

A regional identity through a railway line : North Tunis suburb and the TGM

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Abstract

The TGM (Tunis-Goulette-Marsa) is a railway line which connects Tunis with Marsa while passing by Goulette. The first electrified suburban line of the African continent, bears officially the name of TGM since 1905, date of the inauguration of the first direct layout through the Tunis Lake. In fact well the TGM was at the origin of the Tunis extension of towards north creating in sea front, the most attractive suburbs of the capital. We propose to put the projector on this railway line characteristics and the architectural specificities of its stations, in an historical and contemporary aiming, in order to direct the Tunisian urban developers towards the interests of the railway heritage and to feed the current reflexion on Tunisian urban space and the rail-bound transports.

Indeed, to follow the evolution of the suburban railroad statutes contributes to an awareness of the city as a significant space. The reading of urban space is not limited to architectural forms, it is also organized by its means of transports. Instead of getting lost in a total, general and reducing definition of the northern Tunis suburbs identity, we will target the place of the railway identity of an area in its total identity.

More precisely, we think that the Railway stations are urban entities which knew how to generate their own temporal culture, and where it is urgent to study the "lifespan" of its identity impact. Line TGM is punctuated by stations which preserved the original néo-Moorish style with a repair in 1979, but today, a harmony loss with surrounding urban fabric is clearly perceptible. These stations

are directly active in the production of the suburbs regional identity but are locked up and are not any more transformed to constitute a different universe being used as developing reference. The TGM myth does not exist any more but only in books. With the accelerated urbanization and use of cars, those which take it are stripped and do not have any idea of its history. This micro-regional identity can, through a particular form of development, overcome the challenges of urban developments which tend to asphyxiate it and destroy it.

On a methodological level, it is a question to write an identifying monograph of a space, on the one hand, by exploring its endogenous memory, and on the other hand, by focusing on contemporary uses and practical. We will carry a new glance on urban, architectural, technical, economic and social potentialities of TGM line and stations. We will emphasize the permanence of historical indices which are continuously secreted.

The results will consolidate the assumption that the railway line identity and architectural potential must be better taken into Tunisian urban space reflexions. The relations which we establish between railway identity, architectural identity and social identity, is a transverse reading which makes possible a better control of increasing contradictions between the areas modernization and their urban identity.

Keywords: history, identity, memory, railway station, suburb, transport, tunis

Analyzing the city while waiting for a train

Today, the concept of regional identity is questioned by various scientific, cultural and political actors in all the Maghreb area. Architecture and urban planning are integrated in a total reflexion about areas becoming. Several scales, architectural and urban typologies are approached according to various methodologies which translate a bulk-heading of the committed disciplines. Instead of getting lost in a global and general definition of "regional identity" concept, we will focus on the railway identity place in a total identity of an area. Indeed, following the suburban railroad evolution can energize our cities representations. More precisely, we think that the railroad station is an urban entity which knew how to generate its own image, and where it is urgent to study its identity impact.

Geography and economy dominates the scientific researchs about transport in all Maghreb cities. However, to consider an analysis of the scientific production relating to the city and its collective transport by disciplinary field is not very relevant. The work concerns either morphologies of the city, or of the grid systems layouts, seldom the user and his reception of a service which is intended to him. It is in response to this social unconcern that the urban managers answers by " individualistic modernity " (George, 1991), resulting from short specific answers, but the city cannot be observed by disciplinary layer and this is why we choosed an interdisciplinary city approach.

At the twentieth century beginning, the maritime and railway transport appears in the colonised Maghreb area and " were mentionned in law studies " (Song-Jabeur, 1996). The same period knew the multiplication of "stations districts", a kind of railway network ending elements. The term of "station district" evokes a complicated unit " both functional and social unit in a utilitarian morphology " (Chanson-Jabeur, 1996) : the station, its location, cart parkings (quickly relayed by cars), the surrounding trades to serve the travellers, and finally the houses of strangers coming from campaigns. Today, in modern cities equipped with a railway infrastructure, many public transport stations appear without any harmony with urban fabric, and others are abandoned. The capital Tunis illustrates this situation : stations, bus shelter, hirings park, etc., are not yet the subject of a thorough and widened reflexion, concerning urban and landscape integration, or comfort and pedestrians management flows.

