

# Mediating Intervention: Space, Class, and Differentiation at *Paris North Station*

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on the conditions in which the first Paris North Station was built and debated. The unique special design of its waiting room provides an interesting case, as it was a cause of controversy in the mid-19th century. Using diverse archival sources and representations, this paper illustrates a previously undocumented knowledge of design and use practices in the making. It is in the waiting room that the categories of social and travel classes were in jeopardy, and where the humanism of the Saint-Simonian architect Léonce Reynaud collided with the fears of class transgressions that needed to be mediated. My hypothesis is that the design of the station waiting room can be understood as an intervention in habits of urban mobility and in the practice and knowledge of the infrastructure of French railway stations. I argue that this intervention operates both symbolically and materially through a series of mediating architectural elements such as barriers, walls, and doors.

**Keywords:** Railway Station Architecture; Mobility Infrastructure; Interior Design; Waiting Room; 19th-Century Paris; Archival Research; Media History; Human Differentiation.

## Introduction

When the first North Station opened in Paris in June 1846, the journalist Théophile Gautier wrote an enthusiastic article saying: »Every faith knows how to design its own temple. A comparison of recently built churches shows that the religion of the century is the religion of the railway« (Gautier 1846).<sup>1</sup> The railway station as a sacred architecture – this kind of figurative discourse is a symptom of how contemporary observers discussed the emergence of an important new type of building in public space.

In 1858, Léonce Reynaud, the architect of the first Paris North Station and Professor at the École des Ponts et Chaussées, published the second volume of his handbook *Traité d'architecture*. In the chapter on the construction of railway stations, he formulated a sentence that can be read as a claim for programmatic intervention: »The creation of railways is a major event in the history of humanity, destined to exert a great influence on our manners and institutions, and to have a strong impact on our architecture« (Reynaud 1858: 465). His prediction that rail transportation would have a significant impact on lifestyles, organizations, and the discipline of architecture expressed an optimistic hope for progress that was shared by most of his contemporaries who were involved with railways in theory or practice. But even though Reynaud does not mention the construction of his own station in the chapter, the North Station itself had a significant impact.

The design, construction, and relatively short operation of the station are revealing because they became the subject of debate in specialist literature and the press in the 1840s and 1850s, particularly in regard to the waiting room. Going forward, I will concentrate on this interior space, for it is in the waiting room that the ideology of social class conflicts with the operational logic of travel classes. Here, the egalitarian demands of a Saint-Simonian architect collided with the fear of transgressing class boundaries. Thus, industrialization and social change created problems that required mediation. Here, I understand mediation not only as a way of dealing with contrasting social and political publics. Rather it is about mediation in the sense of communication (in the broader 19th-century sense of the word), i.e. as a cultural production and transmission of knowledge (Schabacher 2013). My thesis is that Reynaud's particular design for the waiting room in

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<sup>1</sup> All French quotes from 19th-century sources as well as non-English research literature are translated by the author.

the North Station can be understood as an intervention in habits of urban mobility, as well as in the practice and knowledge of creating the infrastructure of early French railway stations. I will argue that this intervention functions both symbolically and materially. In this process, the relationship between the social and the technical was reconceptualized in a progressive way and implemented structurally, but was also a controversial topic for discussion.

## Research Material and Method

In order to assess the conditions under which the architecture of the waiting room at the first Paris North Station could develop any potential for intervention at all, it must be understood in the historical context of a genuine »French-style railway system« (Ribeill 1987: 28), which involved a strict regulatory approach to transportation through a centralized state planning policy that was privately operated. For reasons of safety and security, French railway stations, especially the terminus stations in Paris, were governed like a »defensive bastion« in which the incoming and outgoing flows of passengers are channeled, sorted, and stored according to strict functional principles anchored in its »partitioned architecture« (Ribeill 1995: 31). Parisian stations are well researched in architectural and urban history (Bowie 1987), especially in relation to stations' long-neglected history of mentalities as well as social and spatial imaginaries (Sauget 2009).

