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The Politics of Infrastructural Reversibility: No-Regret Futures at the London Euston High-Speed Railway Station

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ABSTRACT

Large infrastructure projects are difficult for publics to challenge, scrutinise, or engage with. A well-researched barrier to public engagement is the technical complexity of large projects, whether it be materially present, or discursively constructed by professional experts. However, the multiple temporalities of large infrastructure projects can also hinder public scrutiny and opposition. In this commentary, I explore the reversibility of large infrastructure projects, using the example of the London Euston station expansion. This large project was launched in 2017 with the aim of preparing the central London railway station for high-speed services. It has since been repeatedly paused, redesigned, and cancelled. Drawing on the London Euston case and theorisations of reversibility as the political act of extending the duration of the present, I discuss how reversibility was evoked and 'made real', and the challenges its ambiguity has presented in terms of public engagement. I end with the possibilities presented by the notion of infrastructural regrets and other emotional engagements with infrastructure in constructing just and inclusive urban futures.

1 | Introduction

Large infrastructure projects are difficult for publics to challenge, scrutinise or engage with. They are often positioned as *strategically* important and thus outside of regular processes of official and public appraisal. They are also 'black-boxed' through claims of extreme technical complexity accessible to only the most advanced expertise (Richmond 2005). The complex temporalities of large infrastructure projects are another, often overlooked, barrier to meaningful public engagement. Infrastructures embody urban futures which are often deliberately over-optimistic and disengaged from the problems of the present (Flyvbjerg 2005). They also exist in a condition of protracted liminality which can block critical feedback instead of inviting it. Thus, promotional materials and detailed visualisations may render projects too complete to be opposed ('this aspect has long since been decided', brochures for such projects seem to tell us); at the same time, public consultations can present plans as too preliminary to be opposable ('the moment has not yet come to debate *that* feature'). The idea of reversibility—how it is defined, or how it remains undefined, and how it then materialises in infrastructure—is one conceptual lens through which the politics of these complex temporalities can be examined. Once a large construction project is well underway, who has the ability to define the point of no return, and with what consequences?

In this brief commentary, I seek to make visible how reversibility and irreversibility are constructed by actors such as elected officials, economists, engineers and other relatively powerful groups within the domain of infrastructure. Reversibility is demonstrated to be a terrain of contestation, and not simply a milestone in a linear trajectory of infrastructure building. I illustrate this point by discussing the redevelopment of Euston, a train station in London. The redevelopment is part of the widely publicised and controversial High Speed 2 (HS2) project, the

second high-speed railway line in the UK. The stated aim of the Euston redevelopment was to increase capacity, enabling the station to become the London terminus for HS2. However, since construction first began at Euston in 2017, repeated changes to the plan for the new railway in response to budgetary pressures, mismanagement and changing political priorities have resulted in the station expansion being repeatedly redesigned, paused, cancelled and reinstated. Throughout this period, large-scale demolition and construction works in London's dense urban core continued apace. The specific inspiration for this commentary comes from a statement by the Chief Executive Officer of HS2, who, when appearing in front of a government committee, insisted that 'all the investment made in Euston [prior to the cancellation] amounts to no-regrets work', and 'money we were always going to spend' (quoted in Gayne 2023). I return to this point in the conclusion, in order to ask whether fostering open conversations around infrastructural regrets may be one opening for critically engaging with reversibility and its current mobilisation as a political tool.

2 | Reversible Infrastructures

The multiple temporalities of infrastructure have attracted growing scholarly attention in recent years as part of a broader 'infrastructural turn' in Human Geography and beyond. Alongside, and often in dialogue with, a lively interdisciplinary exploration of urban futurity more broadly, researchers have begun to elucidate the multiple and non-linear ways in which time shapes infrastructure, and vice versa. Enriching earlier understandings of infrastructure projects as progressing along a predictable trajectory of discrete phases from conception to completion, infrastructure studies increasingly attend to the repair, maintenance (Mattern 2018), incompletion (Guma 2020), impermanence (Andres and Kraftl 2021), obsoletion, decay and ruination of infrastructures. Drawing on diverse urban contexts across the Global South and North, these temporalities have been shown to mix and overlap, clashing with and shaping each other in complex ways. However, the political potential of these complex temporalities remains underexplored. In other words, whether diverse publics can more easily engage with interlacing and subjective infrastructural times, than with the traditional representation of time in a project-managerial Gantt chart, is unclear.

