Railway passenger shelter in Belgium. Built along a dynamic railway line

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In the 19th century, Belgium experienced international railway fever, driven both by its central location in European territory and the development of its industry. In this dynamic context, an impressive number of technical buildings were necessary to ensure the operation of the dense railway network. Engineers questioned the role of innovation and techniques in achieving their goals: creating functional, inexpensive, and quickly constructible buildings. Among the new building typologies created for the railway, platform shelters stand out as one of the most remarkable elements. These structures are notable for their innovative construction methods and the use of new materials.

Despite the significant role of these structures in 19th-century architecture, most research on shelters remains to be done. Current attention primarily focuses on large halls in contact with the public, recognized for their architectural value. Thus, the majority of platform canopies built according to standard models generally go unnoticed. This is the case for shelters built on the Liège-Namur-Givet line for the network of the Compagnie du Nord-Belge. These modest constructions were mostly erected with an emphasis on economy and functionality during the period 1860-1880. Despite belonging to the same standard model, the ensemble was built by a multitude of contractors, presenting variations and evolutions.

The reflection on this set of standard shelters constitutes the first case study of the doctoral project aiming to analyse Belgian railway shelters from 1835 to 1914 from a construction and architectural perspective. Research following themes dear to the history of construction aims to renew the study of railway construction over a wide territory and in an evolving manner. It seeks to understand the entire constructive diversity of a standard architecture, focusing on the comprehension of the construction sector from project conception to the finished product. This includes understanding the involvement of engineers, contractors, architects, and public figures in construction, identifying contract awards, prosopographic studies of contractors and suppliers, as well as understanding material transport and on-site assembly.

In parallel with archival research, a material study on the field is pursued for the entire passenger building and shelter at Godinne station (1862). The goal is to confront historical sources with the realities of the terrain. Using building archaeology techniques allows the effects of speed and economy on construction to be understood, and it also enables the detection of construction defects and entrepreneurial initiatives.

Godinne and Hastière stations (1863) and their wooden and cast-iron shelters