Architecture – and its elements like doors or passages – as Robin Evans famously stated, »encompasses everyday reality, and in so doing inevitably provides a format for social life« (Evans 1978: 77). In this article, I will draw on numerous studies that have explored the relationship between architecture, culture, and mediality in recent years. This includes the narrowing of the concepts of architecture and knowledge in their aesthetic and logistical dimensions (Hauser/Kamleithner/Meyer 2011), as well as the understanding of architecture as a medium of material or immaterial entities (Kamleithner/Meyer/Weber 2015; Gleich/Kamleithner 2023). The perspective of cultural techniques research is helpful here, which links material and symbolic operations together, for example of architectural elements such as windows, portals, and walls (Schäffner 2011; Siegert 2015), and which analyzes the relationship between infrastructures and practices, for example in regard to gatekeeping (Ullrich 2024).

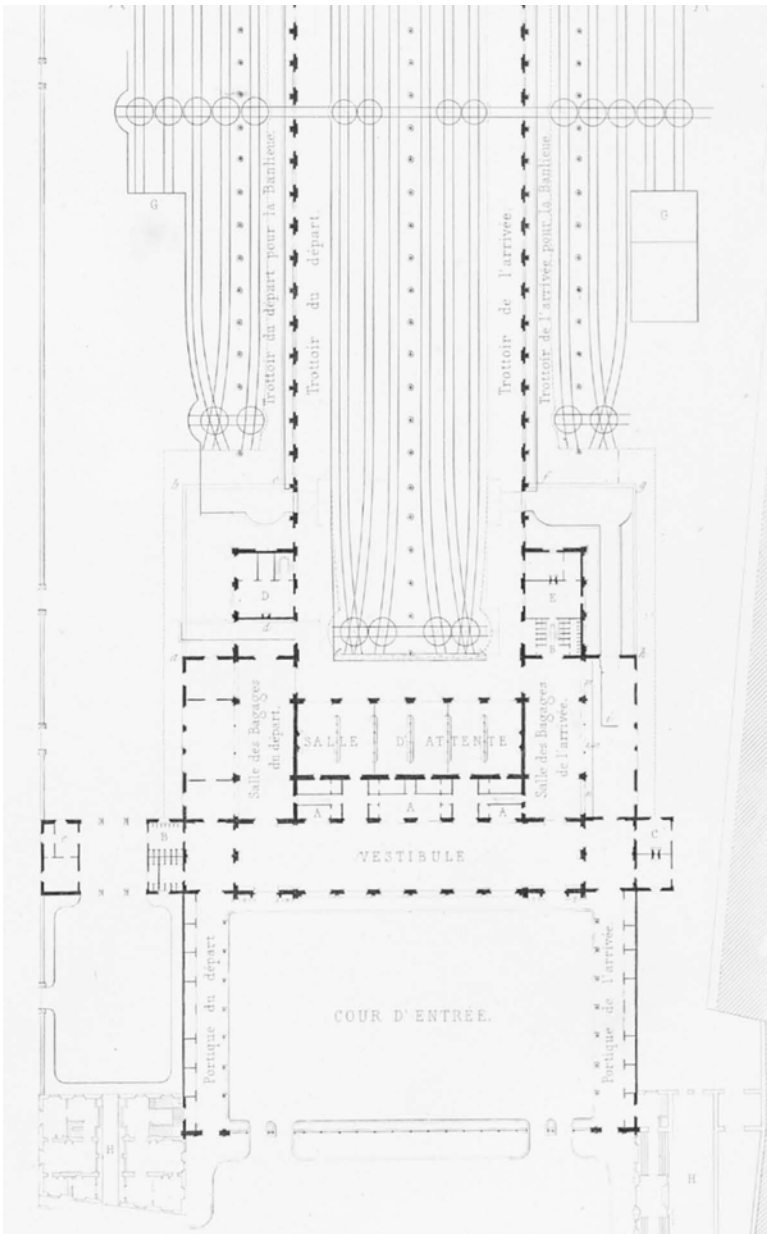
Issues of access and participation are of the utmost importance to rail travel. Station buildings have always been dense intersections where people meet. In order to ensure the continued function of transport, station infrastructures rely on procedures for controlling and sorting people »on the one hand according to general human categories (class, gender, age) [...] and on the other hand according to function-specific criteria (e.g. travelers/passers-by, normal/deviant people)« (Schabacher 2021: 294). Actors in this infrastructural human differentiation include personal actors (employees, police), symbolic-discursive elements (administrative paper media), as well as material formations (architecture, furniture). Together they enable or prevent travelers from behaving in a certain way.

