Lille Europe: A Success Story?

Mig de Jong   M.dejong@tudelft.nl
Delft University of Technology   Transport & Logistics

Abstract
Development of high-speed train station areas can provide an economic impulse to a city. The station area around Lille Europe, Euralille, is probably the project that is most often put forward as an example thereof. In reality the station area is not the success many people consider it to be, au contraire. The offices are rented out for a bargain, the housing areas are not very popular, and the Euralille shopping centre is suffering from a low number of visitors. How did this happen? And why is there such a large gap between the actual success of the station area and the image of success? What can we learn from the success story of Lille and the failure of the station area?

1   Introduction

The face of Europe is changing. A European market is developing and expanding, and Europe is integrating. In Europe borders are fading, and travel in between European countries is becoming an important element of everyday life. This leads to spatial integration; distances are getting smaller through new infrastructure and international services. One of the leading factors in this development, besides cheap flights, is high-speed rail. Since the 1980's the European high-speed train network has been developing, connecting European cities in a network of national and international high-speed lines.

The development of the high-speed train network is still largely a public matter. Western European governments invest in the networks and the services that are deployed on these networks. These investments are not unconditional; different results are expected. Such results are, for example, environmental benefits from modal shifts, from car and aviation to train transport, general accessibility benefits, and increased prosperity in the locations with greater accessibility.

A train station has different functions in a city. Firstly it is part of a transport network, a link connecting the city with its environment. The high-speed train station (HST station) is often one of the most important locations within the network: an important node where many modalities meet. Secondly the station is part of the city, often located centrally within the city. In the station area many different types of activities, functions and facilities are located. The areas where high-speed train stations are developed, called HST locations, are new showpieces in connected cities. These HST locations are special places with high accessibility. Properties in many of these areas are developed as high-rise, high dense, up market real estate with soaring land prices. Other station areas are less successful. They are located in empty areas outside of the central cities, without many plans for development.

Some of these cases are successes. Development of the station area has provided the city with an economic impulse. The city centre where they are located has truly improved, and the station is an important part of the city. Other cases are less successful. These are locations that suffer from a lack of investments, little commercial interest and empty buildings. The station area around Lille Europe, Euralille, is probably the project that is most often put forward as a successful example. However, in reality, the station area is not the success many people consider it to be, on the contrary. Local offices are rented out only for a bargain, nearby housing areas are not very popular, and the shopping centre "Euralille" has difficulty attracting customers.

The case study is examined to grasp the meaning of the concept success, and to learn about creating successful station areas. Why is this location not as successful as it is often considered to be? And why is there such a large gap between the actual success of the station area and the image of success? What can we learn from the success story of Lille and the failure of the station area?

To investigate the success of Lille it is placed within the theoretical framework of the node-place model. This framework is used to define success is, and how to determine success. The station area has been investigated, interviewing both local experts (planners) and users of the station area. The site was visited on several occasions, literature reviewed, and the station area was compared to other similar station areas in North-West Europe. These included Amsterdam Zuid and Arnhem Centraal in the Netherlands, Aachen Hbf and Frankfurt Hbf in Germany, Bussels South in Belgium and both Ashford International and London St Pancras in the UK.

Section 2 deals with station area development and the node-place model. Section 3 describes the history of Lille Europe. Section 4 will discuss the success of Lille Europe, while section 5 describes the lessons learned.

2   Station area development

There are many perspectives on station areas. Bertolini focuses on what he terms "the realisation of the potential for physical human interaction" (1999, p. 220). 2 elements are important for realising this accessibility of an area: the *node*, the *place*.

The station as a *node* refers to the station as the location where different links in a network meet. It forms an access point to a network. The station as a node in a network can be defined in terms of the infrastructure itself; the physical infrastructure that is more or less prominent in different locations. This is also found in the *place*, where the infrastructure is often considered a barrier. The node can also be defined in terms of also part of the and in terms of the spatial interaction between urban locations. These two elements are often equated too easily (Bertolini & Spit, 1998, p. 10-12).
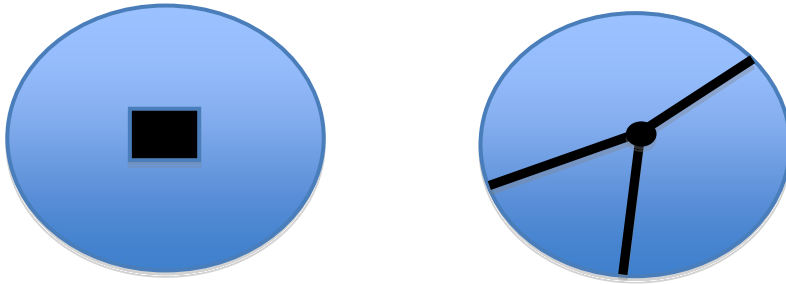
Figure 1. The station area as a place   The station as a node in a network
(Source: Bertolini, 1998, p. 10 & 13)

