

Railway Station Projects in Greater Paris

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This article concerns the projects to renovate and modernise railway stations in the outer metropolitan area of Paris. These projects correspond to the objectives of the metropolitan authorities: optimised mobility and the emergence of a more polycentric conurbation. However, their roll-out is being hindered by a lack of identification with, and democratic debate around, the issues that these projects raise at local level.

Introduction

The railway stations in the outer metropolitan areas are central to the challenges of metropolitan planning in the Greater Paris project. Over the next ten years, according to the current planning documents (SDRIF 2013, PDUIF 2017) the Greater Paris Express network will reinforce the multi-polar structure of the conurbation. The stations in the outer metropolitan area will be situated in neighbourhoods with a mix of housing and local services. They will be more multi-modal than they are today. They will accompany the emergence of communities in the outer suburbs where urban development has remained diffuse hitherto. Thanks to these railway lines that are currently being renovated, these small stations will connect the residential outer suburbs with the new business quarters in the west and north of Paris, but also the small business centres that are expected to grow up around the Greater Paris Express stations.

This process is driving renewed interest in these small stations and railway stops (i.e. stations where the passenger building is closed, but the train still stops and the platform is in use). These points on the regional rail network belong to the Departments of Seine-et-Marne, Yvelines and Val d'Oise. They are situated approximately between 40 and 80 km from the capital, or about 25 to 60 minutes from Paris by train. These stations are attached to small towns which are marked by a diverse range of socio-economic trajectories: small industrial towns suffering from degrowth and with poor populations, "dormitory suburbs" housing office workers, and leafy villages re-invaded by a management class fleeing Paris. There is a strong contrast between the very prosaic reality of these stations, the very limited nature of the services they offer today (obsolescent buildings, lack of shops around them, low commitment of the bus transport operators that serve them, anarchic parking of large numbers of cars all around) and the discourse around them. Understanding what is at stake with these small stations therefore requires the functional object (the building) to be separated from the project it represents. This article is about how the "small

railway station in the outer metropolitan area" object constitutes a subject for public policy, that is to say a means to achieve various objectives. By understanding the different perspectives of the dominant actors, the local stakeholders and different social groups, it will be possible to highlight some of the reasons for the difficulties encountered in implementing these projects.

The small railway stations in the outer suburbs carry in them a series of historical legacies, whilst also marking a new era in the development of the outer metropolitan area

This part explains that small stations represent a certain segment in the rail offer, but also in the accessibility offer to and from Paris. In the past, these infrastructures have been marked by several cycles of investment that have sometimes enriched them, but at other times have impoverished them by depriving them of some of their technical functions, limiting their capacity to fulfil what could be their role in the local territory.

In what way are these railway stations "small"?

The railway stations of the outer suburbs are "small" in three ways.

- Firstly, they represent a small, but non-negligible segment of the rail offer and passenger traffic. Two thirds of the railway stations in Ile-de-France see fewer than 5,000 passengers a day, 20% of them fewer than 250 and there are even 6% (i.e. 22 stations) that have fewer than 50 passengers a day.

- Then, they are small from the point of view of the land occupied by the building and other spaces. These are often small buildings with a second floor (containing a flat for the station master), with a canopy over the platform to protect the passengers, plus a few technical buildings. Stations that previously had a goods traffic function may cover a larger area and have more buildings (maintenance, storage of goods such as grain, for the Ile de France is a major cereals producing area). These stations are nevertheless restricted in size, offering passengers the minimum service that a rail transport operator can offer: a few seats, a ticket machine and sometimes a hot drinks vending machine. Certain buildings are closed and the seats and ticket machines are on a platform directly accessible from the outside.

- Finally, the small stations serve small towns (generally with populations of 4,000 to 10,000) and are sometimes equidistant between two of these towns and in a loosely urbanised area.

A new cycle of investment

Small railway stations have been the focus of three railway investment cycles.

- The first corresponds to the era when they were built, during the Second Empire (1850-1870). At that time they were stops on the main lines (Paris-Marseille, Paris-Strasbourg, etc.). They were built in series, with a recognisable style and care in the ornamentation, for they were conveying the image of the big companies. Other, more modest stations were built at the end of the 19th century by the departmental companies for more local traffic. The electrification of the main lines (no more need for technical stops to pick up coal and water for the locomotives), the advent of the truck and the rural exodus led to the elimination of a large number of these stations in the Ile-de-France area in the 20th century.

