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RECYCLING THE RAILWAY

Christopher Lacey



All photos are by Christopher Lacey

2b. Worb Dorf RBS station with the 'park & ride' built above the S-bahn station on the right. 9/2009.

Gradual realisation of the damage we are causing to the environment has resulted in considerable 'green' legislation being introduced into our everyday lives. The Swiss, however, have long recognised the need to involve their population in such processes and adopted environmentally friendly policies many years ago. One simple example of such policy, to be found at railway stations, is the ubiquitous 'Selecta' vending machine which dispenses products in 'eco-friendly' packaging, that once finished with can be disposed of in the 'blue' recycling bins found on most platforms (Photo 1). Perhaps the most successful example of Swiss 'green' policy so far achieved however are the initiatives that have seen much of the transient freight traffic destined for southern Europe transferred from road to rail.

The advance purchase of discounted tickets, either by mobile phone or on-line, whilst of benefit to the customer, will also contribute to the demise of the traditional station ticket office at many places. The decline of wagonload freight and the move to making local deliveries by road has led to the

decline of freight facilities at local stations. This is something that I touched upon in an earlier article ("Not only trains" – SE 100) and, for example, can already be seen at Worb SBB station, where the traditional staffed station has been replaced by unmanned, cheaper to maintain, facilities. (Photo 2a) Today most travel to and from Worb is via the modern Worb Dorf Station

1. Lausanne. PET recycling bins are located at most stations, 9/2009.





2a. The new facilities at Worb SBB

(Photo 2b). The railway buildings subsequently made redundant can then be released onto the property market for resale, long term lease or conversion to an alternative use, with each option providing an opportunity for additional income. Boards advertising surplus railway properties, whose original function has now disappeared, can be found at many stations (Photo 3) whilst a website (www.sbb.ch/immobilien) is also available, showing the complete range of railway properties currently on offer to the public, ranging from freight sheds and loco depots through to stations. In most cases their use has been replaced through the arrival of new technologies, along with more efficient working practices that provide substantial cost savings for the operators.

One group of buildings falling into this category are the signal cabins once so numerous around the network. These buildings, whose basic shape often resembles a domestic house, provide a fairly easy conversion to a private residence. An example of this can be found at Hindelbank, on the line between Bern and Burgdorf, where one has become an interesting, if somewhat noisy, private residence (Photo 4).

However, what other uses can be found for surplus buildings? A good example is the now unmanned Zentralbahn (ZB) station at Alpnachstad, situated at the base of Mount Pilatus (www.pilatus.ch). The constant flow of visitors at this site has resulted in a number of alternative businesses appearing here and a model shop and café now occupy one wing of the otherwise disused building. These businesses should remain viable given the constant numbers choosing to visit Pilatus. Cycling is another tourist activity that has

3. St. Maurice. Advertisement hoardings of this type are appearing at many major stations, 9/2009.





4. Hindelbank.
The unmistakable shape of a signal box now converted to a private residence, 9/2008.

‘Avec’, ‘Co-op’, ‘Kiosk’ and ‘Migros’ organisations is an obvious move. The ‘Kiosk’ shop at Pfaffikon, however, differs slightly, being located in the freight shed as opposed to within the main unmanned station (Photo 5b). As some of these enterprises also sell tickets in reality these

helped to give new life to some disused railway buildings as ‘Velo Stations’ for the hire and return of bicycles. The former freight shed at Murten allows cycle hirers the opportunity to sample a largely rural, flat landscape while the ‘Velo Station’ at Airolo freight shed caters for a more energetic clientele wishing to tackle the challenges of the Gotthard landscape (Photo 5a). Re-use for some type of retail operation such as the ‘open-all-hours’ type of shop, run by the

stations are now no longer unmanned – to the benefit of all concerned. Future conversions could see complete station buildings converted into guest houses, hotels, restaurants, etc.

Swiss railway operators, like those the world over, erected a myriad of huts and other small buildings alongside their lines, at freight yards or in their works areas. Many of these are of an all-wood construction, having been built from wooden sleepers or planks



recovered from scrapped freight wagons. This type of ‘internal’ recycling ensures that the railway company largely avoids costs normally associated with the purchase or rent of a new building from the commercial market by keeping the project entirely ‘in-house’. During the ‘Gotthard 150’ event at 5a. Murten. This freight shed now acts as a ‘Velo Station’ for tourists and visitors, 9/2009.

Biasca, a number of the buildings located within the railway complex were seen to contain recycled material within their construction (Photo 6). Similarly, at Yverdon Works, a windbreak on one of the large sheds had also been constructed using similar recovered material (Photo 7). There are certainly further examples of this type of 'recycled building' surviving on the Swiss rail network, although their days are surely now numbered given the continuing upgrading taking place throughout the system.

Some track formations are also being rationalised in order to reduce costs and increase operating efficiency. At Langnau near Bern, such action has resulted in the creation of a strip of surplus land alongside the now straightened main line (8). In a novel example of recycling, this strip of land has been taken over by a plant growing operation. The reclaimed land is open to the sunlight, has good

6. Biasca. This small shed was built using material recovered from scrapped wagons, 9/2007.



5b. At Pfaffkion a 'Kiosk' outlet now occupies part of the former freight shed, 9/2009.

drainage capability and, although gaining access to and working within this area could be potentially hazardous, this could safely be arranged between train movements given the more relaxed Swiss attitude to H & S issues.

There are also examples of redundant





7. Yverdon Works.
A windbreak incorporates wooden planks recovered from scrapped wagons, 9/2005.

feel the need during your next visit to Switzerland to make a small contribution to the recycling movement, then you could consider the purchase of a green 'CARGOborsa' bag, manufactured using canvas recovered from scrapped freight wagons and available from either the SBB 'on-line-shop' (www.sbbshop.com),

or at one of the larger stations.

railway equipment to be found in places other than on the network or in museums. A hotel garden adjacent to the station in the town of Trubschachen contains a selection of well-preserved railway equipment (Photo 9). The town is also home to the well known 'Kambly' range of biscuits and the factory contains a shop open to the public (www.kambly.ch). Finally, should you too

8. Langnau. Part of the re-aligned track formation that is now in use for plants, 9/2007.



9. A hotel at Truschachen displays redundant equipment in its garden, 9/2007.