So, the raised question introduces the existence of an urban crisis whose principal release would be the urban traveller rejection of the temporary-habitat which are intended to him, namely the bus shelter or trains stations. This text tries to develop an analytical reading of transitions spaces which are trains stations, and more particularly the Tunis-Goulette-Marsa train which traverses the northern suburbs of Tunis. It is a question to renew the one-disciplinary approaches of the Tunisian public space, by crossing an urban approach, a significant approach and an anthropological approach. But before clarifying the

crossing of these approaches, let us present the characteristics of the investigation area.

1 The TGM : a train “under house arrest” since 1872

The TGM (Tunis - Goulette - Marsa) is the first electrified suburban line of the African continent. Its origin goes up at the time of the fights for Tunisia control in 1870. We won't enter in the administrative details, but we will present the essential elements of the line origin and evolution, collected at the National Company of Transport, (SNT). The railroad in Tunisia goes back to 1872 (Illustration 1). The first line, built by the english engineer Pickering and connecting Tunis to Goulette and Marsa was inaugurated by Mohamed Sadok Bey in 1872 (Lazhar Garbi, 1991). In 1905, the T.G.M knows two great changes: the line electrification which replaces the steamy train, and the inauguration of the first direct layout through the Tunis Lake. This line will bear from now on the name of T.G.M: Tunis-Goulette-Marsa.

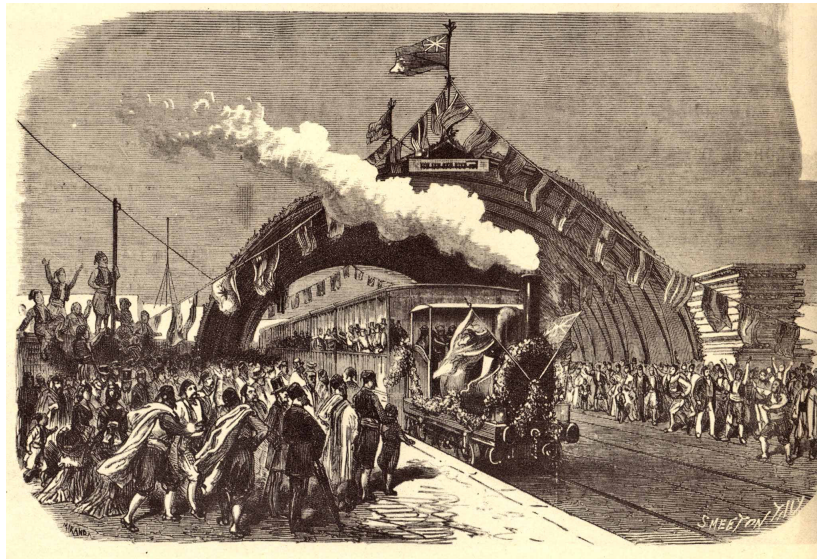


Illustration 1 : “The inauguration in 1872”. Smeeton-Tilly and Miranda engraving

The direct line “Tunis-La Goulette” is established on a dam skirting the channel which crosses the Tunis Lake (Illustration 2). It makes it possible to reduce the trip time of Tunis to Goulette from 30 to 16 minutes, and that of Tunis to Carthage from 45 to 26 minutes thanks to nearly 65 daily trains in each direction. In fact, the TGM was at the origin of Tunis extension towards north, thus creating the best sea front suburb in Tunis.