- A second cycle of modernisation occurred between 1970 and 1990, when the national railway company SNCF was trying to keep up with substantial growth in suburban traffic and in the economies of small towns in Ile-de-France, some of which were industrialising. These small stations were designed as circulatory systems for a population of hurried commuters. They were given subways (to cross the tracks safely), rows of turnstiles (the season ticket became the norm), outdoor car parks (ordering of vehicle flows at a time when car ownership was becoming accessible to the middle classes). On the other hand, the elements relating to contacts with the customers (ticket offices) and their comfort (waiting rooms) were eliminated. It was at this time that the passenger building was sometimes closed for good.

- Finally, a third cycle of investment began at the beginning of the 2010s, under the impetus of the national railway company ("augmented railway station", Proximus, "shared station", etc.) and the Ile-de-France regional transport authority (multimodal exchanges, park and ride schemes, etc.).

Three actions have been implemented:

- a project focused on transport and mobility: its aim is to increase multimodality and accessibility so that the railway station becomes a multimodal hub;
- a programme centred on services to passengers (here there is a change from a strictly technical approach, as in the 1980s the approach was centred on the needs of a customer on the move);
- the integration of the station renovation (building and land occupied) into an urban planning project district around the station therefore the local area. Generally,

the small station retains its existing form, with little being destroyed and few new buildings, but this heritage is entirely reintegrated into a pitch that emphasises the arrival of a new railway, institutional and urban context.

Arguments for and content of the transformation projects concerning small stations in the outer metropolitan area

This part lists the factors that explain the focus of a series of actors (public and private, railway, institutional and real estate) around the small stations object, and lists the types of ways in which the operations are changing the small railway station.

The dominant arguments to justify the intervention on small railway stations are of five types.

- A national obligation: the energy transition
Energy and ecological transition policy seeks to limit the emissions of greenhouse gases and support a policy of encouraging soft forms of mobility and the use of public transport. The 2019 Framework Law on Mobility has two main goals, in which these small stations can exert some leverage: to invest more and better in everyday transport, to facilitate and encourage the deployment of new solutions to enable everyone to travel and to commence the transition towards cleaner mobility.

- An operational argument and a technical necessity.
Regional rail traffic saw two-figure growth through the 2000s, for structural reasons (the peri-urbanisation wave) and for cyclical reasons (peaking car fuel costs drove commuters onto the train). These railway stations therefore need to be expanded to cope with the larger flows of passengers at peak times. In addition, the Brétigny derailment (8 dead in 2013) turned the spotlight on chronic under-investment in the maintenance of suburban railway lines. At the time, the national railway company's investment effort was focused on the high-speed lines. Reinvesting in small stations is a way for the national company to act on two levels: (1) to show that it is making up for lost time on the Greater Paris rail network, (2) to upgrade the stations in terms of comfort as, during the works, trains are delayed and commuters dissatisfied.

- An institutional negotiation: Greater Paris against its outskirts.

The Greater Paris project is investing more than €40 billion and radically transforming the departments that make up the inner suburbs (petite couronne) (Seine-Saint-Denis, Val de Marne, Hauts de Seine). The

local authorities in the outer ring of suburbs (*grande couronne*) (Seine-et-Marne, Yvelines and Val d'Oise) are contributing on a massive scale to the investment effort through taxation. Revamping the smaller railway stations is a response to the feeling of injustice expressed by local inhabitants and politicians, in the face of the concentration of wealth in the centre of the metropolitan area. The work on the smaller stations will help to develop business in the construction/public works sector and to draw property developers towards the small towns instead of the central area of the Paris conurbation.

- Stations for those banished to the suburbs versus stations in the happy fringes of Ile-de-France
From the Yellow Vests movement to the COVID lockdown, the rural outskirts of the capital region have been shown by the media in contradictory lights. In 2018 and 2019, this region was a hot spot of the Yellow Vests movement, a middle and working class revolt that followed the reduction of the speed limit on non-motorway roads and the introduction of a fuel tax. This period revealed the car-dependence of the inhabitants of these peripheral zones and highlighted their loss of status (or fear of seeing their status downgraded), their lifestyle centred on the individual house, and their residential trajectories (these social strata having partly left the inner suburbs as they rejected the level of residential density and ethnic mix of the suburbs closer to Paris). At this time, the railway stations in the outer metropolitan areas were seen as precious objects allowing these populations to access the capital's resources for the long term.

