

DOWNFALL OF A (HISTORICAL) RAILWAY STATION?

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Abstract

The paper discusses problem of deterioration of small railway stations. It focuses on the so called “Kolej Kaliska” railway track, in order to exemplify the lowering importance of once key points in every town – railway stations. Many stations along this tract have been built according to one pattern, therefore comparison of various external factors influencing the present state of such buildings has been facilitated. The paper is an attempt at pointing out future directions for small historical railway stations’ revitalization.

Streszczenie

W artykule autorka porusza problem obumierania niewielkich budynków stacyjnych na trasie tzw. „Kolei Kaliskiej”. Większość z nich wzniesiona została według zunifikowanego projektu w zbliżonym czasie, co ułatwiło obserwację zewnętrznych czynników mających wpływ na obecny stan zachowania tych obiektów i pozwoliło na sformułowanie wniosków pozwalających na opracowanie ogólnych wytycznych projektowych dla podobnych historycznych budynków stacyjnych.

Keywords: Historical railway station; Revitalization; Brick; New functions; Conversions; Maintenance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The discussed railway tract including analyzed railway station buildings has been granted in 1900. The line had its start in Warsaw and went in the direction of Kalisz via Błonie, Sochaczew, Łowicz, Głowno, Stryków, Zgierz, Łódź, Pabianice, Łask, Zduńską Wolę, Sieradz and Opatówek [1]. Station buildings (excluding Warsaw, Łódź and Kalisz), workers’ houses, water towers etc. were built of red brick according to one unified design. End stations were destroyed during the World War I, but remaining smaller stations are preserved till present times. This paper takes a closer look at these once important public buildings and analyzes them according to their present state and function.

2. ORIGINAL DESIGN PATTERN FOR RAILWAY STATION BUILDINGS ALONG “KOLEJ KALISKA” TRACT

Discussed railway stations have been built according to an unified design [11]. According to historical drawings, main entrance to the building was always centrally located in a longer elevation facing the street and led to the main hall, where the ticket office was localized right opposite the main entrance. Then, two hallways led to two smaller door leading directly to the train platform. The building was equipped with toilets localized in the right wing of the building. Passengers could also use two biggest rooms that served as waiting rooms. Ticket offices had separate entrance via stationmaster’s. Other entrances led to waiting rooms and rooms with service function. The main entrance to the building was facing the street (not the platform).

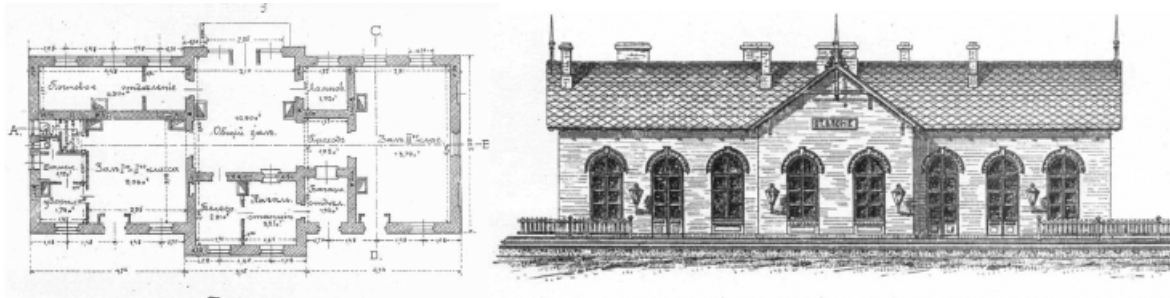


Figure 1.
Historical design of the railway station [3] that was used for: Sochaczew, Łowicz, Głowno, Stryków, Zgierz, Łódź, Pabianice, Łask, Zduńska Wola, Sieradz and Opatówek

Railway station buildings were usually very important public buildings, since railway has long been a key mean of transport. The building itself, therefore, was well kept and equipped with greenery, clocks, lighting, etc. Thus it is clear, why it was often used as a background for souvenir pictures or postcards representing towns.



