

From Lille-Flandres to Lille-Europe —The Evolution of a Railway Station

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Since the mid-19th century, European cities evolved around the railway station as a central pivot where goods and people converge. This is still true today when railway stations take on a new role as urban hubs in the European high-speed train network. Lille in northern France, which has two stations from different railway periods—Lille-Flandres and Lille-Europe, is a good example illustrating this quasi-continuous past and present urban ambitions.

Lille is a city of 170,000 adjacent to the French-Belgian border. It is at the economic heart of the Lille-Roubaix-Tourcoing-Villeneuve d'Ascq conurbation of 1.2 million people, ranking (excepting Paris) third after Marseille and Lyon in terms of population. It played such a major role for centuries in the commercial and industrial development of the region—originally coal, textiles, sugar and agriculture, that it was linked by railway to Ghent and Antwerp in Belgium in 1842, before it was linked to Paris (only 220 km away) in 1846. At that time, Lille was still surrounded by its 17th-century Vauban fortified city wall, so the station—actually a simple platform—was built outside the city. From then on, the inconvenient location of Lille Station was debated periodically between the City

Council, the Northern Railway Company established in 1845 by the Rothschild family, the French government and some of Lille's most prominent citizens. These controversies also stimulated nearby urban projects.

The Railway Station Enters the City

In the 19th century, the railway station became a new gateway to the city, disrupting both the city walls' protective function, as well as the urban layout. The original controversy in Lille emerged from this duality and a station inside the city was strongly opposed by the military. There was also lengthy debate by the City Council and Ministry of Public Works about how to breach the walls to lay tracks. There was a hard fight to decide whether to replace the archaic platform outside the city with a new station inside the city, which the military again resisted and which would entail heavy land purchase costs. This dilemma called the future of Lille into question. Would it be an important communication point between Paris and Belgium, or a secondary intermediate relay isolated from the modern railway network? The

economic arguments finally prevailed and a good compromise was adopted—two stations would be built, a terminal inside the city walls for passengers traffic, and a through terminal outside for goods traffic. Construction of the passenger terminal started in 1845, and lasted 3 years. However, the builders underestimated the scale of both passenger and freight traffic and the capacity was soon saturated. To solve this new problem, an Imperial Decree in 1861 allowed the Northern Railway Company to start construction of a marshalling yard—called Saint-Sauveur station—south of the main passenger station, at the junction of the old city and the industrial suburbs.

A second controversy arose over the question of reconstruction of Lille passenger station, and especially over its architecture. In the 1860s, several English and French examples of railway architecture (façade) were already using the metaphor of the gateway with arcades, portico and monumental arch elements, expressing the grandeur of the city. When the Northern Railway Company announced that it would be recycling the stone from the single-storey eight-bay Paris Gare du Nord station for use at Lille Station, the City Council was scandalized



Lille-Flandres Station

(Author)



Lille-Europe TGV Station

(Author)

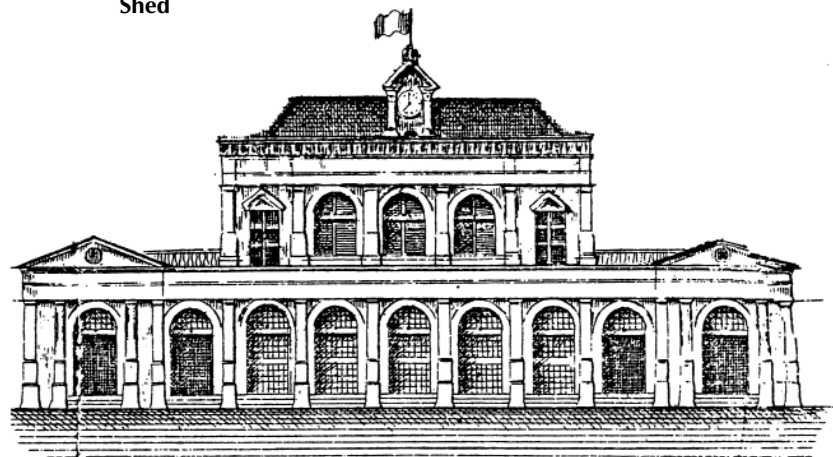
by such a proposition for a growing city of such importance. 'Our mission is to create a big city.' recalled the mayor during a strained meeting in 1864. Once again, a compromise was discussed. The final project consisted of a monumental embellishment by adding a ninth bay, a second storey, and a clock to the former Parisian façade.