The lockdown of spring 2020 threw a different type of light on them. Suddenly 20% of Paris's population headed out of the city, many of them moving to second homes in these peripheral areas. Those without second homes are focused on the better housing conditions (private gardens, spacious houses instead of tiny flats). The outer metropolitan area has come to be seen as a less dense, greener and healthier urban environment, with the lower density seeming to facilitate social distancing and the management of the pandemic. The post-lockdown period is seeing an effect on house prices in the small towns in the outer metropolitan area which have railway stations. Values of houses that are within a reasonable distance of the station have gone up even more. These outlying railway stations seem to have become a potential instrument of speculation and spatial classification in the outer metropolitan area.

- Railways stations ready for the opening up of the railway network to competition:

Responsibility for the small railway stations lies with a dedicated branch (Gares&Connexions) of the railway network operator (SNCF Réseau). Responsibility for mobility around the small stations lies with a regional operator (Ile de France Mobilité), whose president is also president of the Regional Council. Responsibility for other issues around the stationAs lies with local institutions (station planning with the inter-municipal authority, urban projects supported by the municipalities themselves). The funding sources available to revamp small railway stations are limited, given the enormous effort currently being put into modernising the lines by the public actors. Small stations are a heavy burden in the operation of the network and bring in little revenue (used by few passengers compared to the huge numbers using the stations in the centre of the conurbation). The issue is therefore the following: how can these stations be redefined so that they generate some value again, and how can that value be shared in a context where there is no dedicated investor or stable business model, but only a degree of potential and some pressing expectations.

This question now takes on a particular significance as, over the next two years or so, the regional railway business will start to be progressively opened up to competition. The railway reform takes account of this new context and lays down 3 public service missions for railway stations: (1) that they accommodate the trains of all the operators and guarantee equal treatment between them, (2) that they accommodate all transport solutions in the stations to become hubs where different mobility solutions are truly integrated, (3) that they enhance the role of stations in urban and territorial development. The opening up to competition is a threat to the monopolistic national company. Its treatment of the small railway stations is therefore a way of preparing for the arrival of competition. For the historic rail company this means acting positively and pro-actively so that it can retain its market share, as its brand image has recently been dented by long strikes. The solution found so far is this: the historic operator, wishing to work more closely with the local actors who hold the future of the rail company in their hands (through the regional transport body), has called for a pact with the local public authorities in the outer metropolitan area, with a view to developing renovation projects for small railway stations, which will involve a joint financial effort on the part of the rail company and the local authority. This pact was launched in December 2019 in the Senate, the emblematic centre of local power, and concerns three types of transformation for small stations.

Work gets underway on the small stations: three types of transformation

The first type corresponds to functional optimisation and involves creating a multimodal hub. The architecture of the passenger building is unaffected, but it will be adapted to a door-to-door mobility chain. The additions are modular and incremental: expanded car parks with electric vehicle charging stations and dedicated car share spaces, improved pedestrian pathways between the station and bus stops, bike parking facilities, etc.). The inauguration of these exchanges gives the impression of a great leap forward, but in fact these projects evolve incrementally and there is no change to the site's function: it remains dedicated to mobility. The second type corresponds to a transformational adaptation. Small stations undergo adjustments to the space they occupy and their buildings and see their uses diversified. The aim is not only to move passengers, but to create value by concentrating different activities in the station. For example, the railway company rents out unoccupied spaces to shops or to public organisations. Such projects may be interlinked with parallel re-urbanisation programmes concerning the area surrounding the station, which can lead to reciprocal knock-on effects, but these are not yet radical changes. The third type corresponds to a radical transformation: as well as radical changes to the land occupancy and buildings, there is also an institutional reorganisation between the stakeholders. For example the station is sold, a new development plan alters the land uses and the legal basis of the value distribution. Housing programmes and the creation of services lead to a metamorphosis of the neighbourhood over periods of decades and across tens of hectares.

