



JONATHAN BRAY



Breathing new life into redundant land

Thriving new community spaces have been created from the redundant former public transport estate, and more can follow

► Transport reconfigures the landscape time and again with each fresh wave of technological change. The coming of canals, railways, motorways, airports and ports all made new kinds of places. But when the next wave of change happens, those places can be left beached, with land and buildings that are no longer needed for their original purpose.

'Build baby build' is one of the key themes of the current Westminster administration. It wants to speed up house building; back as many mega infrastructure schemes as it can; and in general tip the balance of the planning regime towards developers. So giving new life to dead transport land plays right into that agenda. But will a wave of new uses for old transport spaces be skilfully and sensitively realised?

I write this close to the York 'teardrop' site (now known as 'York Central') - a large area of railway lands being cleared to make way for homes and white collar business. I'm hoping that this substantial development will be a whole lot better than the dispiriting, car park-heavy office park built on part of the site of the nearby York carriage works following its closure in 1996. It should be, but there are plenty of examples of the use of the former public transport estate which are as dispiriting as those at the former York carriage works. Chainlink fences and big sheds; identikit low-density car-dependent housing and commerce with few amenities; and semi-derelict wastelands lingering on.

If we are looking at a new push to use former

public transport land, what does good look like? Well, first of all, it needn't necessarily look like bricks and mortar at all. It could be used to insert green lungs into grey spaces, give urban nature a fighting chance, and help in adaptation to the effects of climate change (slowing the flow of intense rainfall at one extreme and damping down hotter temperatures at the other extreme).

Visit Berlin's Tempelhof airport terminal and gaze out over the runways, and you won't see any planes or service vehicles. Instead, you will see cyclists, kite flyers, skateboarders and dog walkers. This is because when Tempelhof closed in 2008, instead of turning it over for development, they turned this vast site over to the people of Berlin, as a park. It's quite an experience to walk towards the horizon on an empty city runway.

Not far from Tempelhof is Natur Park Südgelände - a slice of woodland shot through with art installations where rare insects rest on rusting railway lines. There are railway lines there because this nature park used to be a depot and railway yard. The yard had been abandoned to nature in the early fifties after the division of the city and its railways. After the reunification of Germany, the park became

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protected, complete with new artworks and old railway artefacts - including a locomotive, water tower and the depot. Natur Park Südgelände is also now part of a green corridor which ends at the more central Park am Gleisdreieck, which is also former railway land, as well as being home to Germany's national technical museum. Berlin is a mix of the gritty and the green. And as with its former transport land not too scrubbed up, interpreted and sanitised. Which is one of the reasons so many people love the place.

Tilburg in the Netherlands was one of the country's rail manufacturing centres with a works that at its height employed nearly 1,500 people. By the time it finally closed in 2009 the municipality had a plan for the large area of land it covered close to the station and city centre. At its heart was the conversion of the locomotive hall into a library. The structural features were left intact with the cranes, which moved the locomotives around the site left in situ, as indeed were some of the tracks now used by three flexible 'train tables' which can be utilised as reading tables, an extension of the café or as a stage. More than the sum of its many parts and interlocking dimensions. Dignifying its heritage without being limited by it. Everything about the library feels generous and true.

The LocHal is set within a wider and spacious city campus known as 'Spoorzone' (railway zone) where other railway buildings and artefacts have also been repurposed. There are restaurants both in a railway carriage and also in a 1930s locomotive shed, complete with an outdoor 1920s turntable. Also part of the zone are new homes for businesses, with a strong emphasis on tech and entrepreneurship. Something which should be boosted by the creation of a young professional campus with 20,000 square metres of living working and education focused on entrepreneurship affiliated with Tilburg university. Elsewhere on site, another large railway building is now The Hall of Fame - an incubator for urban sports and culture.

There are many things that are great about Spoorzone - not least of which is that the symbol and showpiece of the whole site is a public library. But also that it can be found in Tilburg - which not chi chi or a property investment hot spot. Indeed it used to be known as the ugliest city in the Netherlands.



Yet here is a highly successful repurposing of an industrial site of the highest quality.