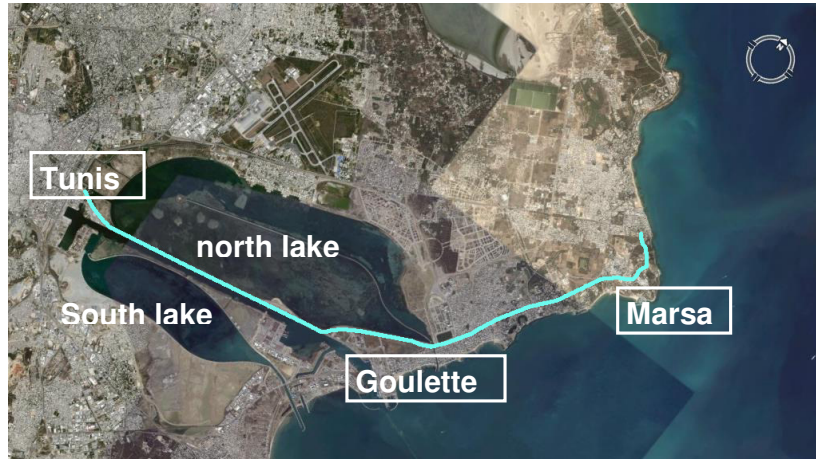


Illustration 2: Current TGM railway line layout

So, it is advisable to analyze rail link characteristics. Indeed, to serve and cross suburbs are not a trivial matter. At the twentieth century beginning, to move away from Tunis urban environment was a means to show richness. At that period, the suburbs were open spaces full of quiet gardens. Its mediterranean sights appeared more resting. The suburbs would have been supported by the romantic theories of the XVIIIe century : purer air, freedom of movement, less exposure to others, intimate relation to nature. To live in an autonomy compared to the city way of life, to escape from a constraining environment, from social codes, were the first suburbs residents goals. This aristocratic distance in suburbs is intended to who could beneficiate of a comfortable transport, in other words, by car. As soon as the railways started to furrow the suburbs, “the situation of refuge is modified. The rail-bound transport accentuates the development of the suburbs but especially mark a territory by its specific noise footprints : engine whistles and steam”(Chelkoff, 1996). The sound calendar grows rich by new markers being added to the regular cycle of prayers calls, so the universe of the commuter becomes exclusive to his means of transport : the space exposure of the stations (Illustration 3), their visual and sound openings (wedged half-closed space), the sound of the bearings, conversations between travellers, etc.



Illustration 3 : A postcard of “*La Goulette*” station, 1920. Victor Sarfati editions.

If living out of the city was to escape from its environment and to find the charms of the rural framework, gradually, the city catches up with the suburban landscape and the transport connections are reconsidered. It seems that a specific answer is given by many decision makers and developers: it was the private car, the symbol of modernity and emancipation. In 1996, one of the objectives of the transport master line of Tunis was to maintain the share of collective transport with 56%, objective recognized like very ambitious and many specialists estimate that it could not be held with the implemented means. In 1935, as soon as the car imposes its presence, the train tends to leave his place to the connection roads and freedom feeling given by the car. We notice that the bus disappears since 1937 and reappears gradually in 1948 to dominate all the public transport offer in 1970. (According to an assessment carried out by Mr. El KAFSI, Chairman and managing Director of Tunis subway company). The distances increases and the pedestrian displacement becomes harder. The suburbs are then perforated and become a succession of landscapes rather than an unified landscape around TGM line.

The “own car” culture became very important in all Tunis town. In the suburbs territories , whose installation is exclusively directed towards the massive use of this mode of displacement, the traffic conditions, as well as the place of the train in Tunis-north society, changed well. The temporal system associated the car is thus completely opposed to the train. The departure time is not important, and the car users reasons by rush hour. On the basis of traffic density, the time of the trip dilates or retracts (Bonvalet, 2001). The road refers then to a softer time than the rail, an elastic and irregular rhythm.

Moreover, and generally, urbanization of the northern suburbs nerve centres : Goulette, El Kram, Carthage and Marsa, result in an effort of acclimation to the motor vehicle networks of traffics what led to continuous additions of popular and commercial districts. The eyes and the ears of the commuters move away from their centenary line, and according to a TGM train driver testimony : “the myth from the TGM does not exist any more, but only in books. With the urbanization and cars, those which still take it are stripped and do not have any idea of its history”. On the basis of this report, we approached more and more the practices around the stations of the TGM knowing that they preserved the neo-Moorish origin with only one repair in 1979. The question is : How do the suburban travellers perceive the TGM stations? How do they appropriate this places? If the hypothesis is that social dimension (profile of the commuter, situations of waiting in station, Co-presence) and sensitive (visual and sound) contribute to the urban identities construction, it is legitimate to lean on the TGM to approach the urban identity of the northern suburbs of Tunis. In this direction, we carried out a reflexion in two times: an urban reading of the line in order to understand its place in suburban displacements, and a significant reading to decipher the stations as a temporary-habitat. The stations of the TGM are posed here like an architectural, social and sensitive analyzer to include the urban space ordering. Indeed, urban space considered here is a space of praxis filled of affordances, or more simply of the " actions invitations " that the urban developer must peel if his ambition is to seize the identity of the considered suburbs.