This concrete context is captured in a media and cultural studies concept of infrastructure, which assumes a »socio-technical-discursive assemblage of actors (human and non-human entities, things and artifacts, signs, discourses, imaginaries)« that, »depending on the historical, political or geographical constellation, generate asymmetries with regard to opportunities for power and participation« (ibid.: 290 f.). In order to reconstruct historical knowledge, practices, and a former building, a critical analysis of archival and published sources is necessary. For my case study, I consider the specificity of the knowledge production of different types of sources, such as handbooks and plans by architects and engineers, articles, and caricatures from the press, manuals for railway employees and railway guides for travelers, along with files from state ministries and railway companies.

### **Operationality of Waiting: How to (Not) Lock Passengers Up Inside a Railway Station**

The North Station was completed in 1845 as the fourth of the Parisian terminus stations. Reynaud was responsible for the construction work under state supervision. A meticulous protocol dated January 7, 1846, recorded the condition of the station when it was handed over to the private Compagnie Chemins de fer du Nord (Archives nationales 1846). This condition is also recorded in a drawing of the floorplan which was published shortly before in the *Revue générale de l'architecture et des travaux publics* (RGA) and documented the original layout of the main building (fig. 1).

The plan for the central waiting room (*salle d'attente*) is an example of early railway passenger processing in its spatial and temporal dimension: In order to ensure the promise of a smooth, safe, and secure flow of traffic before and



1.  
*Floor plan of Paris North Station (cropping), late 1845, in: Revue générale de l'architecture et des travaux publics (Daly 1845).*

after the train travel, procedures, and architectures of segregation have been established: Departing travelers were strictly separated from arriving ones. Anyone could enter the station through a gate across the courtyard (*cour d'entrée*) into the vestibule but only became an official traveler at the ticket counter (A). Inside the waiting room, at the station as well as on the train, valid travelers were separated into first, second, and third class according to their ticket, which commonly meant different levels of comfort and treatment. In contrast to the English system, every passenger in the French system was required to wait, as they were separated from the machine operations processes in the train shed until everything was ready for boarding.

This used to be the typically French »internal discipline imposed on travelers waiting for their train« (Ribeill 1995: 33). Robin Kellermann (2021: 195–267) historicizes the emergence of a »systemic waiting« specific to the early railway time regime, which is enforced by a »stationary waiting imperative«. There was a disciplinary aspect of interior design that processes people in the station as travelers, with compulsory waiting playing a key role. But we need to take a closer look at how this was discussed and represented in mid-19th-century France.

The earliest systematic considerations about station construction were made by the engineers Camille Polonceau and Victor Bois in RGA. In order to avoid »all confusion and all chances of accidents [...] in the arrival of travelers and goods« it would be essential »that a traveler, entering the station, is necessarily conducted to the ticket offices and from there to the waiting areas« (Polonceau/Bois 1840: 518). The aim is a spatial-material control of bodies: »This distribution of the crowd allows for more active surveillance, so that it can be controlled and contained.« (ibid.: 519).

This kind of spatialized state of waiting – »in a room whose monotony makes it hard to bear the wait« (ibid.: 520) – established itself as the status quo in the first decades of Parisian railway stations. It is evidenced by numerous prints and paintings, including those by the artist Honoré Daumier (Kellermann 2021: 616–619). An example of this is a caricature from 1855, which expresses the physical and psychological consequences for waiting travelers, both in the pictorial language and in the caption (fig. 2). Despite how crowded it is (or because of it), Daumier's waiting room appears to be an asocial space of a forced community, separated and held together by barriers and walls.



