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Last Call for an Elegant Rail Station

Published: October 2, 2009

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The new station, designed by Ingenhoven Architects, lacks similar ambitions. To construct it, the German rail authority plans to destroy everything but the terminal's main halls and tower. The platforms would be buried underground, with the tracks set parallel to the old entry hall. A vast plaza would sit on top of this lower level, its surface pierced by big, eye-shaped light wells. Four new entryways, with shell-shaped glass and concrete roofs, would lead down to the platforms from the plaza's corners.

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The plan's defenders argue that it is critical to the city's economic future.

It will reaffirm Stuttgart's place as a hinge between Western and Eastern Europe, as well as speed up travel south, to Athens. What's more, demolishing the old tracks and burying the platforms underground will free acres of valuable real estate in the city center — something that could generate billions of Euros in revenue for the rail authority.

Finally, there is the belief that large-scale infrastructure projects are just what we need in tough times. We need jobs, don't we? And aren't the best parts of the old building being saved?

What's scary about this approach is its familiarity. Engineers, stop watches in hand, calculate the most efficient time between two points. Politicians crunch numbers, estimating that the bigger the job, the bigger the rewards. Developers begin counting the profits to be made when large swaths of public land are turned over to private interests.

Meanwhile, those who care about cities and their history are placated with the facadist dodge. And architecture is reduced to a picture postcard — an empty, superficial veneer.

In the case of Stuttgart, the nuances that breathe life into the design — the sequence of spaces leading from the city to the tracks, the conflict between tradition and modernity, will be lost. The new entry halls, however elegantly conceived, are likely to make the old hall seem like an appendage, stripping it of the function that gave it meaning.

There were other possible options. A proposal by the architect Roland Ostertag that would have replaced the existing train shed with a barrel-shaped glass roof would have been far more elegant and economical. Moving part of the tracks underground could have been part of that scheme too. And the difference in travel time would probably have been minimal. Many opponents of the plan assert that the new design would shave just a few minutes of travel time between Stuttgart and Ulm, the next stop on the line. Replacing the tracks that run between the two cities would save much more time. When I spoke to the station's architect, he did not dispute this claim.

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But this option was never fully explored, lest it give ammunition to the project's opponents.

The insistence on putting economics above culture has already led to the destruction of major historic monuments like the Palace of the Republic in Berlin, a landmark of the East German period. It may soon lead to the dismemberment of Tempelhof Airport, one of the few great architectural accomplishments of the early Nazi period. If it continues, it will lead to a cheapened, oversimplified view of history, one that suppresses the conflicts and contradictions that make cities vital.

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A version of this article appeared in print on October 3, 2009, on page C1 of the New York edition.

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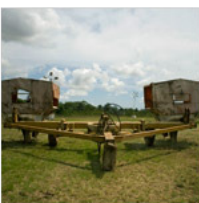
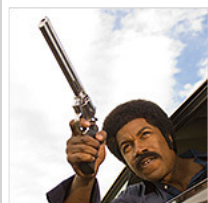
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