2 Waiting at the seawater edge: the seaboard imaginary of TGM stations

The eighteen stations which punctuate the Tunis-Goulette-Marsa trip are visible in the global urban space like minimal architectural shelters, delimited by grids and wire fences. This delimitation reinforces their wedged configuration and devalues their Transit function. The dimension of transit, of deceleration, is a pause in a trajectory ("Mahatta in arab language") according to the resources offered in term of accessibility, quality of time, practicing, comfort and discomfort. In order to demystify and qualify the function of transit, we observed and listened to the immediate environments of the TGM stations. The waiting space and the waiting time are micro-events digest : on the one hand, the visual, sound openings and the prospects on both sides stations constitute supports to be contemplated or “ invite to more contemplation ”, and on the other hand the outside activities become spectacles, screens where social and economic life scenes are projected like “ a mirror, or a magnet ”. Generally, when the architect observes and analyze such social scenes , he is diverted by its dumbness. This shelter “ which does not say anything to us “ would be nothing without the people who use it and occupy it. In this case, we questioned travellers to collect complementary testimonys.

The suburban traveller is an inhabitant of these waiting spaces. He considers them like a transit space, in which he's wrapped by visual, thermal and sound events, but also by the other travellers. Crowd is a malleable body which adapts, compresses and organizes itself in repetitive and interchangeable space configurations. The TGM stations seem like hoppers and thresholds successions, whose crossing supposes the establishment of new social rules, of a particular public space control. They are transitions spaces where we prepare to endorse new attitudes (steps deceleration, body posture, research of the shade, etc.). The space devices of the stations preserves the traces of our practices, the bodies dilatation and frictions. The worn thing testifies to the existence of a human-object coupling in order to have the situation under control. Repeated observations of material traces (wears of the benches, prints of shoes, the bark of a degraded tree, etc.) generally unknown by the analysts, gives sense to the space independently of actors presence like, for example, the inform traces about specific modes of anchoring (wear of painting on the ground by trampling, cigarette delimiting a space, etc). The rare objects distributed in the station space invite the traveller to carry out a particular action (to lean on a dustbin, a bench to sit down, etc).

In the urban places saturated with signs, images, sounds, such as spaces intended to forward travellers, many research (Dubuisson and Al, 1997) showed that the travellers suffer from confusion related to the overload of informational flows. Paradoxically, the waiting times in TGM stations fall under an opposite diagram. The absence of information other than publicities, reinforce the transitional dimension of the place. A desire of escape lives the traveller, he acts to leave the station as soon as possible to avoid discomforts on all the levels: physics, esthetics, significant and social (Pezeu-Massabuau, 2004). This discomfort is initially physical: the exiguity of this living place, kind of estrade, the absence of ergonomic furniture, the constant invasion of the bad weather conditions and the taste and matters disappointment. Forms and colors are simple and harmonious but too distant from travellers aesthetic codes. Moreover, the invasion of the noises seems to break peace feelings. Finally, being unaware of the proxemic rules ordered by such a place, the commuter cannot taste the joys of it's hospitality. The gestural don't adapt to a space where the body becomes a continous embarrassment. In conclusion, he does not find here the dwelling place beacons that must guide its natural occupant. So, for the user, it's only a provisional shelter, not a place to live.

However this avoidance mechanism plays in connection with other discomforts. It is known that any inhabited space confers an order to the social practices, which organize it themselves in return. But this reciprocity exerts different ways according to the prevailed appropriation mode, this is what (Augé, 1992) called no-dwelling places (Augé, 1992), he specifies that no-dwelling places are passages, they do not identify their users, who remain passengers. Against the distress, only the habits remains to leave room for manoeuvre between a personal selection in the space offers, and social conditioning.

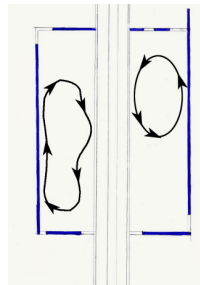
Temporary-habitat place or no-dwelling place, the two concepts are both readable in the TGM stations. Indeed, in spite of a framework felt like hostile, some of the travellers consider waiting spaces their territory, they identify them as home extensions. But how about time control?, it is rare that the traveller accustomed or not-accustomed knows exactly the trains times calendar. The temporal problems are evacuated, the statute of the station as temporary-habitat intensifies for the traveller who does not have any control over the latency. Thus, of this daily discomfort imposed by framework, the traveller-commuter made habits and repeated rites. With the first access, the everyday life seems very banal, a varied mosaic of uses in a space framework repeated from one stop to another.