The station as a *place* refers to the physical location in a city. The station is the centre of the station area: a specific part of the city, where not only infrastructure is concentrated, but also different buildings and open spaces are located (Bertolini, 1996). A place is often defined as a physical environment, and as a synonym of *space* (Bertolini, 1998, p. 11-12). The place around the station is often referred to as station neighbourhood or station district. This can be defined in many different terms, including: *functional-historical*, *topographic* or *walkable radius*. The functional-historical definition refers to the actual functional elements related to the train station, elements with a strong link to the train station, such as an axis connecting the station area to the city. The walkable radius defines the station area as the circle around the station that can be considered walkable. A topographic approach would separate an area on the map that is termed station area (Bertolini, 1998, p. 11-13). Here the latter two approaches are combined: the 500-metre radius around the centre of the train station is considered the station area (HST location). This is roughly the walkable radius.

In determining the success of the station area we can examine many different factors. In order to determine the success of the location as a node we would have to examine the degree to which the station is a node in a network; the connectivity of the station; the relative importance of the station within the network. We could also determine the success of the location as a place. We can examine the accessibility potential of a place, focusing on the activities in a location (number of activities, diversity of activities) (Bertolini, 1999, p. 201. We can also examine the results of the activities, which in turn are the result of the node function as well as the place function in a location. The value of real estate in the HST location should be compared to other locations in the region, as well as similar locations elsewhere. This can be operationalised in terms of current rents, comparing these rents to the rents in the other locations.

3   Lille Europe

Lille is an old (ancient) French city, the largest city and centre of an urban region spanning into Belgium, and covering major cities such as Kortrijk, Tournai, Tourcoing, Roubaix and Villeneuve d'Ascq. In the city live over 220,000 people, in the region over 1.7 million people. The city of Lille developed into a major industrial city in the nineteenth century. This happened particularly when Napoleon put a ban on English

textile, and the Lille became as a textile industry centre. In the mid-nineteenth century many cities gradually developed around their railway station. In Lille the first train station was built when the city was linked to Antwerp and Ghent in 1842. In 1846 it has been connected to Paris. This station was later rebuilt as Lille Flanders, in which part of the old Parisian Gare du Nord façade was used (Tiry, 1999). The actual location of the train station was the subject of a strong polemic in Lille, where a harbour train station, a city centre train station and several locations just outside of the city were proposed as the new location for the train station. The location that was chosen was a compromise, with a passenger station within the city boundaries, and another station outside the city for freight (Tiry, 1999).

In the 1980's the textile industry in Lille collapsed, leading to a difficult period for the city and region. The old industrial fields were covered in dust and the area became known as one of the old industrial areas where unemployment and other social problems thrived. This image in turn strengthened the decline. In 1981 the first TGV line between Lyon and Paris opened, and in Lille the high-speed train was considered an opportunity for the city. Pierre Mauroy was prime minister of France in 1986 and mayor of Lille when France and the United Kingdom decided to build an HST line between London and Paris. In 1987 the governments of France, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands decided on the construction of an HST network between their countries. The fastest route from Paris to London was through Amiens, and this would cut Lille out. Since a connection between Paris and Brussels was proposed as well, the route through Lille was not bad at all. Mauroy, now only mayor of Lille, lobbied intensively for a link through Lille. The old train station Lille Flanders, a terminus station, did not fit well with the direct link to London. Lille needed a new train station: Lille Europe. This is where the success story of Lille started.

All connections between the three important (perhaps the most important) European cities Paris, London and Brussels were to run through Lille. This would transform Lille from a place located in a corner of France, to a central location within Europe. During this period station area development was not considered an important part of the HST development. However, the development of Euralille was largely based upon the idea that the HST connection would be able to transform the station area completely, and even to regenerate all of Lille. The idea was to make the station area into a "gigantic futuristic project" (Koolhaas, in: Bertolini, 1998, p. 77).

This resulted in the Euralille Project. The new Lille Europe station was located only 400 metres from the current station, and the station area was transformed completely, to make optimal use of this opportunity. Famous architect Rem Koolhaas was assigned to design an urban plan for the station and the station area. Koolhaas wanted to create new urban space in the station area. According to the new planning paradigm 'mixed use' different functions had to meet in the area. The spatial layout would be aligned completely with the new train station. The station would get a metro link and it would become the heart of the area between Paris, London and Brussels (Tiry, 1999). The site was to be developed in a public-private partnership.

The site contains a large triangle, where a shopping mall is located, as well as parking places, offices and an international business school. In the station area office buildings have been built, a road linking the two train stations, a large park, a hotel and many smaller buildings.