Territorialisation of railway station projects: political appropriation and social diversions

This section looks at how railway station projects are perceived locally and how this reflects a considerable power imbalance between different stakeholders. The ability to intervene on railway infrastructure is concentrated in the hands of the Regional Council, the regional mobility operator and the network operator and administrator. Except in the third type of case, they are responsible for planning and steering the project, and possess the financial instruments and the first-hand access to information, including in particular the trends in land values near the stations. The local side of the circle of stakeholders consists of small and scattered partners (elected representatives of small municipalities and inter-municipal bodies, a variety of developers, including small firms). The dominant actors propose

the small station projects to the local stakeholders, but the latter may be sensitive to varying degrees to such projects, as well having a limited capacity to intervene and in some cases a hazy idea of the implications of the station project. We will present the points that tend to be opaque and ambiguous in the pitch and schemes that accompany these projects, viewed from the local level.

The railway station project as an uncertain combination of a technical programme and a plan for the public good

The railway station projects undertaken in the 2000s and 2010s are surprisingly similar across the whole of the Ile-de-France region. This resemblance is in some ways due to the architectural homogeneity of these stations, which we have already mentioned and which is a historical fact of life. But it is also due to the series production of the railway station projects themselves: the regional transport authority has its programmes, while the railway company works on groups of stations radial train line by radial train line, and so on. And the diagnoses, like the solutions, work to a set framework: dimensioning of peak passenger capacity using an equation based on the number of services, the size of the transformable spaces and the budget available. Another professional practice that adds to the number of elements framing station projects is the method of defining the pedestrian feeder area around the station, a sort of magic circle where soft modes of mobility are meant to be promoted. This zoning is done by using a compass to draw a circle with an 800-metre radius around the station, equivalent to an average walk of 10 minutes. Finally, the planning doctrines that underpin these projects are all based on identical ideas: densification and intensification, assertion of the centrality of the station district - all terms that are conjugated with positive representations of how the railway station can bring new life to this part of the town or village. The fact that the populations of these outer metropolitan areas may have different understandings of the terms used to those of the experts does not seem to have been anticipated. The railway station project arrives in the town presented as a solid technical programme, but may well be incompatible with the expression of what the station is, seen from the point of view of the local area and society: a focal centre or wasteland, a zone full of life or one subject to lawlessness, etc. This may explain why certain types of project (especially "shared" railway stations where



1. Kiosque à café
2. Paniers de fruits et légumes
3. Consignes pour retrait de colis
4. Espaces de coworking
5. Micro-crèche
6. Parking relais

7. Garage à vélos
8. Toilettes
9. Accessibilité handicapés (rampes, ascenseur sur les quais)
10. Abris sur les quais

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1. Coffee stand
2. Fruit and vegetable baskets
3. Parcel lockers
4. Co-working spaces
5. Micro-crèche
6. P+R
7. Bike garage
8. Toilets
9. Disabled access (ramps, lift to platform)
10. Platform shelters

Figure 1. A small station "augmented" with modules: a transformation of the station's functions with a marginal effect on existing buildings (Source: Le Parisien)

the invitation for tenders includes coworking spaces) frequently fail even though there is demand on the ground and motivated leaders may be involved. The feedback in these cases shows that the parameters (location, ergonomics of the premises proposed, evaluation of the number and profile of potential users, expectations) are decided and managed by the railway institution, with an institutional framework and regulatory constraints that are difficult to accommodate in a more open and pragmatic context of local management.

Railway station projects in the local power jungle

Who is responsible for steering the station project in the greater metropolitan area? It may be the inter-municipal body. French law confers upon inter-municipal bodies, with some differences in level depending on whether they are “communautés de communes” or “agglomérations”, four areas of competence: mobility, territorial development, economic development and the environment. In this case, the inter-municipal body also finds a tool for asserting itself in relation to the other infra-regional institutions. It is a known fact that the Ile-de-France inter-municipal structures came much later and were much more difficult to set up than in the rest of France, but they were finally forced into existence by the Prefects towards the end of 2016. At the time, the attitude of the State was quite prescriptive: the railway station must serve as a starting point around which small towns are grouped. Thus, the inter-municipal body is often looking to consolidate its scope and generate solidarity between the municipalities involved through operational mobility contracts applicable across the de facto communities, which may or not correspond exactly to the official inter-municipal scope. A crucial fact is that the inter-municipal body does not work on railway lines but on groups of stations, which may belong to more than one radial railway line. Thus, the inter-municipal body shapes the usual services (bus) or experimental services (on-demand shuttles) together and invests in soft infrastructure to boost the emergence of a small territorial system, which seeks to achieve, eventually, a balance between housing and jobs, in other words to limit the pull of the centre of the Paris conurbation.