To seize the setting of everyday life scenes, it is necessary to shift from classic categories. The metaphors have this heuristic virtue. They make possible the observation of a familiar universe through a prism which gives to the situations an exotic character in a common language. The crossing of an expert glance (the architect analyst) and of an ordinary glance (ordinary testimonys) led us to highlight some ideal types. We reduced this diversity to three ideal-types which constitute pure forms: the lock, the oasis island and the deserted island. Thus, the apprehension of space is the result of an imaginary construction which implies a cultural polysemia of the environment. The metaphors make it possible to build ideal-types to decline the diversity of waiting spaces.

The metaphors used to name these categories return to seaboard or maritime imaginary, wich emerged in all testimonys collected, like for example: "[...] Each Friday evening, when i stand in line with. It is always very long. In front of me, people ask for things undoubtedly complicated, or the counter clerk does not have a currency. I wait with this bovine look of people in a queue, it is a situation of general breakdown, it does not have there nothing which occurs as if i wait for a fish catch like when i go fishing in la Goulette [...] ". Or, "[...] Even if there are many ruins in this part of the suburbs, the Carthage history and the Roman vestiges, but for us, the inhabitants of the suburbs, it is only the sea which embellishes the area [...] For me the TGM is the blue of the sea [...] When we leaveTunis and crosses a lake, we are already at a beach... after, the TGM crosses the suburbs and arrives at Marsa-Beach, and it is still a seafront place [...]"

The metaphors chosen in a maritime lexicon: the lock, the oasis island and the deserted island, allow the construction of a divided universe. By their common membership to a marine universe, these metaphors can dialogue. The lock station is a place of meeting, a dynamic place, dense, noisy, it is a crossroads place where the customer is subjected to intense visual, auditive, even olfactive stimulations. The presence of the trade is a part in the construction of this environment. The trade maintain a proximity place, networks of urban sociabilities. The "Kram" station illustrate this category (Illustrations 4).

The lock is a small community centered on itself. The stations are integrated as a urban whole, and at the same time constitutes it's own extensions. It is not perceived by the travellers as a functional space delimited by clearly marked borders with urban or residential contiguous spaces. At the bottom, this category shows an urban fragment in harmony with its occupants; a city where the urban man would not be cleaved any more, parcelled out in its identity by a space which would bring simply a functional response to its needs ; a public space which would give him a place to live and would be built with its measurement. The locks stations have a nostalgic thing in their definition, they returns to a hot and emotional community. They constitute a criticism of modernity and technics which dehumanize the social relations.



Illustrations 4 : "El Kram" station , July06/March 07

The oasis island is a rich services environment, a virgin environment away from density, well illustrated by "Carthage Salammbô" station (Illustration 5). Inside the oasis, the traveller finds a resourcing place, a place where he can put down his bags and breath. The oasis marks a border with the outside. It is defined as an interior, a bubble. The oasis is one second skin which wraps the traveller. The difference between the oasis island and the lock station is that the outside borders with are clearly marked. But there a no membership feeling in the oasis island, it cannot federate a local community.

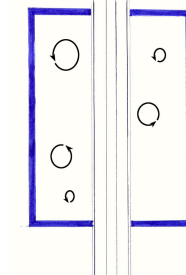


Illustration 5 : “*Carthage Salammbô*” station, March 07

The deserted island is a disqualified environment, low in services and isolated from the urban services. The stations which belong to this category are the first in the TGM trip, like for example “Tunis marine”, “Le bac”, “Khereddine” or “Aéroport” (Illustration 6). The occupation mode of these stations shows a social abandon, visible also in the details : a full dustbin which overflows, an uprooted tree for more than a week, the vats arranged to embellish the stations invaded by grasses. The city gleam reinforces insecurity feelings, abandon is also perceptible in the travellers body postures, in their insulation. Compared to the oasis, the deserted island have no interior. Completely open, this waiting space is exposed to the natural forces. The deserted island cannot draw a protective borders. In this context, the waiting space is reduced to an intimate niche, in a withdrawal world. The night scenography of the deserted island increases the feeling of vulnerability of the travellers who are not sheltered anymore. These categories show the links between the space framework, its limits, proportions, visual, thermal and sound potentialities, and users social conduits. In general, the collective transport consumer circulates in automatic piloting. Guided by his practices, he connects his actions without bringing into questions his unconscious practices, because he incorporated all the instructions of space-transport.