The rhetorical comparison of the confinement of people in train stations and prisons is encountered again and again in both visual and textual sources, not only because it was perceived like that, but because actually locking up people in the waiting room was a practice explained in guidebooks for railway employees and was performed by guards who were responsible for the access and the »interior policing of the rooms« (Schillings 1848: 92). It was against the backdrop of this prison-like practice and its discourse that Reynaud was commissioned to build the first North Station. In the next section, I will show that Reynaud was very familiar with the French and international state of the art but arrived at a different architectural solution because of his specific professional training and his humanist thought. In both material and aesthetic terms, his design for the waiting room in North Station represents an attempt at an intervention that aimed to build better architecture to better manage traffic and, indirectly, to better shape people's minds, bodies, and behavior.

### **Materiality of Waiting: How to (Not) Establish Barriers for Distancing Classes**

The idea and practice of classes seems to be naturally linked to trains and railway stations. However, on the one hand, social classes are an invention of the early-modern period, which was influenced by classification systems from the natural sciences (Gregory 2021). Travel classes, on the other hand, are an invention of the railway age. Previously, people traveled in stage-coaches and on steamships in spatially segregated and various comfortable ways, but not in »classes«. According to Freeman (1999: 109–117), the »classes« of railways are something new that only emerged in the 1830s with the first regular British rail services for public passenger transport.

Contemporary representations such as caricatures, guidebooks, and popular literature were fascinated by the diversity of the people who frequented railway stations. »All social life is contained within the walls of a railway station: multiple types of world citizens«, enthused the socialist writer Gastineau (1861: 20). A hygienist, who was worried about the health of travelers, is more specific and lists: »the broker«, »the shopkeepers«, »the gentlemen«, »the millionaires«, the »petit bourgeois«, the »workers«, the »laborers [...] Well! All these people belonging to the various social categories crowd the railway stations in the mornings and evenings« (Decaisne 1864: 53). As different as these professional and social figures may be, they all had



to wait at the same station and travel on the same train, but not necessarily next to each other. Mass collective travel became a new challenge for architects, engineers, administrators, and staff.

Guards cannot enforce the discipline of travel and sociality with their uniformed bodies, gazes, and voices alone, but they cooperate with the built environment (Ullrich 2024). For illegitimate passers-by to remain outside and legitimate travelers to be able to wait in their correct class, a hybrid actor is needed, which, following Latour, can be described as a guard-barrier. The role played by the material dimension of interior design and furnishings in the operability of waiting can be clearly seen in the early phase of station design, in which Reynaud would intervene in the mid-1840s.

In their article on the construction of railway stations in RGA, engineers Polonceau and Bois criticized a railway station in Versailles, particularly its waiting room for the large crowds, in terms of the materiality of class segregation and its consequences:

«Once in the waiting rooms, passengers are *divided into categories* by simple wooden railings. This way of *distinguishing* between *different classes* doesn't seem to us to be sufficient: in fact, this *separation* is almost illusory, since all passengers are in the same waiting room. And yet, the main advantage sought by *first-class* ticket holders is to be *separated* from passengers in the last *category* [...] while waiting. Here, this last advantage disappears almost completely, since the *separation* is no more than a sort of *demarkation* line» (Polonceau/Bois 1841: 132).

The criticism is remarkable for the sharpness of its notions of difference (emphasized by me in italics), whereby it mixes the two concepts of class. A poor separation of travel classes with wooden barriers is not justified by a lack of comfort, but by the insufficient distance to other social classes. The authors demand that the separating furniture, which they discredit as weak and provisional, should give way to »complete separation between travelers of different categories« (ibid.).

