbor activities and industry, will house ten-thousands of new homes and workplaces.[7] Without knowing every detail on the whole yet, close to the station, currently already new towers are being developed within existing plotlines. Of these, the residential 'Vertical' of architect Kamiel Klaasse stands out literally.[8] In an aim to

open-up to the surrounding, the design extends the network of public spaces, yet also, it remains still one project delineated by plotlines. Other disciplines involved work within these too, seemingly by invitation. Especially in this station area, designers are confronted with a heritage. A past way of doing echoing through. Amsterdam Sloterdijk station is a perfect pars pro toto for the glory of disciplines from the past. It lacks integration. Zooming-out, one sees highways, roadways, waterways, and overhead power lines, neatly designed next to the train tracks. Here, every profession has claimed its own space. The architect too. "Pressure? Which pressure?" Not only the station but the whole needs an update to cope with the influx of people. This includes multidisciplinary work.

Following the early Modern structuralistic mono-disciplinary approaches of the old days, the first station on the line was designed and constructed next to the village Sloterdijk in the fifties, as part of a larger infrastructural plan to serve urban extension areas. Lou Scheffer, Theo van Lohuizen, and Cornelis van Eesteren developed a sequence of policy making, researching and planning.[9] The last one passed the baton to architects, like Koen van der Gaast for the design of the first Sloterdijk station and others for mass housing, industrial complexes, et cetera. From Modern planner's perspective these are just 'urban-planning elements',[10] parts of the whole. In a shift of senses, particularly stations have become multimodal hubs for commuters and office workers, and thus urban, architectural and infrastructural disciplines have come closer together. The development and design of the current Sloterdijk Station, replacing the first, exemplifies this. It is built on a crosspoint of tracks. While its architects Harry Reijnders, Jan van Belkum and Wienke Sheltens added subsequently new station

halls in 1983, 1986, 1997 and 2008, a variety of other designers and engineers have been responsible for the plot-wise development in the proximity of the station. Each one adds a piece, closer and closer to each other. They do in multi-disciplinary teams more and more, hence professionals work increasingly synchronic. Nevertheless, disciplinary boundaries and plotlines are today as clear as they have been. The result is a fascinating clash of infrastructural and architectural presence. From an urban perspective, the area is highly connected by public transport, but poorly accessible by different means. From a human perspective, it is still not really vital, hardly designed to stay, let alone livable. In the midst of everything, humans move on an elevated walkway, colorfully repainted as a 'rainbow path' in 2016, as if they are on a assembly belt. People move as particles almost everywhere around the station, if anyhow they can move. In thousands a day, they flock in and out the metropolitan station and, as said, more will come. Absorbing space, concrete and other resources, it must also be a very unsustainable area. Change is near however.

Outdoors, the Bret pavilion is co-created in 2015. Inpatient people changed part of the area as a place to stay amidst wild flowers. More gardens followed, again a similar team effort.[11] Perhaps these are hipster places, but different people appropriate spaces too. They have their own perception and ideas. Indoors, public amenities serve travelers, tourist, congress visitors, knowledge workers, civil servants, officials etc. Are they able to change stations, hotel lobbies and office atria? Which teams will act first? If thousands will follow, our concern is to fully serve all desires and habits; present locals, hipsters, backpackers and passers-by and every next group of unknown newcomers. People's spaces overlap. The multi-layering of use, appropriation and experience need complex coalitions of interdisciplinary teams of professionals, including continuous input of users. We're pushed together in the growing metropolises, and, at metropolitan stations, the architectural, infrastructural and urban comes together by nature. Here a real innovation district has emerged. Whereas the station has always been a space for many, it is about time to be approached and designed as such. The urgency is there. Stations are part of a larger network of public spaces, indoors – outdoors, and interlink other hybrid places and buildings. From a human perspective, it all makes sense. The more people flock to the city, the more move and stay at stations and/or elsewhere close-by. As such, from the observation that the whole is more than the sum of fixed demarcated elements, ever-changing human hubs are perfect settings for place-based innovation in design and by design, because where people move society changes, and where strangers meet change takes place. At metropolitan stations change becomes spatial and physical: a transdisciplinary domain in which we act. Design is on-going!

▼
Mind The Gap poster by GVB
Photograph by author
(22 augustus 2018)

Notes

1
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3
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7
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9
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