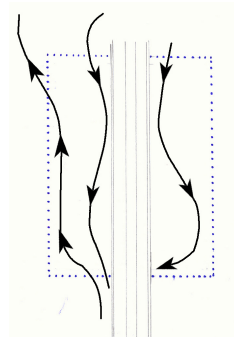


Illustration 6 : “*Aéroport*” station , July 2006

By the bonds established between their comments about a "without interest" qualified space, and a fine glance on the same space potentialities, another reading of the suburbs become possible. So, the three image-types attributed to the stations characterize the identity of crossed suburbs. This identity is the product of a simultaneous analysis from architectural, urban characteristics of the train stations, and social, cultural characteristics of the travellers. The results are a reflection of maritime images of outside the stations in their inside.

3 TGM stations units as relay of a regional identity

The investigations carried out tries to give an original view of the Tunis-Goulette-Mars railway line in a regional identity. After this expertise, distinct perceptions of public and private space are identifiable and seem conditioned by social and cultural travellers characteristics. We notice also a complexified urbanity model linked to the geographical particularities of the suburbs: a seafront towns. The TGM stations as waiting spaces are not anymore considered on the only grid system scale, they are a part in the suburbs geography of which they reflect a paramount aspect: a suburbs at sea edge traversed by a railway line. These stations are indirectly active in regional identity production by constituting another imaginary universe being used as developing reference.

The TGM stations obey to models extremely far away from the traditional station sense, starting point and returns between the residence place and the remote city. On the contrary, their current statute shows that they are usual, regular, central, dense, integrated into the urban rhythms, inserted in a generalized traffic space which blurred their cultural and historical value. The station was transformed into a simple crossing point, immobilized in a too slow adaptation.

In addition, we notice that the TGM railway line and its stations are part of a large colonial architectural heritage, but contrary to other buildings of this heritage, we can qualify them as no-heritage or heritage on standby of recognition. However, in our case, imaginary dimension in our apprehension of the city can make the TGM a part of our heritage. Indeed, it is pretext to original design in which new interdisciplinary know-how will be requested and could establish a conjunction between two tendencies of our modernity, one which privileges the immediate consumption of transport architectures, and the other insists on the importance of a sustainable development. Under these conditions, the imaginary social is an index to approach more the contradictions between urban memories and responsibility for future generations mobilities, linked in what the historian François Hartog (2003) defines as a "presentism" or a hypertrophied conscience of time present.

Currently, even if there are no inciting policy for heritage management, the urban developers and the decision makers concerned are invited to exceed the simple economic durability required by the reflexion on an urban space dedicated to the

public transport. Indeed, it is urgent to intervene simultaneously on four dimensions: cultural, aesthetic, technical, and particularly on their space clarity. Moreover, such reflexion could lead only through a concerted approach between several disciplines. The city is a natural size laboratory of social life, and submissive to a long methodological tradition : urban ecology, anthropology, social imaginary, sociology, space semiology, many approaches were applied and invented. The crossing of the methods, tested here, engages original cuttings of the research object and allows the development of new categories analysis. From this point of view, urban space is not an evident and autonom research object, but it gives a diversity of approaches which define it in return.

Beyond a space anthropology which confined in its "human" territory, situated research engages a fundamental resumption of the interdisciplinary architectural theory and practice characters, it facilitate the recognition of the interdependences between built form, perceived form, and represented form. A negotiation between several actors would avoid the reduction of the traveller waiting space to a landing stage or railway unloading dock, and could define it as the privileged place of the transition between different temporalities and various mobilities, respecting a common and shared identity. It is not relevant to renew the quality of waiting spaces if, in the same time, we neglects the social image of these spaces on a regional scale. To be a modern metropolis requires to equip the metropolitan territory with a public grid system able to perpetuate social identity images. The pressure is too strong from the population to be equipped in the cars, but this happens also because many public grid systems ceased alluring their users. An essential question is to choose the right model of waiting spaces, an equipment would reinforce the contemporary ideology where the treatment of the public uses rests on the cultural value, comfort and safety. A quality rail-bound transport, and a quality waiting spaces are able to exalt the asserted metropolitan power.

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