When Reynaud was assigned by the Ministry of Transport in August 1842 to construct the terminus station in Paris, he had only earned a reputation for building lighthouses. In 1845, César Daly, the editor of the RGA, praised Reynaud as »both an engineer and a highly distinguished architect«, who »has scrupulously studied the advantages and disadvantages of the various combinations adopted before him« (Daly 1845: 512). The first concept of the

North Station was outlined by Reynaud in an internal report from 1843. The section on the design of, and furnishings in, the planned waiting rooms makes particularly fascinating reading, as it takes the opposite position to that formulated by Polonceau and Bois two years earlier:

»[A] single room is assigned to travelers of different classes, separated only by woodwork partitions at support height. It was felt that this arrangement offered the double advantage of producing the best effect, and lending itself to any modifications that might later be required by changes in traveler classification or public habits« (Reynaud 1843, in Bowie 1987: 172 f.).

What was criticized in 1841 was thus a desirable design for Reynaud: A single waiting room in which the travel classes are only slightly separated by low walls. Two reasons are given: On the one hand, the »best effect« refers to a more effective operability of waiting. On the other hand, Reynaud includes the dynamics of further development possibilities which he wants to integrate into his design with foresight. The special feature here is also an implicit double approach to the concept of class: While the »traveler classification« refers to the potential change of travel classes, behind the changeability of the »public habits« lies a (hoped-for) change in mentalities, perceptions, and ways of classifying social groups. Reynaud thus turns out to be a supporter of the social reform ideology of Saint-Simonianism, which was then in vogue, and he takes the inherent potential of his architecture for social and political intervention seriously (Bowie 1996: 18–20). This tendency, which is only hinted at in the report, can be supported by further biographical evidence and made plausible regarding the discussion about the actually built North Station.

Reynaud received his first training as an engineer in 1821 at the École polytechnique under the classicist Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand. However, he was expelled after a year because of his republican views (Bowie 1987: 78). In 1824, Reynaud began training as an architect for the second time at the École des Beaux-Arts in the class of Jean-Nicholas Huyot and came into contact with the Romantic movement. This »transition from analytical to organic methods« shaped Reynaud's understanding of architecture (Puppi 2012) and at the same time made him open to the socially utopian element of Saint-Simonianism, which he got to know through his younger brother Jean, the editor of *Encyclopédie nouvelle*, to which Reynaud contributed the article on »architecture« (Reynaud 1836) among others.

Many architects, engineers, and administrators involved in early railway and station construction were supporters of Saint-Simonian ideas and saw an opportunity to translate the theory of progress through industry and performance principles into social practice (Picon 2007). As the architect of the North Station, Reynaud indirectly participated in this transfer of knowledge, even if he never explicitly expressed his views on Saint-Simonianism (Picon 1991). His belief in the interventionist potential of architecture becomes very clear in his chapter on the railway station in his 1858 handbook. In the section where he asserts that the invention of the railway represents a turning point in human history, the interventionist claim in its historical dimension becomes evident as he goes on:

»We no longer need invasions of barbarians, the founding of empires or the mixing of races to renew societies, and the forms that express their habits and spirit: we have the progress of science and industry, and they too produce profound revolutions, but peaceful revolutions that bring only benefits« (Reynaud 1858: 465).

Reynaud formulated this idea of intervention as a peaceful change in general terms in relation to the construction of railways and stations. However, it can also be analyzed very specifically through the architectural discursive traces left by his work. The great socio-political question of the existence and division of classes becomes acute in railway stations. More specifically, the relationship between travel and social classes became crucial in the interior of the first North Station, which, in his written design of 1843, Reynaud conceived as an egalitarian and adaptable space for encounters between different people.

It is important to know what exactly happened in the period around 1845/46 during the completion and opening of the North Station. The question is, on the one hand, how the interior architecture was materially and spatially realized and, on the other, how the built waiting environment was experienced and evaluated by contemporaries. The 47-page handwritten protocol dated January 7, 1846 provides information about the material condition of the station's waiting room and its partition:

»The waiting room [...] is divided lengthwise into six equal parts by five 1.00m-high partitions of polished oak [...]. Two benches, also in oak, are anchored against each of them. Three of these partitions are open at each end.

The other two are closed by two double-leaf doors, also in polished oak and of the same height [...]. Each of the five partitions is surmounted by a 0.81m-high cast-iron grid formed of five ornate openwork panels, assembled in oak up-rights forming part of the partition.« (Archives nationales 1846).

