Feature

Between City and Countryside—TGV Méditerranée Stations Paying Tribute to Nature

Corinne Tiry

Twenty years after the birth of French TGV, the French National Railways (SNCF) is offering its customers a faster way of crossing France from north to south. Thanks to the new 250-km high-speed TGV Méditerranée opened in June 2001, railway passengers can experience the cinematic changes in the French landscape from Lille to Marseille in only 4 hours and 30 minutes. The impact of this geography lesson is heightened when stopping at one of the three new TGV Méditerranée stations at Valence, Avignon and Aix-en-Provence. SNCF's economic and symbolic priority was to reach Marseille in 3 hours from Paris and, as a result, most TGV Méditerranée stations are located on the periphery of the cities they serve. Although this policy seems contradictory to the notion of the traditional centrality of railway stations, as well as to current French government transport policy to reduce car traffic and air pollution, the peripheral location offers opportunities to control local development. But above all these, the peripheral TGV stations symbolize the new gateways to the southern France. For their architects, the challenge was in finding the right architectural expressions for these isolated but attractive landmarks.

The Station as Contextual Object

The architects of SNCF's Station Design Office and the landscape architects Desvigne & Dalnoky agreed on the idea of modelling each station and surrounding open spaces at Valence, Avignon, and Aix-en-Provence based on local context rather than repeating an improved model. This approach marks a turning point in the short history of French TGV station design. The TGV Atlantique stations (opened 1989) were conceived as new gateways to the Atlantic Ocean and designed with the same metaphor of boat sails; the TGV Nord stations (1993) were organized as urban nodes connected with other national or international networks. Although synthesizing the most efficient characteristics of the first two generations of TGV stations, the stations of the TGV Méditerranée are architecturally very different as a result of incorporating local context. First, Valence's architectural device came directly from the station's intermodality—the station is stretched to link the local train and TGV services. Second, Avignon and Aix-en-Provence are deeply influenced by the local geography and Mediterranean culture. Third, Valence and Aix-en-Provence introduce the idea of the station as a territorial landmark. Since the early 1990s, in France and other European countries, the railway station is no longer just a technical and functional object but is instead seen as an integrated (usually central) component of the region playing a strong role (or even initiating) local development. For the TGV Mediterranée line, the implementation of each station had to follow strong topographical rules defined by SNCF during the early 1990s. The architects used these rules to shape the buildings in a radical way and confer strong and unique architectural images on each. They clearly emphasize the formal universal building dictionary: the bridge, the wall, and the roof shapes are selected for linking, insulating, and sheltering. Valence Station Building covers the 8-m deep line cutting in both directions as a thin floating bridge; the long walls of Avignon Station Building frame the 6-m high elevated track; the huge curved roof of Aix-en-Provence Station Building shades the lines at ground level. In fact, the strength of these archetypes refers to traditional Mediterranean architecture combining two basic demands: temperature regulation and shade. At Avignon and Aix-en-Provence in particular, the appeal to basic principles rather than to sophisticated high-technology forms reveals the architects' willingness to refer to the local environment.

The suspended waiting room of Valence Station ends as a large balcony looking South.
(SNCF AP-AREP, S. Lucas)

The linear waiting room of Avignon Station is flood with natural light coming from the city side.
(SNCF AP-AREP, D. Boy de la Tour)

The tree-like pillars of Aix-en-Provence Station allow a great visual depth.   (SNCF AP-AREP, M. Denancé)

The Station as Transitional Space

A common difficulty in using the architectural devices of the bridge, wall and roof is how to combine the openness of stations with surrounding landscapes, while protecting waiting passengers against weather. The physical or visual proximity of major landscape icons—the Vercors Massif at Valence, the River Durance at Avignon, and Mount St. Victoire at Aix-en-Provence—guided the design choices.

Located inside the Rhodanian corridor between two different landscapes, Valence Station's linear and suspended volume acts as a transitional space between opposing environments. The eastern glass wall faces the panoramic grey barren Vercors Massif while the western wall punctuated by shopping kiosks offers fragmented views of the green Valencian trees. Sheltering the platforms, the suspended floor of the station concourse forms a gentle slope connecting the local and TGV lines and ending as a large over-the-tracks balcony looking south.

