



MANIFESTO FOR THE PRESERVATION OF A RAILWAY STATION

(translation of the original Dutch version)

This manifesto on the role of railway stations as anchor points in cities and regions came about in response to the debate sparked by the planned demolition of Kortrijk station. It defines 'heritage' more broadly as the materialisation of the histories and stories of communities.

It makes clear that the Belgian railway company NMBS-SNCB has a fundamental responsibility for conservation and quality management of its immovable heritage based on its agreement with the Belgian federal state. This has to be done in close cooperation with the historic buildings department of the Flemish Government.

Conservation and redevelopment are sustainable, demolition and new construction are not. What the Belgian railways have achieved since 1835 provides a unique sample of the development of civil architecture and buildings, including stations, which today can once again be anchor points in cities and regions.

Manifesto

As mentioned in the 'Canon of Flanders', in Belgium the Flemish region was a pioneer of railways - with the opening of the first railway line between Brussels and Mechelen in 1835, and the first cross-border connection Kortrijk-Rijsel in 1842.

In the course of past centuries, an exceptional heritage was realised as a result. Stations and railway lines were for a long time the central meeting and contact points in towns and villages, and responsible for social and economic development of cities and regions. Much of this has been lost. Not only during two world wars, but especially after 1960 due to the abolition of lines and an unbridled drive for renewal.

On 13 April this year, the reconstruction station of Kortrijk (1951-1956) was declared one of our continent's seven most endangered heritage sites by a European expert commission, Europa Nostra's annual list of *The 7 Most Endangered*. Incomprehensibly, but despite this European finger pointing, the city of Kortrijk and NMBS-SNCB/Infrabel are pressing ahead with their plans to replace the historic station with a megalomaniacal and money-consuming project.

This is the reason for this manifesto

1. What is heritage?

'Heritage' is an important component of our culture. It tells the stories of our community – our immovable heritage is the Story of Flanders cast in stone.

In doing so, heritage does not necessarily have to be 'beautiful' or 'liked'. It should not necessarily be 'old' and 'antique'. It should tell, materialise, the stories that are relevant to a city and region. The stories of people, their achievements and also their misfortunes. Because history is not always a 'beautiful' story.

It is striking how heritage is increasingly assigned that role in the designation of *European Capitals of Culture*. Greece's Eleusis (Elefsina), a town of just under 30,000 inhabitants, will be European Capital of Culture in 2023. The railway station (1884, closed 2001 and subsequently taken over by the municipality) played an important role in the candidacy for Capital of Culture 2023 and is now a central element in the 'Eleusis Architectural Heritage Development Strategy'.

Thus, capitalising on and upgrading an old railway station or industrial heritage can undoubtedly add value to a city and region.

2. Responsibility

The Management Contract 2023-2032 between the Belgian federal state and the national railway company NMBS-SNCB states that the company is responsible for the preservation of historical railway heritage. Unfortunately, the term "erfgoed" (heritage) is not defined in this context, presumably because competence for movable and immovable heritage is a competence the Communities and Regions.

Nevertheless, a vision around valuable railway heritage and its reconciliation with contemporary public transport requirements appears to be quasi non-existent. The approach taken in the Netherlands, where a 'Bureau Spoorbouwmeester' was set up as early as 2001 to develop a consistent policy, seems to be unknown in Belgium. However, the need for such a vision and consistent policy appears to be great. Within the federal competence and supervision of NMBS-SBCF, a shift is therefore urgently needed from the focus on demolition and new construction towards conservation and revaluation of the railway's immovable heritage.

We also ask that the Flemish minister responsible for immovable heritage pursue a thorough protection policy for railway heritage, both stations and guardhouses, as well as infrastructure works (bridges, tunnels, turning lanes, etc.) and old lines that can act as green corridors..

3. Sustainability, upgrading and redevelopment

In his ambition note 2020-2025 'Creating opportunities for encounters', p. 27-28, the current Flemish Government Architect Eik Wieërs states :

« The quality of our heritage is usually evaluated on the basis of its cultural-historical value. However, if we make a full assessment and also take into account the costs of producing new materials and processing waste, many more buildings qualify for preservation than those that we traditionally want to protect as heritage. Wherever possible, reusing what we already have should be a first reflex, before deciding to build new structures. I want to advise the authorities not to act on the basis of a programme-driven question, but on the basis of the question: what can I house in the existing heritage? If we consider our new buildings as future heritage, their suitability to the current programme will recede to the background when their quality is assessed. We will have to learn to judge them rather on the future-proof quality of their spatial concepts and their adjustability to future programmes. As the Flemish Government Architect I will urge the Flemish Government and the local authorities to reuse their existing heritage as much as possible and to opt for future-proof new constructions »

Arguing that the accessibility of railway stations must be adapted to current standards and requirements, a lot of demolition is taking place. While building, one uses raw materials and energy.

During demolition, raw materials and energy are used again, and construction waste is produced. This waste has to be disposed of and processed, again at the expense of energy and raw materials. And new construction also consumes raw materials and energy. The production of building materials often emits harmful gases (including CO2)... So not demolishing and reusing is much more ecological.

Numerous examples, both at home and in other European countries, show that it is possible to adapt railway stations without demolishing or damaging historical station buildings. Indeed, combining old and new can just reinforce each other to create a unique whole.

NMBS/Infrabel should henceforth put the emphasis on an ecologically based heritage-oriented adaptation and redevelopment policy.

4. Representativeness

The civil architecture, buildings and infrastructure realised for the benefit of the railways over the past century and a half can be considered the most exceptional expressions of architecture and engineering. It is therefore important that the most representative from all periods are selected, protected, repurposed and revalued - including more recent examples.

For Flanders, this is a responsibility of the Flemish Government. On 23 March, the Agency for Immovable Heritage posted the note on Postwar Heritage (1945-1989) on its website, as one of the policy priorities for coming years. Among others, the reconstruction period and stations are nominatim mentioned. Until today, not a single post-war station in Flanders has been legally protected. Urgently time to get to work on this.

5. What is the purpose of a station?

A railway station was and often still is a place of encounter between people, and between people and a city and a region. It is and should be more than a place of arrival and departure.

Technical advances such as ticket machines and remote control and monitoring of switches and rail traffic, the station master no longer living in the station, ... make that many stations today are too large. In many cases, attempts are therefore also being made to add commercial functions, while vacant spaces can be filled by all kinds of social functions, exhibition, meeting and coworking spaces, a library, the tourist office, catering... depending on the creative thinking of designers and the needs of the city and region.

In this way, the station can once again become an anchor point in and for the city.

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This manifest has been endorsed by