

# INCOMPLETE URBAN PROJECTS: URBAN VOIDS IN POST-HIGH SPEED TRAIN ZARAGOZA

**Carmen Bellet**

**Pilar Alonso**

Departamento de Geografía y Sociología. Universitat de Lleida  
c.bellet@geosoc.udl.cat, p.alonso@geosoc.udl.cat

## I. THE HIGH SPEED TRAIN AS AN INSTRUMENT OF URBAN PLANNING IN THE SPANISH CITY

The arrival of the high speed train coincided with a boom in the property cycle and with favourable expectations for economic growth throughout the country. As a result, an almost endless number of urban property development projects emerged in association with this new infrastructure. In this context, much of the academic literature has questioned the deterministic relationship underlying many of these projects and the rhetoric which tends to be found in political and media discourse relating to territorial development and infrastructure (Plassard, 1997; Wickerman, 1997). Some of these same studies have shown that many of the most important and direct changes have been urban transformations associated with both the work involved in the introduction of new this infrastructure and the property operations that it has subsequently given rise to (such as the development of land around the station and the areas of new centrality, etc.). (Bellet, Alonso, Casellas, 2010).

Spain is the European country in which the arrival of the High Speed Train (HST) has been associated with the most intense changes in the form and physical structure of cities (Bellet, Alonso and Gutiérrez, 2012). There have been several reasons for this, which include the following considerations:

- The introduction of the HST in Spanish cities offered a great opportunity to overcome historic problems associated with the integration of the railway. These cities therefore sought to take advantage of the arrival of the new train service to modify their relationship with rail transport at the local level.
- In the majority of cases, when incorporating the new train service, the authorities seemed to opt for the “hardest” forms of integration. This implied undertaking complex and expensive operations such as covering urban stretches of track and constructing new stretches of track located outside the city (Pérez Fernández, 1994).

- In many cities, the work associated with the introduction of new railway system was also used to try to solve other, inherited, urban planning problems.
- A good number of projects involving the introduction of the HST coincided with a period of expansion in the property cycle and with favourable expectations for economic growth throughout Spain. The arrival of the new train therefore served as the perfect excuse for undertaking numerous property development projects of a clearly speculative nature.

All of these questions should help us to understand the context of major urban transformation in which many Spanish cities became immersed with the arrival of the HST.

In some cases, such as those of the cities of Zaragoza and Valladolid, the arrival of the new train service was also seen as a great urban project capable of generating far-reaching changes to the physical and functional structure of the whole urban system (Bellet y Gutiérrez, 2011). The case of Zaragoza also presents certain specific characteristics that make it a particularly interesting case study. Of these, we would particularly like to highlight the following:

- The arrival of the HST could be understood as an instrument capable of delivering the new urban projects on which the city had already been working since the early 1990s: the Strategic Plan (Ebrópolis), the for the organisation of its urban territory, and other urban projects of significant size and importance, including: the to Recover the Banks of the River Ebro; the mega-event Expo 2008; the planning and development of the largest logistical platform in Europe (Plaza); and the construction of extensive business spaces such as Empresarium and the Recycling Park.
- An urban project to reconfigure and organise the city that was the result of a large-scale process of participation involving numerous local agents and collectives.

At that time, the HST therefore became a key element in plans for the development of a project for the Zaragoza of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This was clearly reflected in all of the physical and strategic planning documents and also in the project for introducing and developing the new railway infrastructure. This was a model for an expanding city based on the logic of large-scale projects, but one that the current economic crisis has now called into question.

## II. THE TERRITORIAL CONTEXT OF THE HIGH SPEED CITY OF ZARAGOZA

Zaragoza has an important geostrategic position within Spain, being located in the Ebro valley, in the north-east of the Iberian Peninsula, where it is not only 300 km from Madrid and Barcelona, but also from Bilbao and Toulouse (in France). The presence of the HST in this city has helped to reinforce the importance of its geographic position, located as it is between the main cities in the north-east of the peninsula.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the coincidence of new urban-territorial projects and the arrival of the HST in the city, projected for 2003, helped to turn this infrastructure into an extremely important instrument for change. The strategy chosen consisted of drawing up a

new urban project for the Zaragoza of the new millennium whose main objectives were associated with a period of economic boom and a context of clear expansion within the property sector (Alonso and Bellet, 2009). Of the objectives established within this new strategy, it is possible to highlight:

- Taking maximum advantage of the geostrategic location of Zaragoza and promoting its function as a node of transport and communications for the north-east of the Iberian peninsula: the remodelling of the railway system was aimed at reorganising rail passenger transport both within the city and in the surrounding metropolitan area and was to be associated with the establishment of an intermodal logistical area which would be reinforced by the extension and modernisation of the airport and the creation of a new freight station (at PLAZA).
- Transforming the internal image of the city, through ambitious urban projects and strategies of urban marketing. The objective here was to turn Zaragoza into a modern, well-structured and dynamic city through: flagship urban planning projects (the Project for the Recovery of the Banks of the River Ebro, the Digital Mile Project and the Project for Recovering the Historic Centre), policies favouring metropolitan mobility and policies of urban marketing.
- Projecting the city externally. The image of Zaragoza has also been re-launched through the organisation of large-scale international events, such as the organisation of Expo 2008 and the impulse that this has given to the organisation of congresses and professional meetings.
- Diversifying its economy by taking advantage of its position, its condition as nodal point and its municipal surface. To achieve this, Zaragoza has particularly focused its efforts on: the logistics sector, expanding its activity relating to trade fairs, shows and congresses, and developing new land for business parks.

Although Zaragoza sought to take advantage of the arrival of the HST in order to favour this new city project, the onset of the economic crisis coincided with the end of the international exhibition and helped to highlight a number of problems associated with the financing and management of the projects that had been planned.

### **III. THE INTRODUCTION OF THE HST IN ZARAGOZA AS AN INSTRUMENT OF URBAN PLANNING OF THE HIGHEST ORDER**

After tough negotiations and much debate in the city over where the new rail services should be situated, it was decided to locate them in a station occupying a position on the western side of the urban fabric, where there were already activities relating to the classification of rail freight. Choosing this option implied a major remodelling of the railway system within the city. In turn, the changes to the railway infrastructure were expected to provide an opportunity to improve the general organisation of the urban fabric, to help overcome certain scars and barriers associated with the railway, and to foster the development of a new urban model that had already been drawn up within the *Master Plan*.

### III.1. The *External by-pass*, the relocation of the railway station for freight traffic and the creation of sector-related logistics

The new freight station (equipped with both UIC and Iberian gauge track) was built on the external *by-pass* that runs to the south of the city and near the airport, the trade fair centre and the Logistics Platform of Zaragoza (PLAZA). The new freight station therefore provides support for the logistical activity on which an important number of the city's economic strategies have been based.

The autonomous government of Aragon also approved plans for the construction of a second station on the *by-pass*, near the freight station, but this project is currently paralysed.

The construction of the *by-pass* to the south of the city pulled the city out towards the south, generating great expectations for urban growth between the urban centre and the new external (road and rail) rings. Projects for some of these large packets of land were subsequently approved and then developed and built upon during the *property boom*. On the other hand, a large number of these developments fell victim to the crisis and today remain undeveloped and give an air of desolation to this part of the city.

### III.2. Operation "El Portillo"

Abandoning the old railway station was initially expected to pave the way for the restructuring of the area it had occupied and its conversion into a new zone of urban centrality with a total surface area of 9.3 hectares. This was supposed to structure one side of the area between the urban centre and the Delicias neighbourhood, two areas that had historically been separated by the central railway infrastructure. With the development, it was hoped to generate a new area of centrality.

The Plan Especial (redevelopment) for the Portillo area that was passed in 2005 initially envisaged the construction of an area of housing with powerful cultural amenities to help reinforce the urban centre. However, to date, the project has only consolidated one of these targets: the Caixaforum building and a local-service railway station. The rest of the project is still to be undertaken, with the old station building still waiting to be demolished and a post office building still to be moved to a site near the new station.

Problems deriving from the management of the first plot of land and the onset of the economic crisis paralysed the development of the projects earmarked for this site and have left an enormous urban void surrounded by fences.

### III.3. The operation around Delicias-Almozara

Another important urban planning action associated with the arrival of the HST was the construction of a new intermodal station in the area occupied by the former freight station of Delicias. This was an operation affecting 95.8 hectares on the west side of the city which aimed to open up this part of the city to the river, connect the neighbourhoods on the west side of the metropolitan area (Delicias and Almozara) and pull the centrality from the centre of the city towards the location of the new station.

The new intermodal station was provided with hotel, commercial and restaurant service uses but, to date, it has been unable to generate any powerful uses or contents in its immediate vicinity. This was initially due to problems deriving from the management of the land, but was also due to the ambitious policy of creating areas of tertiary sector economic activity in the city that disperse operations of centrality throughout the urban area.

