More than Infrastructure Hubs: the challenges for railway stations in transforming Chinese cities

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Contemporary cities are becoming increasingly complex. Globalization, individualization and decentralization, have remarkable influence on the way our cities develop and transform. In this framework, particularly projects connected with pivotal infrastructure nodes deserve special attention. The constantly increasing need for mobility makes the mutual synchronization between the development of infrastructure nodes with the transformation of their surrounding areas a crucial matter within the fields of architecture, planning and urban design. Particularly observing the case of growing Asian cities, it is clear that a critical perspective is needed in order to find ways of bringing forward new urban configurations able to reflect urban conditions and society's needs now and in the future. The focus is on the Chinese scene, where we can find remarkable examples as well as interesting controversial aspects.

China is working on the largest high-speed railway network of the world and is busy with the planning and the realization of several new stations along with the refurbishment of existing ones. All this has already great impact on the mobility of people as for instance in the conspicuous reduction of travel time on several main railway routes throughout the country. On the other hand, due to the implementation and the realization of the high-speed project, the existing balance between infrastructure and city needs to be reconsidered in order to cope with its new dimensions and challenges. This is particularly the case of cities where a completely new high-speed railway hub has been realized or is under construction. Some interesting questions arise about their role as urban catalysts as well as their impact on the future of existing (and usually centrally located) railway stations.

The main objective of our research is to acquire knowledge and contribute to the discussion about the significance and the role of architectural and urban design in the realization of complex building assignments. Knowing that there will be the necessity of building new railway hubs and/or transforming the existing ones, an important question would be: how can we possibly anticipate and adequately react to the problems and challenges posed by these interventions? How can we achieve a balance between complex urban projects and their context — and not only in spatial terms — is an increasingly important matter for disciplines as architecture and urban design.

In this respect the research is bringing forward interesting perspectives on the matter, very fruitful for some PhD candidates and certainly suitable as background or framework for design studios. Next to the more academic targets, the outcome of this investigation could be very useful for institutional and market related parties.