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Figure 3. The HST Location Lille Europe. Source: Bertolini, 1998.

4 Success Story?

The station area Lille Europe (or Euralille) is often termed a success (Trip, 1999, Tiry, 1999, Newman & Thornley, 1995). Other authors are more reserved in ascribing success to Euralille (Bertolini, 1998, Priemus, 2006). How successful is this station area really? In order to investigate the actual success we need to examine both the success of Lille as a *node* (section 4.1) and as a *place* (section 4.2). Then the overall success of Euralille for Lille will be discussed (4.3).

4.1 Success of Lille as a node

Not all high-speed trains stop at Lille Europe. Trains from Brussels to Paris have to take a detour if they stop at Lille Europe. Therefore most of these trains don't stop there. Trains between London and Paris do pass by this station, but most of these trains don't stop either. It is mainly the London – Brussels Eurostar train that stops at Lille Europe. Within France the connection to Paris is crucial. At Lille Europe there are only 7 connections to Paris per day. Lille Flanders, however, has 26 connections per day, of which 16 in the (long) French rush period.

Most of the trains connecting to the vast region of Lille (spanning Nord-Pas-de-Calais, and parts of Flanders and Wallonia, containing Douai, Valenciennes, Béthune, Maubeuge, Arras, Lens, Armentieres, Mouscron, Courtrai and Tournai) stop at Lille Flanders. Only trains to Douai and Arras stop at Lille Europe, but trains to these cities stop at Lille Flanders. Both of the stations are connected to the city and several suburbs through the Lille metro, using the VAL (*Véhiculaire Automatique Léger* or previously Villeneuve-d'Ascq-Lille). However, Lille Europe is only a minor stop, while Lille Flanders is the main metro station, where all metro lines meet. Lille Flanders is also the most important bus station of the city.

Considering that Lille Europe is not even the most important node in Lille for high-speed trains, for which it was built, and considering that for regional connections it is a very minor train station, we must state that the station is not very successful. The station appears to be a minor train station, secondary to Lille Flanders. In some occasions the station area is considered to consist of the two train stations together (Bertolini, 1998, p. 70-72). Together these train stations form an important node, the most important in the region. They are however not the epicentre of the triangle London-Paris-Brussels, as it was once foreseen (Bertolini, 1998, p. 72). However, the true success story, as it is called, is about the station area (the *place*), not about the station (the *node*).

4.2 Success of Lille as a place

Most of the 500 metres around Lille Europe is known as Euralille; the *place*. This station area contains beautiful architecture; there are many good-looking buildings, with architectural highlights that are very nice to look at. Rem Koolhaas is a gifted architect, who is very good in capturing contemporary taste in his buildings, and is very well aware of the perception of his architecture on camera. However, he is not a very gifted urban designer.

The station area is often termed to be multifunctional, grasping on the idea of mixed use. However, the term 'contemporary monofunctional' would better suit the station area. There are several strongly separated elements. In the heart of the station area is the station itself (which is logical since the definition of station area is the 500-metre radius around the centre of the train station). Through the station runs the rail infrastructure with a parallel highway, from northwest to southeast. Alongside this highway are a series of office buildings, lined up with the highway. This does not look bad, but it means, practically speaking, that these offices are not part of the city, but part of the highway. Most workers get there by car, because there are massive parking locations in

and near the buildings and only few trains stop at Lille Europe. The workers leave when they are done with their work, because there is no city life there.

On the city side of the station we find two other monofunctional blocks, separated by a 4-lane street, that connects Lille Europe with Lille Flanders. On the one side we find a green park. This "Park" is mainly an extensive grass field spanning almost 80,000 square metres. On the fringes there are some bushes and trees, but there are no other landscape elements, hills or water. Overall it is a park that feels desolate and eerie. On the opposite side of the road is the Euralille Shopping Centre. This huge building contains only shops, cafés and some cheap restaurants. Theoretically it connects Lille Europe to Lille Flanders and the city centre. Practically it separates the two, because of its massive size, and introvert construction. There are only two entries, one at each station, while along the road between the stations there are no entry points, only the large unfriendly walls of the mall.

The contrast with the city centre of Lille could hardly be any bigger, because in the centre there are many small shops in old streets. Here we find what Jacobs (1961, p. 152) terms 'primary mixed use'. People use the area during different times of the day, because there are people who work here, people who live there and people who are enjoying themselves. This in turn leads to liveliness, variety and safety. Old buildings allow for creative entrepreneurs, bookstores and other innovative new ideas to develop (Jacobs 1961, p. 152-200).