Figure 2.
Railway station in Pabianice – historical picture [4]

3. RENOVATIONS AND OTHER CHANGES TO STATION BUILDINGS

As it might be noticed in pictures below, altogether with changes in transportation habits of passengers, railway stations have become a sort of interchange point. People came to the station by car, left it by the station and continued their journey by train. This parking function did increase with time and now it actually even broadened into car, bus and train interchange point (i.e. Stryków). Thus, once rich in greenery, squares in front of railway stations have more and more often been changed into parking lots or even bus stops or taxi stands. Photographs below illustrate some of former squares in front of railway station buildings altered in the 60s, 70s, and 80s.

Another alternation to the original surroundings of the station building is frequent addition of various sorts of pavilions, used as toilets or additional services. These additions may be best described by photographs below. Buildings have also become points, where telephone booths or letter-boxes have been installed. As it might be observed in photos below, they were usually placed on the street facade in the vicinity of the main entrance.

However, a general tendency for alternations to described railway-station buildings was gradual deterioration of their technical state leading sooner or later to a shutdown of the building.



Figure 3.
Railway station in Pabianice – August 2006 [4], Sieradz [5] and Zgierz – photograph from 1980s [6]



Figure 4.
Głowno (author's photo), Sieradz (photo from 2008) [5] and Sochaczew [5]



Figure 5.
Railway station in Pabianice [4] and Głowno (author's photo)



Figure 6.
Railway station Łask around year 2000 before the renovation [10]

4. PRESENT STATE

Nowadays, thanks to the supervision of the heritage conservator, analyzed railway stations are being renovated according to strict guidelines focusing on bringing back the original layout of rooms in station buildings [2].

Some of railway stations' renovations are being subsidized by the European Union Fund [7] and thus via strict EU guidelines, manner in which these buildings are being renovated is also changed. For instance, design solutions concerning toilets that need to be adjusted to the needs of people using wheelchairs are unified for all renovated public buildings (many detailed dimensioning might be summarized in a duty of wheelchair turning space that is enclosed in a 150×150 cm square of floor area free from any equipment). This EU guideline also influences such details as width of doors (minimum 90 cm), lack of steps inside the building, etc. It also determines the use of ramps and specific walkways outside the building (not only steps, but also ramps for handicapped). Schemes below illustrate documentation for contemporary renovations of some of the described railway stations.

Other guidelines are connected with PKP regulations and, among others, determine introducing such ideas as an "obstacle-free track" of the width of 160 cm that is free from any equipment and enables people with a big luggage to move freely (ramps for people who drag their luggage on a luggage trolley or a wheeled bag) [9] and introduces an unified system of signage for travelers. It consists of such basic signs as direction arrows, marks for toilets, exit, way to a platform, luggage storage place, etc. These small marks have become as important as other elements of small architecture. Their form is very modern, since they are a sort of novelty (the only written boards in historical railway stations were timetables).

A very important alternation is forced by a technological change. A ticket office is no longer necessary for travelers. In order to buy a ticket, they may use



Figure 7. Documentation for the renovation of Pabianice railway station and photographs of the present state of the station building [8]

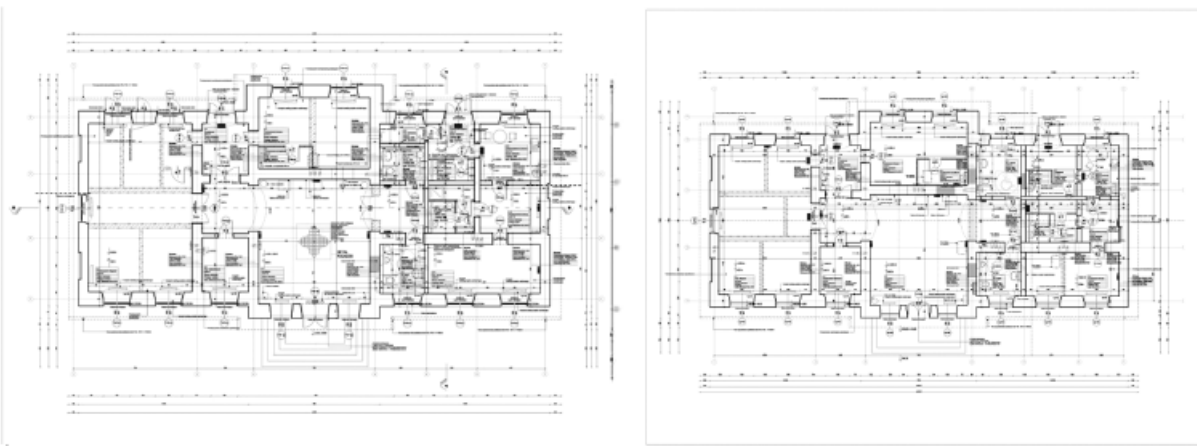


Figure 8. Floor plans for Stryków and Głowno (author's work)

