Finding the Way: Reconsidering Wayfinding and Liminal Spaces.

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Introduction

Liminal spaces are transitional or transformative spaces, often associated with a desolate atmosphere, a disconnection from the concept of reality, and a fluid or sometimes neglected aesthetic. They are the waiting areas between one point in time and space and the next (Augé, 1995). Train stations epitomize these liminal spaces as they function primarily as points of transit where individuals temporarily reside while moving from one destination to another (Turner, 1967).

Train stations serve a dual role as both hubs of transit and as refuges for marginalized individuals, in this essay I will analyze this double function in the context of two examples: Perron Nul in Rotterdam and Platzspitz in Zurich (van Santen, 2014; Bieleman, 2010).

The aim of this essay is to explore the juxtaposition of train stations as transit hubs and as final destinations for marginalized individuals. The accompanying creative project will focus on wayfinding design, reimagining directional signs to reflect the directionlessness experienced by those who use train stations as places of refuge rather than points of transit.

Background

In anthropology, liminal spaces are seen as thresholds, moments, or locations between different stages of life or states of being (Turner, 1967). Urban studies extend this concept to physical spaces in cities that serve as intermediary zones, characterized by their transient nature and often a sense of neglect or giving off the sense of being frozen in time (Augé, 1995).

Train stations exemplify liminal spaces as they are inherently transitional. People pass through them on their way from one place to another, spending limited time there with the primary purpose of transit. These stations are marked by constant motion and temporary stops, embodying the essence of liminality.

The architecture, often grand yet utilitarian, reinforces their role as nodes of movement rather than destinations (Berman, 1982).

Beyond their role in facilitating transit, train stations often become unintended refuges for marginalized groups, such as the homeless, drug users, and others on the societal fringe. These individuals use the stations' facilities and relative anonymity as temporary shelters, finding some respite in the otherwise harsh urban environment (Doherty, 2011). The perpetual motion of travelers provides a form of invisibility and temporary safety (Mitchell, 1995).

Wayfinding encompasses the design strategies that help individuals navigate and orient themselves in physical spaces. In public spaces like train stations, wayfinding is crucial for managing the flow of people, reducing confusion, and enhancing the overall user experience (Passini, 1996). Traditional wayfinding design focuses on guiding people efficiently from point A to point B. However, for marginalized individuals for whom these stations are more than transit points, conventional wayfinding offers little solace or direction (Arthur & Passini, 1992).



Rotterdam Central Station circa 1985.

Case Studies

Perron Nul, Rotterdam

Perron Nul, established in the late 1980s in Rotterdam, was a pioneering harm reduction initiative aimed at addressing the city's escalating drug problem. Located next to the central station, Perron Nul was conceived as a safe space where drug users could access essential health services without fear of arrest or harassment.

Perron Nul offered clean needles and methadone, a synthetic opioid used to treat heroin addiction. These services were critical in reducing the spread of infectious diseases such as HIV and hepatitis among drug users. Additionally, Perron Nul provided basic medical care, social support, and a non-judgmental environment where users could seek help (Bieleman, 2010).

The impact of Perron Nul on Rotterdam's marginalized population was significant. By offering a safe haven and essential health services, it helped reduce the public health risks associated with drug use. The initiative also fostered a sense of community among users, many of whom had been marginalized and stigmatized by society. However, the presence of Perron Nul near the train station also attracted criticism and concern from local businesses and residents, leading to debates about its location and the broader approach to harm reduction (Van Santen, 2014).



Kiosk providing clean needles and methadon.



Recreational space, space for safe drug use.

Platzspitz, Zurich

Platzspitz, also known as "Needle Park," was an open drug scene in Zurich that gained notoriety in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Situated behind Zurich's main station, Platzspitz initially served as a gathering place for drug users, where they could consume drugs openly with minimal police intervention. The park's purpose evolved into a more structured harm reduction site, following the city's realization that traditional law enforcement approaches were failing (Nordt, 2006).

Similarly to Perron Nul, Platzspitz offered clean needles, along with a range of other harm reduction services. These included supervised drug consumption areas, access to medical care, and social services aimed at supporting users. Unlike Perron Nul, Platzspitz was more open and less formally organized, leading to a larger and more visible congregation of drug users.

The impact of Platzspitz on Zurich's marginalized population was profound but mixed. On one hand, it provided a critical lifeline for drug users, reducing the spread of infectious diseases and offering some degree of safety and community. On the other hand, the park's visibility and the large number of users it attracted led to significant public health and safety concerns, eventually prompting authorities to shut it down in the mid-1990s. This closure forced the city to adopt a more comprehensive approach to drug policy, leading to the development of more controlled and supportive environments for drug users (Uchtenhagen, 1997).



People could exchange used needles for clean needles at the kiosk.



Public drug usage at Platzspitz.

Comparative Analysis

Train stations serve as bustling hubs of transit, facilitating the movement of thousands of passengers daily from point A to point B. They are designed for efficiency, with a focus on managing flows of people, providing clear directions, and ensuring safety. However, these same stations also become refuges for marginalized groups, including the homeless and drug users, who use these spaces as temporary shelters. This dual role creates a stark contrast between the orderly, purposeful movement of travelers and the often aimless presence of those seeking refuge (Doherty, 2011).

The dual functions of train stations generate various social, economic, and political challenges. Socially, the presence of marginalized groups in these spaces can lead to tensions with other users and highlight societal inequalities. Economically, there are costs associated with maintaining safety, cleanliness, and providing services to both travelers and those using the stations as shelters. Politically, the situation prompts debates about urban policy, public health, and social welfare, as authorities must balance the needs of different user groups while addressing broader issues of homelessness and drug addiction (Mitchell, 1995).

The presence of marginalized groups in train stations necessitates a rethinking of urban design and public policy. Designing stations that can accommodate both their primary function as transit hubs and their role as refuges requires innovative approaches. This might include dedicated areas for social services, improved security measures that protect without discriminating, and inclusive design principles that cater to diverse user needs.

Conclusion

Train stations function both as hubs of transit, facilitating the movement of people from one place to another, and as refuges for marginalized individuals, such as the homeless and drug users. This dual role creates a complex urban environment where the needs and experiences of diverse groups intersect.

Perron Nul in Rotterdam and Platzspitz in Zurich illustrate how public spaces can be repurposed to provide essential services to marginalized populations. Perron Nul offered clean needles and methadone, significantly reducing harm among drug users. Platzspitz provided a similar range of services but in a more open and less controlled environment, highlighting both the benefits and challenges of such initiatives. Both cases underscore the importance of harm reduction approaches and the need for careful management of public spaces.

In examining the dual roles of train stations as transit hubs and refuges for marginalized groups, it becomes clear that these spaces are more than just points of transit. They are complex urban environments where the needs of different groups become apparent. By studying cases like Perron Nul and Platzspitz, we can learn valuable lessons about the importance of inclusive urban design and thoughtful public policy. Reimagining wayfinding and other design elements to consider the experiences of all users can help create more equitable and supportive urban spaces, ensuring that train stations serve both their traditional function and their role as sanctuaries for those on the fringes of society.

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This research culminated in a creative project that transforms traditional wayfinding in train stations to reflect the experiences of marginalized individuals who use these spaces as refuges. By redesigning directional signs the project aims to evoke the uncertainty and disorientation felt by those for whom train stations are final destinations. Utilizing traditional codes, abstract paths, and strategic placements, these signs create moments of reflection and empathy, highlighting the invisible struggles within our urban environments and fostering a more inclusive and compassionate public space.



Zurich Main Station.

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