In the late 1880s, an adjacent hotel and a splendid cast-iron train-shed at the rear were added to complete the project. However, the result today seems much more like a collage rather than an homogeneous and powerful single building. Such a monumental station building also required a worthy urban frame rather than the existing crowded urban fabric inherited from the middle-ages which was a serious obstacle between the economic centre of the city and the new city gateway. While the new station was being built, the 20-m wide road called rue de la Gare (renamed rue Faidherbe in 1880) was built in 1869 based on Haussmann design principles—linking important urban poles while bringing open space and light. The axis focused on the station in the east and the theatre in the west, adjacent to the ancient Grand-Place and Stock Exchange, and presented elegant and homogeneous five-storey Parisian-style buildings on both sides. Unfortunately, the theatre was destroyed by fire in 1903, so the street lost half its elegant appearance.

A Continuous Polemic

Although Lille Station still stands today as Lille-Flandres, its controversial position within the city provoked nearly 100 years of lively discussion interrupted only by World War II. Successive construction and extension stages offered many opportunities to achieve a much more ambitious urban project by really including this 'central' station in the heart of the city rather than keeping it on the edge. Moreover,

Figure 1 Lille Railway Station Façade in 1871 before Addition of Rear Train Shed



Source: BNF

Figure 2 Lille City Plan in 1871 with New Boulevard linking Old City and Suburbs (BNF)



Source: BNF

during this long period, there were other crucial opportunities related to new global visions for the city, such as urban design competitions. The protagonists of the urban role of the railway station were divided into two main camps: the economists, and the engineers.

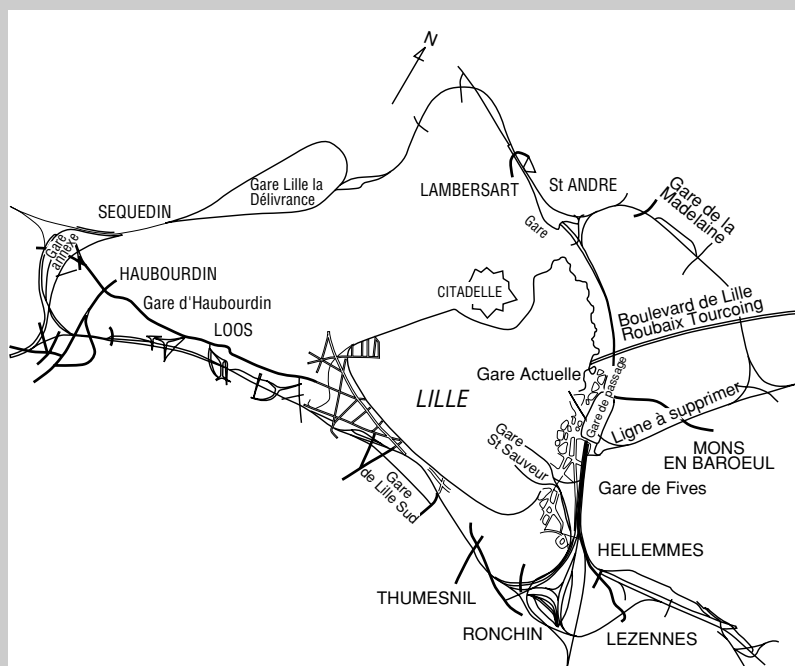
In 1858, several nearby towns, mostly south of the city walls, were incorporated into the city, suddenly doubling its size. The enlarged city boundaries and removal of the walls completely transformed the urban scale—from 92,000 inhabitants in 1858 to 170,000 in 1868—and required

a new city plan to articulate the densely populated heart of the city and former scattered suburbs. The City Council organized a planning competition based on a detailed programme with primary focus on communication between the city's commercial and industrial sections. The first priority was rapid and direct connection between the freight station and port on the River Deule—adjacent to the citadel to the west. The second priority was keeping the traditional economic centre in order to maintain property values in the old city. The winning project, designed by the local architect, E. Vandenberg, respected the City Council's request to connect the old city and suburbs by creating a 30-m wide tree-lined boulevard commanding a sub-network of public squares. However, several other projects took much more radical or ambitious positions on the

question of modern city communications, based on economic arguments. Some proposed building a new freight station close to the port to form a competitive industrial complex, while others planned to transfer the passenger station into the heart of the new extended city, similar to Lyon Central Station, from where new boulevards would emerge. The first proposal was quite visionary—a huge marshalling yard called Lille-Délivrance would be built there in 1921, but the second proposal showed that the station was adopting a new monumental and symbolic role, expressing the city's status, power, and dimensions and controlling its spatial structure. In terms of town planning, 1919 was the turning point for main French cities. Some were partially damaged during World War I but most were still surrounded by restraining and obsolete fortifications. The