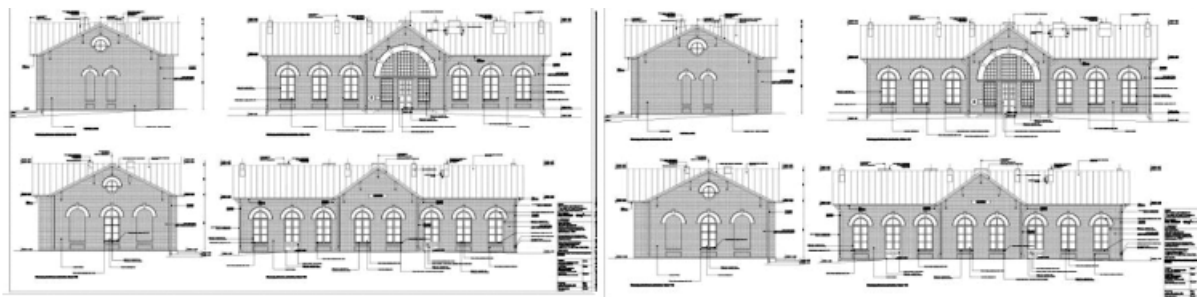


Figure 9. Documentation for the renovation of brick façades in Stryków and Głowno (author's schemes)

machine or buy tickets on the train. Due to the fact that trains are owned by many smaller companies, none of them is interested in bearing costs of a ticket office maintenance, therefore, railway stations end

up deprived of such a room. Despite the fact that in some railway stations there are still ticket offices, the newly renovated ones are rather equipped with ticket machines (pol. "biletomaty") – it may be observed on



Figure 10.
Zgierz railway station before and after the renovation and the documentation for the renovation of façades [5]

floor plan schemes for Głowno and Stryków railway station.

Functions of rooms at railway stations are consequently not as prestigious as they used to be. Small bookshops, kiosks, flower shops, bakeries, cafes, private restaurants, bars and sometimes small museums and many other services fill up interiors of contemporary railway stations and thus support financial upkeep of these buildings. They are also main magnet for keeping constant flow of customers, since railway station's role is not as important as it used to be.

With the aid of renovation funds, brick facades of the stations of "Kolej Kaliska" railway tract are cleaned and impregnated in order to bring back the original look. Only in Zgierz, where the building walls were too strongly deteriorated due to thermo-insulation from the 90s, external walls have been planned as thermally insulated and covered with external layer of paint.

5. ATTEMPTS AT ASSUMING FUTURE OF ANALYZED RAILWAY STATIONS

Transport companies are especially interested in predicting the future of small railway stations in Poland. Estimates done by LKA (Łódzka Kolej Aglomeracyjna) assume vast increase of railway clients triggered by growing role of people commuting between Łódź and Warsaw. However, traditional ticket offices are no longer necessary to obtain tickets. Railway stations will be losing their importance and this is the main reason for their deterioration. Railway stations are no longer an important place even for travelers, who may check the timetable via internet in their phones or other mobile devices and buy ticket on the train, therefore there is no necessity of visiting a railway station unless it is cold or rainy (even then, people often seek shelter at roofed platforms).

In this case, it is crucial, that there are ways to secure that the railway station stays open, since it might turn out that it will no longer be accessible when needed. When there is no necessity for railway companies to upkeep such buildings, they need to be filled with public functions that will keep them open for travelers, by providing not only food or basic services, but such minimum as toilets and warm waiting rooms.