On the other side of the station area, we find two separate residential areas: *La Madeleine* and *St Maurice*. The density of La Madeleine is so low that it is more of a suburban neighbourhood than a city, which of course does not fit well with a station area. Density and concentration are not only essential to city life, but particularly to station areas (Jacobs, 1961, Majoor, 2006). The central streets of both neighbourhoods are not directed towards the station. Actually, in between the neighbourhoods and the station there is a massive parking place. This clearly separates the neighbourhoods from each other and from the station. The people in the areas rarely use the station, mostly because more centrally located metro stations are available there. There is no interaction between the six different areas that form the station area. They are completely different worlds.

All of this doesn't have to be too problematic; there are many monofunctional areas all over the world we might still consider successes. However, this station area is probably not one of them. A way to analyse the success is to examine the rent rates and the occupancy rate. The office rents are equal or slightly lower than elsewhere in the region, although the buildings are very new, and the rates are much lower than in big metropolitan areas like London and Paris (Bertolini, 1998, De Jong, 2007). The occupancy rate is not good either, and many occupants are either located their because of subtle persuasion by local government or because of special tariffs (De Jong, 2007). The occupancy of the shopping centre has been a difficult matter as well, with shops continuously moving and expanding within the building, to keep it fully occupied. The rents are, although presumably lower than expected and lowering, not available publicly.

4.3   Success

As a node in the network and as a place in the city, Lille Europe is not a success. Overall, the station area is a fiasco. It is not what it was supposed to be: an international metropolitan centre of a large urban conurbation. The different functions are separated and none of them is very successful. At the Lille Europe station a high-speed train stops , but the station is not well accessible from the region. The eventual success is related to the positive image of the station area. However, Euralille is often referred to a success story. The secret of this "success" is contained in the positive image. Lille Europe has a positive image, and the station area has done a lot for the image of Lille in general. There has always been strong lobby for the station are. This has been done by Mauroy in particular, a charismatic and powerful man, as a mayor of Lille, as the vice-president and president of the metropolitan region Lille, and even as prime-minister. The lobby for promoting the station area as a success has been very strong as well. It was promoted internationally as the new urban regeneration strategy.

This lobby led urban planners from all over the world to learn from the success of Lille, and Lille became an international example of how to build a high-speed train station area. Because so many people believed in the success story, it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. The success of the station area changed the perception of Lille. No longer was it considered a failed industrial city, and a new *élan* came over the city. When this led to new tourism the city council decided to give the city centre a facelift. This time no new megalomaniac constructions were built, but several buildings were sandblasted and squares made more attractive for tourists and visitors. Several streets were closed for traffic and cheap alcohol attracted English tourists.

This means that the success for the region is in fact real. The question of whether Lille Europe is a success project thus has many answers, depending on the way the question is formulated. Is a successful train station a station with many connections? Or with many activities that are diverse and coherent? Or is a successful station area a station where the economic success has led to high rents. In that case Lille Europe is not a success. Is a station area successful if it leads to a positive impulse to the image of the region, and the economy of the region? In that case Lille Europe is a true success case.

Figure 3. Superficial success at Lille Europe. Pictures: Mig de Jong

5   Lessons Learned

The development of the station area around Lille Europe is a rich source for lessons for future development of stations and station areas. For each station connecting to the HST network, this connection provides an special opportunity for development. However, this connection provides only one type of accessibility, which is not as important as it is often assumed. A high-speed train connection is not important for commuters, but commuters are important for business. For a successful train station area more is required than high-speed train accessibility alone. Particularly regional accessibility is important for commuters, and thus for offices in the HST location.

In terms of design of the station area Euralille is mainly a negative example: it teaches us what we should not do. Mixed use is an important element in a station area, but not in terms of placing monofunctional blocks adjacent to one another. Housing above stores allow for space to be used in a functional way, but also allows for interaction between different functions. Mixing offices and houses allows for a good combination of liveliness during the day and at night. Cafés, bars, restaurant, hotels and leisure are other complementary functions, creating liveliness and interaction. Stores focusing on groceries and other daily shopping are more suitable in a station area, while a shopping district focusing on recreational shopping is more suitable in a city centre.

Open space, like parks and squares are often considered to be very positive. However, the adagio too much is always bad applies here. Parks, open fields and squares can only flourish when they are shielded by buildings and in combination with other attractive elements. More playful and thus successful parks can be created using lines of sight, specific focus points, meandering roads and landscape design tricks. Open space for the sake of it does not work.

However, the most important lesson to be learned from Lille Europe is the way the train station changed the image of Lille. Lille has been put on the map because of the TGV and Eurostar, and Lille has seized this opportunity to promote their city. They have presented themselves as a new node the network, with itself at the centre of the network. They have presented Euralille as the example for all stations to follow, although the station area is not very successful as such. To the outside world local and regional governments stick to their claim of success, and on congresses and meeting they tell their success story. The fact that they achieved this success without creating a very successful node nor a successful place is a big paradox. And the success remains fragile.

6   Literature

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