1919 Cornudet Law required the local authorities of cities to launch town planning competitions where candidates should study urban improvement and extension problems. In Lille, the competition mentioned major transformation of the whole railway network, among several requirements. In fact, in 1919, the City Council, the Northern Railway Company and the Ministry of Public Works agreed to demolish and move the passenger railway station rather than extend the existing terminal. The plan envisioned creation of a terminal through station located 500-m behind the existing one, on a site free from the walls. The competition winner, designed by the famous architect, E. Dubuisson, used the new station location as a focal point for the urban structure of the whole area. But strong resistance from Chamber-of-Commerce members and from prominent local traders against moving the station far from the vital economic heart of the city, quickly overturned the decision. In fact, technical reasons were behind the City Council idea; they were considering the move as part of a much bigger infrastructure project that became apparent a decade later—the construction of a more convenient railway loop for the growing national and international traffic, such as Calais-Berlin-Warsaw. Intermediate local stations at the southern edge of the city would eliminate the old branch line and its dangerous level crossings. After tense negotiations, the project was scheduled to start in 1934 with completion 15 years later.

Figure 3 Lille Railway Network Envisioned in 1930s



Source: L'Echo du Nord

The Railway Station in the Shadows

In most industrialized countries, the priorities from the 1950s to the 1970s focused on developing new rapid means of transport. In 1954, the opening of Lille Airport and the first section of the Lille-Paris motorway (completed in 1967)

symbolized the start of a new era of modernity and the need to change the city scale. Planners stopped viewing Lille as a single city surrounded by suburbs and adopted a much more metropolitan viewpoint. Moreover, the 1967 plans for the new university and science town of Villeneuve d'Ascq 6-km to the southeast required reorganization of the entire transport system of the metropolis. Actually, at that time, city trolley-bus networks were being closed across France and the only existing transport except for roads and railways, was the Y-shaped tramway line built in 1909 to link Lille and its industrial satellites of Roubaix and Tourcoing, 13 km to the northeast. The first subway, planned to connect Lille and Villeneuve d'Ascq would be completed only in 1983.

Although traffic at Lille Station was still growing, with 15,000 to 20,000 passengers per day in 1959 and reaching 41,000 passengers per day in 1977—the biggest provincial railway station in France, the building itself stood apart from the ferment of metropolitan projects.

In the 1960s, transport facilities like a coach station and a heliport were added next to the old station, but were progressively abandoned. However, the station area itself became the focal point for futuristic, ambitious, and optimistic urban projects that would reinforce Lille as the largest city and economic powerhouse in the Lille-Roubaix-Tourcoing-Villeneuve d'Ascq conurbation. Today, the combination of high-speed railway and motorway on the less-developed eastern side of Lille makes this a region with high potential. For example, the Metropolitan Business Centre project, which is similar to the Lyon La Part-Dieu area, was once proposed over Lille Station. It would have offered 100,000 m² of space for offices and parking for 1800 cars within a 40,000-m² area of new housing, hotels, shops, restaurants, movie theatres, etc.

Finally, in the late 1970s, French National

Railways (SNCF) decided to launch a programme in partnership with local authorities to renovate and improve 200 stations in 5 years. In Lille, the challenge was hard because the old station had to be transformed into a modern multi-modal platform, sharing concourses and

underground space with the new tramway terminal and the central station of the first subway. The station evolution was a huge success and, as a sign of the changing times, the 19th-century architecture was completely restored and preserved.