Avignon Station's slightly curved and linear shape located between the River Durance and the ancient fortified city, mirrors these natural and man-made geometries. Again, the architectural device questions the transition between two different climates—the cold northern mistral blowing from the city side and the strong southern sun from the river side—dictating the choice of materials. On the river side, white concrete provides shade from the blazing sun while glass openings on the city side bring natural light inside the white volume. Tangential to the platforms, which are located on the windy side, this curved gallery offers direct and sheltered access to trains.

Emerging from a dry plateau between Mount St. Victoire to the east and the barren land to the west, Aix-en-Provence Station's wave shape softens the harsh landscape. Here again, the architectural device responds to opposing situations using local architectural references. The eastern aspect of the station is completely open, revealing Mount St. Victoire to the passengers and catching the fine morning light. The western and main façade is composed of horizontal and movable wooden shades that provide relief from the hot afternoon sun and regulate the temperature. The rhythm of the giant tree-like columns in the structure is based on the length of the TGV carriages, freeing
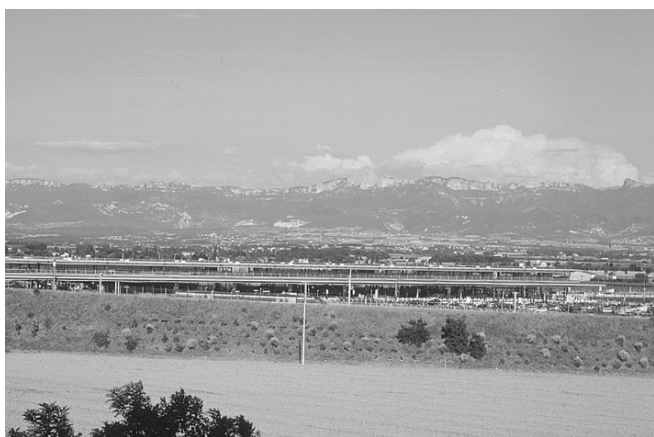
The low linear volume of Valence Station underlines the crest of the Vercors massif.
(SNCF AP-AREP, S. Lucas)

The waved shape of Aix-en-Provence Station reveals Mount St. Victoire
(SNCF AP-AREP, S. Lucas)

the space of visual limits and reintroducing the scale of the train.

The Station as Living Environment

The landscape architects also have provided contextual and transitional qualities to the open spaces surrounding the three TGV stations and the three stations. The design principles focused primarily on integrating the station buildings into the local landscapes on one hand and on regeneration of the latter on the other—a method influenced by sustainable-development thinking. Although it will take some time before the greening plan can be completely enjoyed, trees have already been planted extensively on a three-level hierarchy. First, the station buildings are emphasized laterally by two avenues lined with plane trees (Platanacea), providing a territorial dimension while reinforcing the landmark status. Second, precisely aligned rows of cypress trees act as station wind-breaks. Both figures are traditional to southern French landscapes but are disappearing due to 20th century development. The landscaping agenda consists of planting trees over large enough areas to revitalize the local landscape. Third, all parking areas are embellished and refreshed with

orchards of local tree species (Valence and Avignon) or oak trees (Aix-en-Provence). At Valence and Aix-en-Provence, the plantations will also serve as guidelines for future urban development and tourism (hotels, shops selling local products and exhibition centres). The 3-hour travel time by TGV between Paris and the climatically attractive southern cities matches French people's increasing mobility. Commuters to Lyon (65 minutes) or Paris (2 hours and 40 minutes) are already renting wooden-boxed parking spaces in front of Avignon Station. And as the TGV Méditerranée brings Marseille closer to Lyon (1 hour 35 minutes), the French map of economic power will be probably become more balanced way. Conversely, it is becoming worthwhile for wealthy Parisians to own a weekend cottage in southern of France but this will not promote decentralization of good jobs away from Paris to the provinces.

Therefore, we can imagine two opposite

scenarios for the next 50 years— the TGV stations may become active crossroads in the middle of giant parks, or they may become the centres of a new generation of garden cities like those first envisioned by Ebenezer Howard (1850–1928) in the UK at the end of the 19th century.

Like the early railway travellers who often had to travel to the edge of their 19th century towns to catch a train, 21st century TGV travellers may (re)discover the pleasures of leaving their densely populated cities to experience southern French culture. ∎

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