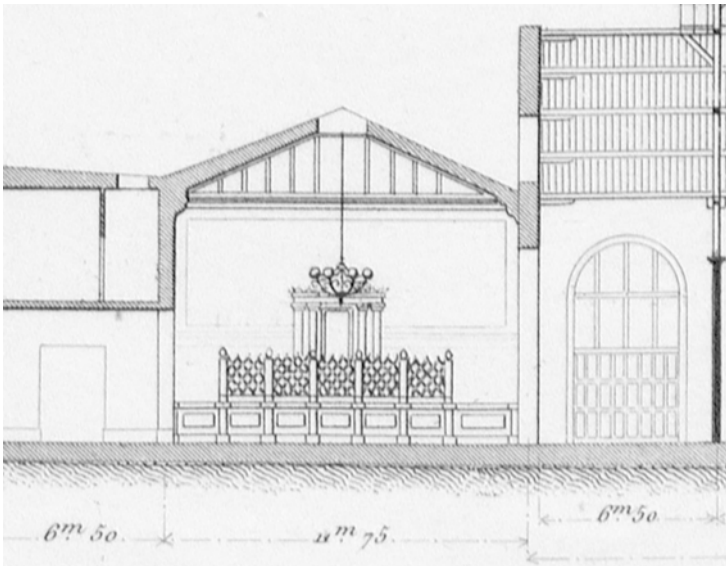
The five partitions divide the room into six equally sized areas, two of which are connected at the sides by an opening and thus form the continuous waiting area of one of the three classes. However, the low wooden partition previously designed by Reynaud was now supplemented by the addition of a cast-iron grid in the finished building, so that the partitions reach a height of almost two meters instead of »stand height« (Reynaud 1843).

In a supplement to their architectural handbook on station construction from 1855, Perdonnet and Polonceau (1855: 50 f.) show technical drawings of the North Station. Based on a detail of the cross-section of the waiting room (fig. 3), the material spatial partition is clearly recognizable and corresponds to the description in the report from 1846. At the sides, the low doors without grids organize the circulation architecturally and differentiate necessary from unwanted mobility between the travel classes.

If we look at how contemporary observers judged the North Station waiting room, it is interesting to see at what point in time and in what way the space has been criticized. Even before the completed station was handed over at the beginning of 1846, articles about it appeared in two journals at the end of the previous year. The *Journal des chemins de fer* gave a mostly negative account of the construction site and the waiting room in an article dated October 25, 1845. It said that a successful aesthetic would be compromised by an unsuccessful materiality of travel-class separation:

»The waiting rooms are luxuriously designed, and it's a pity that the compartments for the three classes of travelers are not further separated« (*Journal des chemins de fer* 1845: 796).

In the November and December 1845 issues of RGA, Editor Daly published two extensive articles on railway-station construction, which took up Polonceau and Bois's early considerations in the same journal and, now using the North Station as an example, developed the first ever individual analysis of a railway station together with attached technical drawings. Daly provides a consistently positive assessment of the station and emphasizes the comfort of the seating. He explicitly praises the material room partitions



3.

*Cross-section of the waiting room (detail), Paris North Station, in: Perdonnet/Polonceau (1855).*

made of a wooden base and iron grids on top: »all with a very elegant effect and ingenious arrangement« (Daly 1845: 531). According to Daly, the design of the material class separation even enables an aesthetic experience by inviting every traveler, »to follow with one's eyes the cast-iron windings that so happily crown the benches' backsplashes in the waiting room« (Daly 1845: 531). None of the sources mentions a differentiation of comfort according to class. On the contrary: Several laudatory articles appeared in the press for the official opening of the station in June 1846. The rhetoric of social diversity is also similar to that of the Saint-Simonists when it comes to the concrete design, the egalitarianism of which a writer in the newspaper *L'Illustration* explicitly attributes to Reynaud: The waiting room is

»of great richness, and the architect is to be praised for having the happy idea of involving all classes in the luxury that has been deployed in every detail of everything that has been done for the Northern Railway« (*L'Illustration* 1846: 227).