Figure 4 Lille Transportation Network

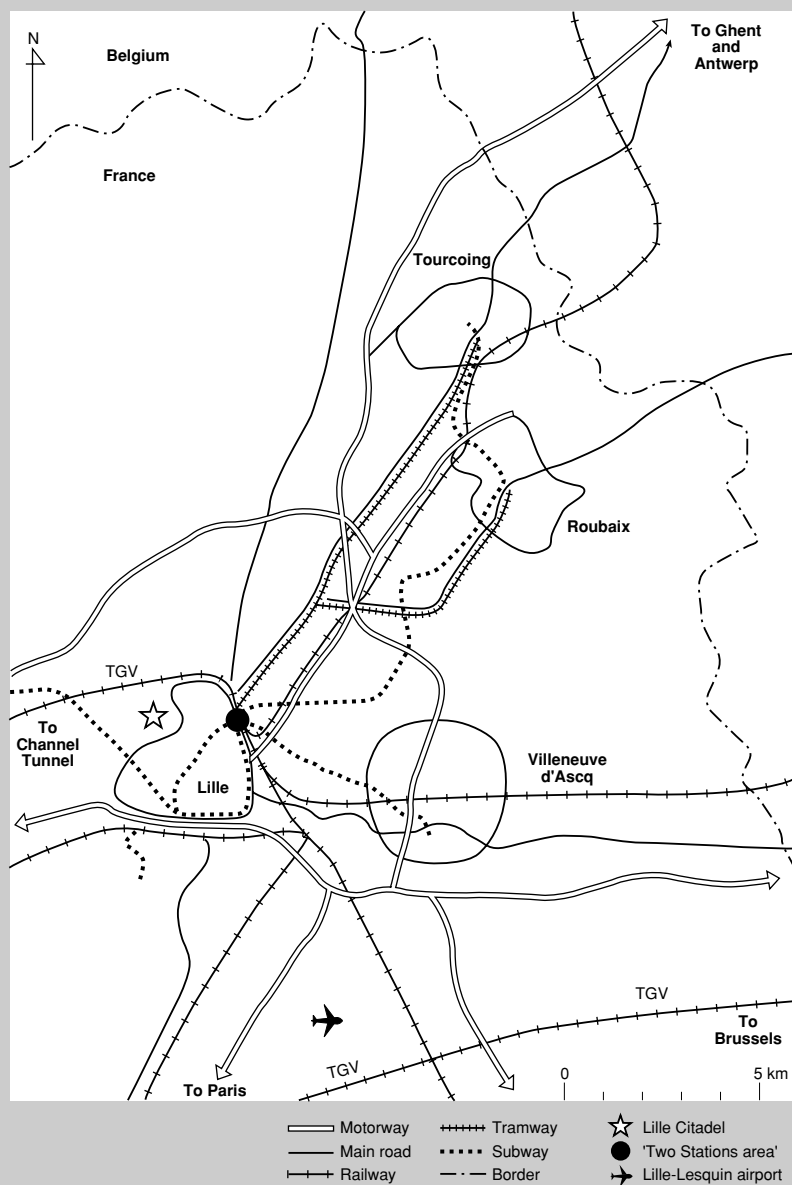
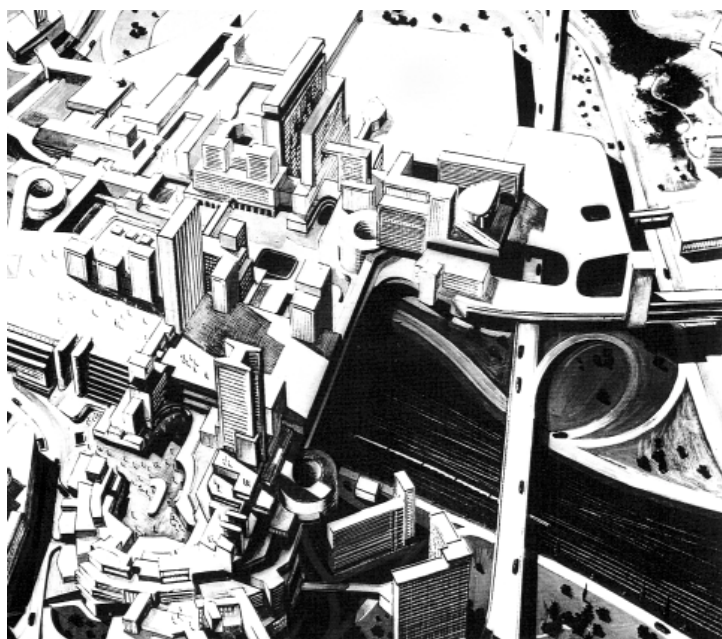


Figure 5 Early 1970s Concept of Lille Metropolitan Business Centre



Source: CUDL

The TGV Across the City

Yet again, the polemic over the location of Lille Station re-emerged in the 1980s as the dream of the European high-speed railway network started to become reality.

