

Toader Popescu, **PROIECTUL FERROVIAR ROMÂNESC (1842-1916)**, Editura Simetria, București, 2014, 290 pages, ISBN 978-973-1872-34-6

The novelty that this volume contributes to the research on both urban and territory history¹ lies in its very theme, scope and the careful attention paid to all the facets of the key components regarding the modernisation of the “Old Kingdom” of Romania between the second half of the 19th century and World War I. The entire corpus of works on Romanian railways that was published until today particularly focuses on technical issues (railway rolling stock, infrastructure).² Although important, such works do not circumscribe this phenomenon that is vital to the country’s modernisation by a broader and extremely complex background, which includes urban planning, territory planning and interventions on towns), architecture (the formal and stylistic pursuits of the railway buildings, primarily the train station buildings), its impact on civilisation and the collective mentality of the age, on its culture, etc. In his book, Toader Popescu opens up this broader and well-articulated perspective that tracks down the evolution of ideas related to railway transport and their actualisation, from catching up with the Western experience to the development of a local mentality expressed through discourse, doctrine and specific practice.

The volume consists of three parts, articulated in a well-defined structure, and illustrating the three major aspects of the relationship between railway and environment, as follows: The Territory, The Town, The Railway Station; they all proceed into a deeper understanding of the importance of the railway for modern Romania. Toader Popescu begins his inquiry in 1842, when the first documented intention to build a railway in Moldova was expressed, and continues until 1916, when Romania entered World War I.

In the first part, *The Territory*, the author discusses the relationship between railway and territory – a national territory on the point of being defined as such, *i.e.* according to its modern

meaning. The railway and everything connected to it rightfully support the shaping of a national territory, simultaneous with the political actions in progress during the 19th century in regards to the forming of the Romanian state, actions that materialised in the 1859 Unification between Wallachia and Moldova. Being consistent with his proposed perspective, Toader Popescu analyses all the proposals of railway routes, starting with the one first documented in Moldova in 1842. This opens the road to several proposals that, until 1869, remain at this stage. The author points out that until that date, *i.e.* until 1869, after the Unification, the railway proposals were launched separately in Moldova and Wallachia; this suggests the lack of general public awareness regarding this subject. The author delineates the evolution of these intentions followed by major achievements in succeeding stages as follows: 1842-1859, an exploratory stage, with authors belonging to both the public domain of the Principalities and private persons; 1859-1869, when the initiative not only belongs to the private domain exclusively, but also to the newly created state, that formulates the legislation and implements certain mechanisms by request of the private domain; this stage ends with the inauguration of the first railway in the Principalities, namely the one between Bucharest (Filaret railway station) and Giurgiu; 1869-1879, when the major network is acquired on leasing terms, with H. B. Strussberg as major leaseholder; the 1879-1901 period, which the author defines as “the golden age” of railways, witnesses an actual construction boom – approximately half the length of the railways being built during the antebellum period – a time when the entire process of planning, designing, realisation and exploitation was carried out by the Romanian state; finally, during the last stage, until Romania’s entering the war, the pace of building less important railway connections has considerably slowed down; likewise, certain attempts of decentralisation failed to materialise. The stages delineated by the author include, in a broader synthesis, not only the intentions and the actual materialisation of the railways, but also the major groups interested in this action (whether private entities or the state), their goals, and the development of the planning mechanisms.

The author also marks some of the crucial effects on the territory following the emergence of the railways: local alterations through the modification of the farming land due to railway construction and its related elements, such as tunnels, bridges and engineering works of art; the restructuring of several road networks under certain circumstances; the reshuffling of the city hierarchy according to

¹ This study elaborates on the author’s doctoral thesis presented at ‘Ion Mincu’ University of Architecture and Urbanism, Bucharest (under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Arch. Ana Maria Zahariade).

² See, for instance, D. Iordănescu, C. Georgescu, *Construcții pentru transporturi în România*, București, CCCF, 1986, 2 vol; Radu Bellu, *Mica monografie a căilor ferate din România*, București, Ed. Filaret, 1995-2001, 6 vol; Ș. Lăcrețeanu, I. Popescu, *Istoricul tracțiunii feroviare în România*, vol.1: 1854-1918, București, Ed. ASAB, 2007.

their position in relation to the railway network. As a corollary of such cumulative effects, the author discusses the growing economic importance of some areas or localities, either from an agricultural viewpoint, or from that of the new industries which essentially emerged from their connection to the railway. The most relevant case in this respect is the Bărăgan Plains that, since the establishment of the connection between Bucharest and Cernavodă as an extension of an older railway connecting the Danube port and Constanța, has become a major area for cereal production, triggering the emergence of new localities, and adapting the road network to the new physical, social, and economic conditions.

Another long-lasting effect of the materialisation and exploitation of the railway network has been its use by the population which gradually included the train as a daily rapid way of traveling; people have become more aware of this new, modern way of moving in the territory, of its role in the country's "discovery", and started taking the train to the spas and resorts that were at the time developing as a way of recreation and therapy.

