Why we can’t afford to miss the train

I have often argued for fewer grand projects and a more fine-grained architecture and urbanism. But one place where big projects and systems thinking are needed is infrastructure, for it sets the framework for developments in place. So I am inclined to dive in investment in high-speed rail and airports, and argued for an extensive UK network in Transport and Neighbourhoods, my 2008 book with Edge Firetimes. High-speed rail, as a part of an overall transport system, can enhance the transport experience, stimulate regional economies and divert traffic from car and air travel.

But the more I look into HS2, the more I worry that it is being driven by engineering and cost-benefit analysis — leaving the core social and economic reasons for the investment out of the design equation. Not only does this undermine the case for HS2, it means that the project may fail to achieve the potential benefits.

Transport investments can help unlock access to land, permit more intense development and enable households to make different housing choices. This can transform regional economies, if it is part of broader land-use transportation strategies. Making cost-benefit decisions primarily in terms of the effect of reduced travel times is too narrow, and allows the debate to be reframed around the choice between investment in the countryside and travel time savings for commuters with laptops.

A few people have recently offered perspectives that see transport investment as a tool to address housing affordability and regional competitiveness. If the debate can be reframed in this way, the question is no longer should we build HS2, but what HS2 should we build?

Peter Cuming’s proposal for Euston station shows that design matters, by putting connectivity and related development over first cost. Michael Heseltine’s idea to create urban development corporations around stations would capture the value created by improved access, creating a vehicle for providing needed housing and allowing the regions to create development strategies that will make them more successful. And many have called for better connections to airports and HS1, and to what is amusingly called the “classic” rail network.

Many rail advocates have looked at HS2, seen its flaws and concluded it should be dropped. I fear if we don’t move forward, the same thing will happen for a generation, and we can’t afford to slip further behind. We must find the will to advance high-speed rail and airport investment in London, but both need to unlock and capture the value of the shaping power of transport.

Alongside a more broadly framed transport investment, government must use its powers to assemble land, create a friendly yet directive framework for private investment and thus enable the transformation. Architecture and urban design are critical here, for the project-driven approach will seek to save costs by cutting connections, simplify designs by ignoring synergies, and reduce complexity by partitioning “outside” issues like value capture, user experience or placemaking into another project. What’s needed is not more analysis of the benefits but an HS2 that recognises the centrality of these issues to project delivery and success.

MATT WHITE
Founding partner, Matt Architecture

Arguing in favour of the regeneration of neglected sites to the readership of BD, whose livelihoods are all more or less dependent on the industry. But there’s that, pretty much everything’s fair game. While a site may become permanently neglected, as soon as that neglect becomes permanent the site loses relevance.

Any place that remains alive in our imaginations is never truly neglected: we just have to make sure our plans for the future don’t destroy our inheritance from the past.

In London, our own project (in collaboration with Soda) for Soho Estates in Walker’s Court — once home to the iconic Raymond Revuebar — involves the regeneration of a derelict site littered with sex shops, lap-dancing clubs and “walk-ups” — all of them failing as the economic thrust (unintended) of their activity has moved to the internet.

In its 1980s heyday, however, the Revuebar was at the cutting edge of social change and launched its owner, Paul Raymond, towards becoming one of Britain’s richest men. It’s this heyday that we remember — and that we are celebrating in our proposals.

Its regeneration is necessary, though — to create a new chapter for our time. There will still be a couple of nightclubs, but there will also be a new theatre, restaurants, shops and apartments — and of course a restored sign, high-kicking its neon legs into the imagination of a new generation.

Now — what do you think about Hartlepool?

SPEAKING OUT

Amanda Baillieu pays tribute to Jubilee Line Extension mastermind Roland Paolotti

Roland Paolotti, who died last week, was one of the most significant architects of post-war architecture in the most unlikely of circumstances. Appointed chairman of the Metropolitan Water Board in 1941, he arrived determined to outdo the original plan of Frank Pick.

I knew him very well when he was choosing the architects for the Jubilee Line stations he used to ring me. I was a reporter on BD at the time from a phonebox in UCL headquarters to tell him my latest architectural congeries. I knew he wanted Norman Foster — they had trained in Manchester together in the 1950s — but he refused to tell me which station he was planning to give him. One day, just before BD went to press, my phone rang. It was Roland, “Foster, Carus Wharf”, he said and then hung up.

When I interviewed him a few weeks later he was exhausted. He had seen 65 architects and at that point picked just three: Ian Ritchie for Bermondsey, Ron Heron for Corporation Water, and Foster. None of them had any experience working for WLR before — even then as almost as much of a social perspective — which he considered an advantage. And he was prepared to take some big risks. Will Alsop was hired through his first public building, Le Grand Bleu, when Paolotti said he wanted to give him the largest station site on the line: North Greenwich.

He made his job sound easy. “I have a list of architects I like and then I choose my favourite,” he said to me once — but that wasn’t quite true. Behind the scenes every station was its own mini-drama, whether it was the conjoined nature of Hounslow’s Westminster, which had the SNB offices under it, or North Greenwich, which was designed in an open box but ended up with a roof.

Years later, I would tell him my current favourite station — or I have had love affairs with most of them — and tease him that he had master-minded something so audacious that no architector would ever let near a tube line again. “JL E was not extravagantly funded,” he’d say crossly. The architecture of course was a fraction of the cost and not why the line went over budget. Yet what he couldn’t argue with was that, for Londoners, the underground is a fact of life but he turned this part of it into a source of national pride.

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