Paradoxically, the future of Lille Station depended on external factors like the Channel Tunnel agreement signed in 1982 between France and the UK. For Lille, on one hand, this agreement brought a new chance to reinforce its position as an important economic centre at the

metropolitan, national and European level. On the other hand, it offered a chance to develop a successful Metropolitan Business District type project centred on the TGV station. But first, the London-Paris-Brussels high-speed trains would have to stop in Lille rather than in Amiens, and second, they would have to stop close to the city centre rather than in the countryside or next to the airport as was originally planned. However, as SNCF Chief Architect, J. M. Duthilleul, explained several years later, in France at that time, the TGV was still seen mainly as a disturbance to the surroundings and TGV stations were not yet regarded as potential urban planning initiators.

The strategic position of Lille played an undeniable major role in the negotiations from the perspective of attracting investors to the region: Paris-Lille would only be a 1-hour trip, compared to 2 hours 15 minutes previously; Roissy-Charles-de-Gaulle Airport would be 52 minutes away, Brussels just 38 minutes and London less than 2 hours. The European high-speed railway junction in Lille was finally approved in 1987 by the government, and SNCF and the City Council agreed on a new TGV station within the city on a huge vacant lot free from the Vauban fortifications, just a few hundred meters from the existing 19th century Lille Station, and adjacent to the ring road. Lille finally got its through station under conditions that previous planners could never have dreamed of!

In 1988, a semi-public corporation launched a competition to select the architect in charge of the master plan for a new 70-ha area between both stations. R. Koolhaas, a famous Dutch architect, was chosen to design the so-called Euralille area, a name promoting the European dimension of the project. An SNCF design team was already at work studying the new station architecture and engineering.

The first phase of the Euralille programme



City panorama through glass walls of TGV station

(Author)



Spire of St Maurice Church across new interconnecting bridge (Author)



1920s View towards Lille Station along rue Faidherbe (E. Calteux-Gorlier)

and the deadline were very ambitious. The TGV station plus 300,000 m² of the Euralille Metropolitan Business District was to be completed in 1993-94, a crucial period when the Channel Tunnel and the Lille-Paris-London TGV and *Eurostar* services would start. The challenge was met and in 1997, the combined number of passengers annually at Lille-Europe (the TGV station) and Lille-Flandres (the new name for Lille Station) exceeded 5 million, with one train every 30 minutes between Lille and Paris during rush hours.

Work in Progress

The first phase of the Euralille project is now complete, and Lille inhabitants are slowly getting used to the radically contemporary architecture, coexisting with the traditional centre of the city. But this twin-station area has given an undeniable new city identity to inhabitants and visitors.

For the first time in Lille's railway and town planning history, the station entirely rules the spatial layout of the new area. The Euralille Metropolitan Business District concept of R. Koolhaas—the famous 'TGV window'—has created a strong relationship between the train and

city. The transparent 400-m long glazed TGV station building joins two different ground levels—an upper level on the suburban side, and a lower level on the city centre side. It breaks the monotonous from-the-North topographical plain level to show trains on the one hand, and to offer passengers a panoramic view of the city on the other. A light bridge links both Lille-Europe and Lille-Flandres stations, stretching across a large square and urban park, and connecting the city centre and suburbs. Looking towards the city's traditional centre, the bridge axis focuses on the spire of St Maurice Church, one of the few vertical landmarks characterizing Lille. Looking towards the new Metropolitan Business District, two office towers span the TGV linear structure as landmarks of Lille modernity. But for Lille citizens, the beating heart of Euralille remains the Two Stations Triangle building, containing a huge shopping mall, car

park, hotel, cultural facilities, business school and housing between Lille-Flandres Station and the new public square. The Triangle has soon become a new competitive sub-centre in itself where young people like to meet and stroll. In the near future, the second phase of Euralille will emphasize housing construction behind Lille-Europe Station to complete the functional mix of the whole area.

Lille's 150 years of railway and town planning history show that the architectural evolution and changing urban roles of the station shifted significantly each time the people required different ways to move in and around it.

Lille-Europe Station and the real estate development are a global vision stimulated by the TGV revolution. Other station prototypes are emerging in France in relation to their specific local urban, suburban, or rural contexts. ■



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Ms Tiry is a French architect-researcher. She attended Kyoto University from 1994 to 1996 as a researcher on a scholarship from the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. She received an AFAA grant from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs to study in Tokyo as a freelance architect-researcher from 1996-1997. She published several articles about Japanese cities in specialized magazines (including *JRTR* 13, pp.4-11) and is now a member of the AVH (Architecture, Ville, Histoire) research team at Lille Ecole d'Architecture.