In the second part, *The Town*, the author researches the relationship between the city and the railway. The former is considered neither from the viewpoint of the theory or doctrine of the era, as the author claims, because they were almost absent at that time, nor from the actual normative acts (which incidentally concern only the relation to the cities); instead, the author tackles the relationship between the railway system and urban planning and the impact of the existing railway infrastructure upon the urban body. The only exemplified town – carefully analysed – in which the Town Hall decided the railway station location and the establishing of the railway network is Bucharest; in this case, both the 1906 planning competition and, later, the work of Cincinat Sfințescu took into consideration this aspect of urban modernisation. Toader Popescu emphasises that, except for some situations, the existing urban structure was forced into adjusting to the imperatives of the railway and that, during the first stage at least, the administration paid less attention to this new means of traveling. However, the town benefited from the integration of the railway station as a key representational element of the city by connecting it to the existing urban structure and giving it an appropriate urban image. The research has been carried out on most of Romania's county capitals, which the author grouped into two categories: spontaneously developed towns, which evolved gradually, and towns with a pre-established plan. For the first category, the most populated one, according to the location of the station – mainly at

the periphery or at some distance from it – Toader Popescu has identified three types of intervention: the penetration of a boulevard connecting the station to the city centre, a local solution (through the creation of an access street or the adjusting of some existing arteries) and, finally, the adaptation of existing streets through alignments, alterations, extensions. The tracing of boulevards has prevailed; some of them (in Ploiești and Târgoviște, for instance) awaken a particular interest due to the quality of the public space that was created. No matter the type of urban operation, the appearance of the railway station has always triggered local transformations in the urban configuration, and more than often generated regularised fragments of urban structure. The (particular) case of cities with pre-established plans – the ports on The Danube – suggests that the existing structure has not been affected, since the railway stations have been placed in major points of these structures. An ample chapter is dedicated to Bucharest, a complex case, which the author has analysed thoroughly, highlighting the railway routes in the urban zone, the locations of the stations, and the related urban developments. It is worth to mention the debates on the location of Obor Station, in Bucharest, the third most important in town, a case that has generated long and heated debates between the municipality and the leaders of the railway department.

The third part, *The Railway Station*, focuses on the architectural object, an entirely new type of building in Romania as much as in other countries. Being regarded as the (new) gate to the city, a point of arrival and departure alike, an urban landmark that was supposed to be treated both architecturally and as a utilitarian building, the railway station was one of the most fertile grounds for architectural experiments in the 19th century. Regarding the Romanian examples from the studied period, Toader Popescu has established an adequate typo-morphological classification, as follows: railway stations built on leasing terms, duplicated railway stations, railway stations designed in the "Romanian Railways" style, railways designed in national or regional architectural styles. Their succession mainly goes hand in hand with the completion of various railway routes. This is but a natural phenomenon, and it is the author's merit of having noticed such similarities. If during the first stage the concessionaires (as diverse as ever) applied the projects used beforehand in other places, once the entire network became the property of the Romanian state, which continued its development, it was only natural that a different kind of architecture would appear as a result of Western

influences, and that later a particular “style” of railway buildings, especially railway stations would evolve. Finally, during the last period, around World War I, the experiments of a national architecture (Neo-Romanian architecture) extended to railway stations. This kind of succession is suggestive for the development of railway architecture. In the last chapter of this part, “Flag Projects”, the author details the period railway stations, that through their architectural features and value, stand as unique buildings: Burdujeni, Bucharest, Obor, Sinaia, Ploiești, Râmnicu Sărat, Buzău, and the successive (unbuilt) projects for the central station of Bucharest. This is probably the most expressive example of complete, integral equipping with a network of buildings for urban (and territorial) functions, one that is the best defined among all the massive building interventions of the period.

If we consider the volume as a whole, we can unmistakably say that the “golden age” of the Romanian railway project unfolded between 1879 and 1901, when the first governmental program of railways was established; in fact, the timeline corresponds to Romania’s gaining of independence and the creation of the Romanian Kingdom. The new state and its glory of recently gained independence and the integration of Dobrogea in its territory have been themselves powerful incentives for the growing authority of the state institutions. Equally, we cannot overlook the fact that the *golden age* of railways is “organically” circumscribed to a considerable growth of the built environment; in a nutshell, after 1880 the whole country underwent a process of westernisation, and the railway buildings truly followed this trend.

The bibliography is quite comprehensive; it reflects the author’s diverse sources of information, such as: archive documents, collections of legislative acts, general history books, volumes, essays, articles published in various magazines, etc. One cannot fail to notice the richness of international bibliography, with its important references that are vital to the circumscribing of the research to the present-day context of this topic. The illustrations are also numerous and vary from fragments of maps, city plans, drawings from the building permit files, to photographs, period and contemporary postcards reproduced as such or skilfully borrowed by the author; they all accompany and exemplify this articulated discourse. Likewise, the annexes are worth mentioning since they highlight a parallel between the development of the Romanian railway infrastructure and that of the neighbouring countries, and provide a useful timeline of the railway legislation.

Toader Popescu’s book is a rich source of information, documents quoted *in extenso*, and thorough comments. The author is proficient at finely and assiduously piecing together diverse pieces of information and interpreting them at times in a strikingly unexpected manner. The volume largely contributes to the understanding of Romania’s modernisation process. What is more, it rearranges the era of flourish of the railway domain into a coherent image according to three levels of development. Undoubtedly, it is the first attempt in the field that has proposed a perspective on the relationships between technical aspects, interventions on the territory, influences on urban structures and, finally, on the architecture of major railway station buildings. The author knows how to conduct a rigorous, thorough research based on the interconnecting of various documents, of which many have been rather unknown so far, which truly makes the volume a major contribution to this field of study. We should also emphasise the author’s precise, clear, concise, yet equally persuasive discourse.

Nicolae Lascu