For the mayor of a small municipality in the outer metropolitan area, the railway station is an object over which he or she has little control. For these mayors, the SNCF is a remote public enterprise with a complex organisation. In fact the local station, for the mayor, raises issues connected to other objects of public action. For example, it will be come up in discussions of parking in neighbourhood council meetings (the cars of inhabitants from neighbouring towns or villages, on

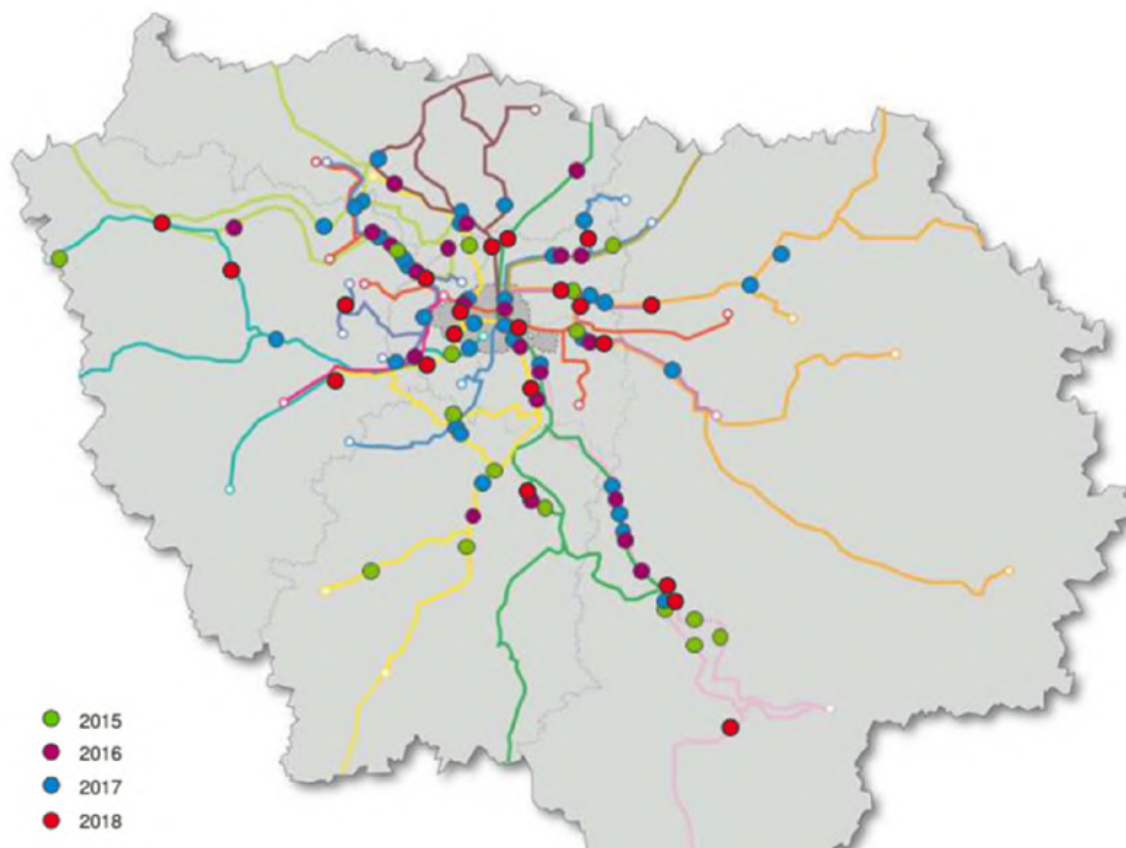
top of local residents’ cars, clog up the areas around the station). It can also come up in what can be emotive discussions of local petty delinquency. It goes without saying that the mayor will have a vision for his or her town which involves the long-term plans for the station, which are produced by the Regional Council or the inter-municipal body, but his or her spheres of action are peripheral to the station both spatially and functionally: they essentially relate to the roads and the urban land use plan. The mayor is the elected representative most directly exposed to a whole series of tensions. There are the classic difficulties of local governance, the balancing act between day-to-day concerns and monitoring one or more railway station projects (for example a multi-modal exchange project, a service project or a housing programme), which all have different time-frames and involve different stakeholders. In addition, there is the constraint of turning - or rather adapting - technically strictly circumscribed projects into local projects whilst integrating the orientations of a whole chain of overarching institutions and giving voice to the expectations of the town’s own citizens.