One solution seems to be the perfect answer to railway companies that own railway station buildings. Station buildings should be sold to local governments for a very low price on condition, that it will be accessible to travelers (low price is compensated by heating, cleaning and WC conservation expenses that are paid by local governments and not the railway companies). Today, after few years since this program has been started, local governments are rather skeptical, since the costs outweigh benefits of such transactions and buildings, even if bought cheaply from railway companies, are hard to maintain for small local governments.

According to Jan Prześluga (the author of the above-mentioned idea), a great incentive for local governments is the income from hiring railway station floor for offices, services (especially connected with traveling) and using the space directly connected with the building – for parking lots, bus stops etc. [12]. The problem lays in the fact that many of these buildings are nearly not attended and attracting potential clients is very hard. It additionally may not be done if local governments are only renting the station building, not own it, as it frequently is today. Only a complete ownership of such buildings guarantees maximum profit from, for example, renting service area. Perhaps finding completely new (however public) functions, sometimes completely not connected with railway transport, for small railway stations is, paradoxically, the only way to save them. On the other hand, frequency of trains on the particular line determines the everyday number of travelers and users of facilities located within station buildings.

The Swedish example (“Bahn – 2000”) [13] illustrates that the above-mentioned idea may be successfully introduced under the condition that local governments will own such stations and thus become responsible for their technical state and accessibility for travelers. Many of Swedish railway stations have successfully found new functions only after they have been given to local governments.

In Poland, European Union funds allowed for renovation of some of the stations, however, as for example in Pabianice, rooms stay empty and this leads to problems with further preservation of the building. Allowing local governments for intervention seems to be the only logical way to preserve these buildings by giving them functions other than original railway station.

It turns out that each of the stations analyzed in this paper, despite identical floor plan and similar design guidelines from the conservator, ended up nowadays with different floor plans, elevations, even building materials used in the process of renovation. Despite the fact that formally, at the moment of renovation, all the buildings were owned by the same railway company there is no trace of unified renovation program for these, once identical, railway stations. This shows, that the only argument for leaving small railway stations in the ownership of one big company instead of giving it to local governments is obviously gone, therefore it seems, that giving small railway stations to local governments is not the yes/no question, but only a matter of time.

It seems that, having in mind legal situation of Polish small railway stations, one general design guideline may be drawn from these examples. Mainly, it is crucial to keep the interior of renovated buildings as flexible as possible. Even in the situation, as in Pabianice station, where functions for the renovated building were well defined, a flexible design turned out to be basic. The planned restaurant does no longer function, as there was not enough travelers to keep such business going, and the empty spot is still waiting for a new function. Not to mention Stryków or Głowno, where even at the moment of renovation it was not clear who will occupy the renovated interiors. In order to facilitate future use of the building, and in order to prevent further building interventions, future changes of building’s function should be taken for granted at the moment of design.

The era when a railway station was designed and built to fulfill given functions (ticket office, waiting room etc.) is long gone and with constantly changing demand for services (popular a few years ago, at rail-

way stations, internet cafes, are now obsolete and majority of them is long gone) it is pointless to adjust historical buildings to rapidly changing tastes and needs. In Pabianice, for instance, some of the original walls have been removed in order to provide space for the restaurant and now the room is too big for many new services, therefore new walls are necessary. It is very probable that they will be built, not in original localization, but adjusted to new functions. The idea of light partition walls would be perfect for this purpose, if only the designer had not provided a massive brick bar dedicated only for a pub/restaurant function.

Observing changes to described railway stations along the “Kolej Kaliska” tract may be a source of many precious ideas that should be taken into consideration when renovating small railway stations in Poland. Since there are so many of them, majority pending for renovation, the issue seems to be worth further consideration.

6. SUMMARY

The above study of the present state of small railway stations along the “Kolej Kaliska” railway tract focused on external factors that determined contemporary technical state of the said buildings and consequences of their legal position. Discussed railway stations have been built at approximately the same time and on the basis of an unified design, therefore their observation was targeted at formulating general guidelines for the design focused at adjusting these small historical buildings to contemporary needs. It allowed for conclusions concerning renovation. These ideas are, however, valid not only for the buildings on the above-mentioned line, but also in other localizations in Poland.

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