The urban development around the Delicias station, which included general operations and work to improve its accessibility, made great advances between 2003 and 2008, the year in which Zaragoza hosted the International Exhibition. However, to the west of the station, where the majority of the 3,000 units of social housing units were supposed to be built, the land has remained undeveloped.

#### **III.4. The Digital Mile project: towards the city of information and knowledge**

The initial aim of Zaragoza City Council was to install a technological urban development project called the “Digital Mile” in the area between Delicias and El Portillo. In this way, it sought to take the fullest possible advantage of the urban development located between the two railway areas (107 ha) in order to organise a space related to new technologies, the information society and knowledge. Within this project, as well as housing units, it is particularly relevant to highlight the construction of a series of unique buildings that were meant to stand out on account of their functions relating to multimedia technologies, public digitalised spaces and technological and cultural amenities.

However, at present, only two of the amenities associated with these new uses are in service: the Digital Mile Nursery for Business Activity (in the Zero Emissions Building) and the Etopia Centre for Art & Technology (CAT).

#### **III.5. The paralysis of the project: the onset of the crisis and problems with managing the land**

The arrival of the HST in 2003 and the subsequent celebration of the International Exhibition in 2008 guaranteed that the majority of the transport and accessibility infrastructure was prepared in the area around the new station and the Ranillas meander in time for the celebration of Expo 2008 and to provide access to the station (Fig. 11). In contrast, the rest of the elements programmed for this area remained paralysed. The onset of the crisis and the problems associated with the management of the former railway land held back its development. An official agreement for the management, financing and execution of the work to transform the railway and urban landscape was signed between different administrations: the Ministry of Public Works (Fomento); the Provincial Government of Aragón (Diputación General de Aragón); and Zaragoza City Council in 2002. The objectives of this agreement could be summarised in the following terms: to manage the urban development of the land that would not be destined for railway uses, to carry out the work required for the new rail infrastructure, and to ensure that the latter worked well. The public company *Zaragoza Alta Velocidad* (ZAV) was created in order to meet these objectives and was constituted by these same partners plus ADIF.

The value of the anticipated investment increased over time and now stands at over € 1,000 million. The initial idea was to reinvest the profits that would be obtained from the

urban development and the sale of the land in order to finance the associated railway and urban development operations. In reality, the management of these properties was not, however, so simple. Even before the onset of the economic crisis, problems emerged in the management of the land patrimony. It was possible to officially register all the plots of land in the next two years, but the economic and financial crisis then paralysed the operation. To date, none of the plots of land in question have been sold, so all the operations carried out so far have had to be paid for by the partners who signed the initial urban development agreement.

In addition to the problems associated with the management of the railway land patrimony, the agreement was further burdened by the excessive number of obligations and urban projects (and their associated financing costs), which far exceeded those of the urban transformations required to prepare the city for the arrival of the HST.

Then, the property crisis arrived and this effectively blocked urban development and put an end to the dream of achieving a rapid urban transformation. The plots of land located in the vicinity of the station that had been left free and which should have been sold to finance the development of the projects still remain fenced off and unsold today. ZAV is now offering land for sale at prices 60% cheaper than in 2002 in order to try to offset the enormous debt that this company had contracted as result of its initial operations. The bursting of the property bubble effectively put an end to one of the most important and ambitious urban transformation projects ever seen in Spain.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

In many cities, the arrival of the HST generated great expectations for urban renewal and urban development fuelled by the associated property *boom*, favourable economic prospects, and a host of neoliberal urban planning policies based on the logic of great urban projects. The arrival of the crisis has put a brake on the initiation of many of these projects and paralysed others, resulting in unfinished and desolate urban landscapes.

In this work, we have examined one of these examples, the case of the HST in Zaragoza. In this city, the HST was seen (both directly and indirectly) as the strategic instrument that would bring about urban change and transformation. Today, however, some fourteen years later, much of the project for remodelling the land associated with the reorganisation of railway uses in the city remains empty and with little possibility of being developed in the short to medium term.

Apart from the basic work linked to providing railway services, the construction of the new intermodal station and improvements in accessibility to help develop the area immediately surrounding the station, little more has been done to carry out the other projects that were initially envisaged.

The large urban voids which typify the urban landscape between the new Delicias station and the land occupied by the former El Portillo central station are particularly desolate. This space and its metallic fences are the predominant characteristics of the urban landscape in this part of the city.

The project has not been completed and will need to be extensively reconsidered taking into consideration the present context and the financial situation of ZAV.