The article thus emphasizes the idea of community instead of disparity. The physical separation created by the bench-wall function of the wooden element is supplemented by the element of the iron grid, which dissolves the separation and through which all travelers can see each other. On the occasion of the opening of the North Station, Gautier described the waiting areas as »divided into louvered compartments« (Gautier 1846), alluding to the clerestory in church buildings: A barred window in an elevated position that is permeable to view and light. The partitions thus simultaneously process division and mediation of the travel classes. Like a wall, the iron grid prevents physical contact but, like a window, it allows and conditions visual contact through a »richly ornamented iron grid« (*L'Illustration* 1846: 227). As an architectural element, the grid conveys an aesthetically framed, moderate communication across the supposed boundaries of social and travel classes.

The overview has shown how ambivalent and controversial the separation of different notions of class was in the discourse on the waiting rooms in early French railway stations. The materiality and aesthetics of the partitions allowed for a spectacularization of human diversity, bringing different travel and social classes into a well-mediated orbit and exchange. When in 1848 republican and democratic ideals, for which the student Reynaud had been expelled from school 25 years earlier, were back in vogue in France after the February Revolution in Paris, even a competitor of the Northern Railway

Company praised the station for its »elegant waiting rooms, perfectly in harmony with today's dominant ideas of equality« (Schillings 1848: 48). In the view of some contemporaries, Reynaud's attempt to revolutionize the interior design of railway stations could be perceived as a prelude to a political revolution for more freedom and civil rights. Yet it didn't help much, as the result was both disputed and rather short. By the end of the 1850s, the station was overcrowded and it was decided to demolish and rebuild it. In 1864 the new North Station was opened.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the conditions under which the first Paris North Station was both built and became a subject of public controversy. Providing a cultural analysis of infrastructure, I developed the thesis that Reynaud's particular station design can be understood as an intervention in habits of urban mobility, as well as in the practice and knowledge of the infrastructure of early French railway stations. The analysis examined the design of the waiting room in regard of its operability, materiality, and aesthetics, which manifested itself in the architectural elements of the partitions between classes. The mediating agency of architectural elements is of great importance. In view of the conflict that became visible in the waiting room between the ideology of social classes and the operational logic of travel classes, the relationship between citizens on the move had to be mediated. It did not draw sharp boundaries but established certain distances by creating spaces of transition and communication. In this sense, I would like to bring mediation and intervention closer together.

I want to conclude that architectural intervention takes place in two mutually dependent ways: Like any cultural technique, intervening architecture operates both symbolically and materially. On the one hand, this means that Reynaud's building and its history intervened in architectural and engineering discourse of his time, offering a new, more democratic approach to imperative waiting. This novelty was perceived ambivalently and its significance was debated at the time. On the other hand, this also means that this kind of major intervention builds on many smaller concrete interventions. These smaller interventions are – following the etymology of the term: To step between – to be thought of as material architectural elements that interpose themselves between the people as full mediators in the Latourian sense. Semi-transparent barriers are concrete architectural media that are

intended to step between classes. They are walls with very specific holes that differentiate very finely and enable communication. As material interventions, they are intended to mitigate or resolve potential conflicts with which the urban society of industrialization and the onset of mass transport is confronted, by democratizing rather than disciplining the experience in the station.

The exemplary analysis of the waiting room in the historic North Station also offers the opportunity to look at our current station designs with regard to questions of class, gender, and race-specific waiting, discrimination, and comfort. Questions of architectural regulation of the flow of people are being discussed again (Moroni 2022). North Station has become a laboratory for new security and surveillance solutions (Baron/Le Bot 2020). However, there is still a lack of research on how railway stations today are staged and legitimized as places of consumption and well-being, while at the same time they are increasingly equipped with media technologies of control (Schabacher/Spallinger 2023). The »appropriate« stay at the station and keeping the »right« distance from each other is once again controversial today. Given the current and future use of algorithmic surveillance and globally networked systems we are confronted by a new intensity of intervention that promises much, but whose effects we still barely understand. A critical look at the history of architecture and the agency of infrastructural differentiation will help.



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