And it's not the only example in Europe of massive former railway works which have been repurposed into new local mixed economies. I've been impressed by Lokstadt (formerly the Swiss Locomotive and Machinery Factory) in Winterthur, and Telliskivi on the old

locomotives works at Tallinn. They have both gone with the grain of the architecture and atmosphere of the massive railway works they inherited to create new quarters that manage to combine different functions and activities in a way that feels interesting and real.

What equivalents of scale do we have in the UK for old railway sites (outside of scrubbed

up restorations primarily for heritage or enthusiast purposes?). King's Cross railway lands, Swindon works, Derby roundhouse, Camden Market, Manchester Mayfield all spring to mind. Though I'm not sure any of them are quite the mixed economy that Tilburg has pulled off.

It's not just former working transport land that can be reimagined, so can active transport land. In Paris they are putting new housing developments above new bus and metro depots. They are being built by RATP Habitat (a subsidiary of RATP Paris), whose mission is to provide housing for essential workers (including public transport workers) in the heart of the city. This includes more than 600 new housing units over a new maintenance depot for Line 12 of the Metro and mixed-use developments over new electric bus garages.

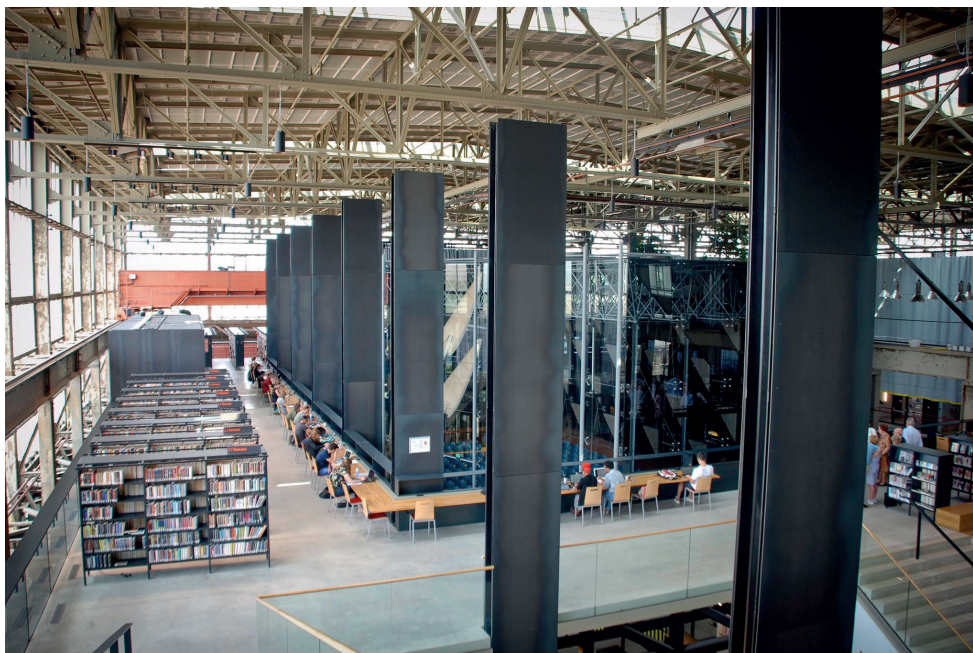
Last month, at Bankside, I boarded a Thames Clipper (arguably the most 007 public transport service we have) which powered its way to the end of the line at Barking Riverside down a misty Thames lined with high-density blank-faced, high-rise, luxury apartments. After these dead-eyed and claustrophobic displays of wealth and speculation, it was a relief to alight at Barking Riverside, which shows how something better can be done on former industrial land (in this case, a power station). It's incomplete, but the public transport is already in there - including an Overground station and bus links - as are schools, urban farming, and many green spaces. There is car parking, but it doesn't dominate the space. This feels like an attempt to build a community with space to breathe.

Can we create more spaces to breathe from the public transport estate? More 'spoor zones'? More affordable homes for public transport workers? From Barking to Berlin, new places say we can. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

► For decades Jonathan Bray has been at the forefront of making progressive change happen on transport - from stopping the national roads programme in its tracks in the 1990s to getting buses back under public control in the 2020s. He is an advisor to the Welsh Government on bus franchising and an independent advisor. www.jonathan-bray.com

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Images from the Spoorzone in Tiberghen. At its heart is the conversion of a locomotive hall into a public library