Everyone in the peri-urban area has their own idea of a plan for their station: the one that best matches their lifestyle

For a working couple living in the outer suburbs of Paris, the railway station is a way of articulating day-to-day mobility (the ability to work far from home) with residential mobility (the possibility of choosing a place to live based on housing prices, amenities, and also, more and more often, a desire to live alongside a population like themselves). The railway station draws two types of populations.

- Certain inhabitants live within walking and cycling distance of the small station, in a spacious, leafy neighbourhood. This is not down to chance. Mainly members of the higher classes, they work in Paris, which is why they can afford to buy a house in the “golden triangle” of the village. During lockdown, they were easily able to work from home, since they were already familiar with this practice. Some of them also keep a small flat in Paris as daily travel times are long. They also have their doctors, friends, the higher education institutions of their children etc. in Paris. What they want from the future operators selected in the tender process is a direct, frequent express service from their station, a sort of express shuttle between this small station and Paris. The multimodal exchange is of no particular interest to them, apart from the bike park, as it would impinge upon or complicate their daily journey. Other inhabitants, locals or those from the rest of the inter-

Figure 2. Four years of calls for projects (Shared Stations Programme) to diversify railway station uses and services
Source: SNCF Transilien



municipal area, who clog up the roadsides with their cars squatting the same place all day long, are seen as the enemy. The plan for services in the station may interest them, especially drive-type services or lockers (parcel collection), but certainly not a third space for teleworking. Plans to increase urban density by filling in urban infill sites in the station quarter offend them, hence their interest in advocating the political values of proximity and ecology (some of them even propose making the quarter a car-free enclave) to hamper this densification and mixed character of what is a sort of Parisian residential colony.

- Other inhabitants live within driving or public transport distance of the small railway station and use it to get to a job in Paris, or sometimes somewhere nearer when they can find a job in one of the secondary central points that are developing and becoming more autonomous within the wider urban area around Paris. This is a population that is in the process of becoming anchored in the community developing at inter-municipal level. These two features, the combination of car and rail mobility and the relocated mobility area, determine other needs as regards the small station: needs for multiple rail services - to Paris, but also nearer stations - and needs for inter-modal services. This group's biggest demand is for the construction of huge, free car parking spaces as close as possible to the small station. They have fewer needs for other services: the shops near the station are not necessarily the local shops of these inhabitants.

Finally, they are split when it comes to the creation of a housing offer close to the station: for some, it does not concern them directly, others are afraid that the densification of buildings in the station quarter will hinder physical access to the station and, more widely, traffic flows in this area.

Conclusion

In the eyes of the urban and transport planning authorities in the Ile-de-France Region, a vision is emerging of an object of public action with many virtues attached to it. Our work, however, leads us to consider that small railway station projects cover a range of programmes with, uniquely or transversely, three objectives: optimisation of traffic, a service and technology-based approach to consumption in a mobility situation, and extraction of value from the land and buildings. The arguments put forward concerning these station projects are too formatted and the technical schemes highly pre-determined. These programmes are being projected onto local realities that are in fact highly complex. Finally, the keys to translating and adapting these small railway station projects, have not been provided by the dominant operators, which means that they are regarded with a great deal of caution by the local actors. But the subject is political and it is urgent, if we are to believe forecasters who are betting on an urban exodus for sanitary reasons (climate change and heat island effect in the centre of Paris, pandemics). More effort to make plans for these small railway stations part of the democratic debate could lead to an unblocking of the situation in two ways.

By accepting that there is more than one model for efficient stations and station quarters, new, more explicit ways could be found of setting out how spaces can be shared and compromises negotiated locally in terms of accessibility versus the distancing of social groups and urban resources, in terms of protection versus exposure of local communities to the effects of rising land and property prices, in terms of the effects of station projects on socio-economic trajectories in the territories. It would then be possible to cast light on what is going on behind the scenes in the sometimes violent conflicts of interest that are emerging and obstructing the projects, whilst going beyond the screen of local political slogans (mobility, proximity) and the current stranglehold of metropolitan development doctrine (density, intensity, centrality).

