



ARTIST'S IMPRESSIONS: Few of the passengers seem to have any luggage Pictures: Network Rail

'Gateway' to Britain's rail hub

Passengers were shown the future face of Birmingham New Street station in September.

Network Rail says the striking new design, clad in reflective metal, will create a bold, modern gateway to the city.

The design is the work of Foreign Office Architects and the new-look station is expected to be completed in 2014.

"With the world looking on, this breathtaking design firmly places Birmingham on the international map for very high quality and daring design," said Councillor Mike Whitby, chairman of the New Street Gateway Funders' Board.

Speaking at the launch event, he said: "Alejandro Zaera-Polo's bold architecture symbolises Birmingham's arrival over the last few years as a globally relevant city looking to its future, as a connected international hub, to the advantage of citizen and investor alike."

Mr Zaera-Polo, principal architect for Foreign Office Architects, said: "We were inspired by the movement of people and trains at New Street and the beauty of the skyline. Our concept reflects all these components."

There is also an atrium which will "flood the station with light".

The Gateway is a £600million joint project between Birmingham City Council, Network Rail, Advan-

tage West Midlands and Centro. Network Rail says it will double passenger capacity and create a concourse three-and-a-half times bigger than at present, more accessible platforms, serviced by 42 new escalators and 14 new lifts, better links to and through the station for pedestrians, with eight new entrances and a "stimulus for the physical regeneration of the areas surrounding the station".

The concept designs will now be developed by a team led by Network Rail and including Foreign Office Architects, WS Atkins and Mace.

More than 35million passengers use New Street every year with 120,000 people passing through every day.

Network Rail says the redevelopment will provide £2.3billion of economic benefits.

The revamp of New Street has been given the Government's support shortly after the House of Commons transport committee described the makeover as a cosmetic project which would not solve Birmingham's lack of rail capacity.

The revamp is unlikely to change the trackwork which is already carrying twice the number of trains it was designed for.

However, the committee said the number of trains might well have

to double again in the next two or three decades. The committee said: "If the station cannot be adapted to such throughputs, then the Government must look for alternative solutions now."

But the Minister for the West Midlands Liam Byrne insisted New Street will remain the heart of the rail network for up to 30 years.

The committee's report reopened the debate about alternative schemes, such as a new "Grand Central" station at Eastside which could potentially serve high speed rail lines between London, Birmingham and the North. This has the support of politicians including Railfuture vice-president Lord Snape.

Under the £2billion "Grand Central" plan, New Street, Moor Street and Snow Hill would remain open as secondary stations to the central hub at Eastside, which would be at one of the few places where the large number of lines which serve Birmingham can be separated.

Moor Street and "Grand Central" would be connected by pedestrian walkways and could share a central ticket office.

Although some critics have dismissed the Gateway scheme as "all smoke and mirrors", it appears that the opportunity for a Grand Central project has gone. It is reported that land earmarked for the scheme has been sold off.

There is more to this railway of ours than banging on about Birmingham, I have often been told, but I admit I have been very worried about the various plans for "solving" Birmingham's rail problems.

Railfuture's summer conference in Salisbury raised issues from many other parts of the country as well as stimulating informed debate about the challenges facing the railway as a whole.

It reminded me that Railfuture has a very deep pocket of knowledge which we need to use.

I have had many follow-up comments and a good deal of enlightening detail.

It has made me ponder the alternatives for the West of England, the opportunities for East Coast electrification and on possible ways to deal with road-locked Ebbsfleet station, Eurostar's new stop in north Kent.

Underpinning all this, we have seen the sudden emergence of oil price and availability as a major issue. Then of course there is growing public awareness of the dangers of environmental pollution.

Railfuture's next conference will provide a platform for the great and the good to debate but in the end, we have to convince the real power brokers to listen.

Should we try to give more precedence to the line reopening debate, but that is a major challenge given the present



Rayner's Review

of "jam tomorrow"? I know for example that every year, 42,000 people are killed on the roads in the European Union as a result of accidents which also cause another 170,000 serious injuries.

The estimated cost is £125billion but what is the answer proposed? Well, it is to spend £1.53million to improve road safety.

A better (and more sensible) solution would be to spend some of that money on rail improvements which would get traffic off the roads.

That would prevent many road deaths and in the long term save money.

Politicians should not find it impossible to see the big picture.

Of course major social benefits for everyone would flow from a rolling programme of rail electrification and especially "infill" electrification. We have been pressing the case for years despite short-term thinking from some inside the rail industry. Former Secretary of State

Ruth Kelly has recently made positive noises about that, although I am sceptical.

As soon as it is agreed, it can so easily be withdrawn, crucified on the altar of Treasury cuts.

Even the well-planned Portsmouth-Gosport tram scheme, and the Liverpool tram plan had the plug pulled on them in an almost cynical way.

Why this happens time and again is because since 1997 every Secretary of State for Transport has been subservient to the Treasury.

Being realistic, perhaps I should be pleased the paper I prepared for the Railfuture conference was well-received. I'm pleased the House of Commons transport select committee recent report on strategy quoted a lot of what I and other Railfuture people have said.

Some of the schemes mentioned above do cry out for a working party group approach.

But we have little chance of dialogue with the Department for Transport. To hope they will finance good rail schemes or even give them fair evaluation seems like pie in the sky.

They have by their inexperience and lack of basic knowledge confused strategy with tinkering, such as deciding how many extra vehicles the railway needs.

Given three weeks and the diagrams, I and one or two others together could save them many units, run more trains under the

wires where they should be, and cascade the stock on to other needed routes. Would they let us? No chance!

The Government pays lip service to devolving decisions to local communities which leads to small-minded parochial solutions and is not always in keeping with the needs of the strategic national network.

By way of example I return unashamedly to Birmingham to support Railfuture West Midlands who have joined the debate about a "Grand Central" station.

For three years now I have pointed out to the House of Commons select committee on transport and in various issues of *Railwatch* and other articles the fact that New Street is never going to be able to fulfil the requirements of a main line high-speed Trans-European Network.

The deep foundations of footings of the Bull Ring shopping centre prevent expansion.

To talk about a tunnel-fed underground high-speed connection is just another way of kicking the issue into the long grass. It will be supported by the Treasury because it is such a long way away and when the time is ripe the Treasury can cancel it.

How many times have we seen that with London's Crossrail, and we are still not sure about that. Maybe now it will be built after the London Olympics in 2012. The New Street Gateway is a classic case to

illustrate why local authorities should not be the final arbiters of their own systems if those systems affect the total network.

It contains so many operating half-truths and, explained simply, is about a food hall, a shopping mall and a piece of real estate money making. Not about railways.

I have a dossier of detailed, carefully argued papers on the subject going back years. Those papers are available for any impartial examination.

One early paper was circulated to Birmingham Council, Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, Centro and the Select Committee, Birmingham MPs and Members of the House of Lords. It is therefore untrue for any pro-gateway scheme person to say that they were unaware of any practical operating constraints.

The only effect the gateway scheme will have on the railway is to cause disruption while they make infrastructure changes above the station.

Months of bus substitution should keep the bus operation side of the train operating companies nicely viable despite the cost of oil! Unless we get the trunk routes sorted out North, East, South, West, and Birmingham is key to that, then all the rest is so much hot air.

■ Peter Rayner is a former British Rail operations and safety manager.