How reversibility is constructed in relation to infrastructure projects can help address this question. Reversibility is a concept which brings together the linear and the relationally constructed views of infrastructural temporalities in different ways. On one hand, it implies travelling back along a clear timeline, but by doing so, it also complicates the idea of time marching irrevocably from past to present to future. While reversibility has long been of interest to economists, engineers and others involved in the planning and delivery of infrastructure (see, e.g., research on the 'sunk cost fallacy' in relation to infrastructure, Demirkesen 2025),[1] studies have often framed reversibility and irreversibility as technical challenges to be solved. In fields such as political ecology, however, reversibility has long been recognised as a contested political terrain rather than a material reality (Wolff 2021). In Wolff's work on the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, based on Niklas Luhmann's writings on time and time-making (see also Richter 2023), reversibility refers to the act of extending the duration of the present. The ability to extend the duration of the present both reflects and amplifies the power of some actors over decisions with far-reaching impacts, and the relative powerlessness of others who are to be impacted by these decisions. In relation to urban infrastructure projects, reversibility can be glimpsed in a range of ways, but two are especially relevant here. The first is the material impact on urban space of those infrastructure projects, the construction of which has seen deliberate undoing, whether prior to, or instead of, completion. This may entail abandoning a project altogether and attempting, or claiming to attempt, to restore the urban fabric to its previous condition. It can also mean unmaking a substantial part of an infrastructure project back to a critical juncture which has already been passed, in order to change course. The second goes beyond the materiality of reversal, highlighting reversibility as a distinctive way of discursively constructing infrastructural temporalities which is not always dependent on what is being reversed 'on the ground'. In practice, the material and discursive aspects of reversibility are often entangled, as reflected in the Euston station case below.

The present brief commentary does not aim to establish whether infrastructures should or should not be reversible. This ambivalent position differs from the view of, among others, political scientist Hartmut Behr (2024), for whom reversibility is an ethical imperative of responsible governance. In light of the unpredictability of the human condition further heightened in the Anthropocene, Behr argues, the responsible thing for decision-makers to do is to acknowledge the limits of their knowledge and prioritise reversible, or at least not irreversible, policies. Arguably, there are also risks to consider, including the risk of further aggravating political apathy by framing the impact of any decision as tentative and reversible. Eschewing a normative view, I aim to demonstrate how claims around (ir)reversibility can amplify inequality and antagonism in large infrastructure projects, precisely because narrating something as reversible or otherwise is a political act. By rendering the substantive ephemeral and vice versa in ways which are neither visible nor accessible to most infrastructural publics, reversibility reasserts the exclusive nature of large project decision-making.

3 | HS2 at Euston

High Speed Two (HS2) is a railway project which was originally intended to provide a new, fast transport connection between London, the West Midlands and the North of England. Following delays and cost escalations, the original project was significantly scaled back, and in 2023, the UK Prime Minister announced that only the section of HS2 between London and the West Midlands (known as Phase 1) would be completed (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts 2024). Euston was announced as the terminus of HS2 in London in 2015, with plans to double the size of the existing station and add residential and commercial 'over-site' development (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts 2024). Similarly to the rest of HS2, the initial ambitions for the Euston redevelopment were repeatedly cut back due to cost escalation. In 2023, as the budget for Euston was confirmed to have increased to £4.8bn from the original £2.6bn, the Department for Transport announced a

2-year 'pause' in the Euston works (National Audit Office 2023). By the time the plans for Euston were cancelled,[2] over £0.5bn had already been spent. By this time, the area around the station had seen the demolition of multiple buildings, with an area of 50,000 m^2 now razed and fenced off. While during earlier environmental protests the station expansion had been positioned as too far advanced to be contestable (BBC News 2021), a new discourse of reversibility (and relatedly, of 'no regrets') once again positioned the project as tentative and changeable.

4 | Producing Infrastructural Reversibility and Irreversibility

The reversibility of the station redevelopment plans has established an extended presence at Euston station (Wolff 2021). Alongside environmental activists, it is local inhabitants, the owners of local businesses and the large and small suppliers that form part of the Euston redevelopment extensive supply chain, which have had to contend with a project which simultaneously lies in ruins and in their future. At the national level, various decision-makers and regulators have sustained the extended present through public statements and reports. The complex and assumption-ridden calculations of the economic costs of infrastructural reversal are one reason why establishing a transparent and widely acceptable definition of reversibility has proved challenging, although this is likely only a partial explanation. In this context, it is important to push back against the discourse of exceptionality which surrounds the Euston station redevelopment (and all large infrastructure projects; see above) and attempt to foster critical debate around how its reversibility has been imagined and made possible.

Who defines infrastructure projects as reversible even when dramatic economic, social and spatial transformations have already taken place? And what are the consequences of extending the 'onset' of infrastructural irreversibility? The Euston station redevelopment illustrates the way reversibility is enacted in a large urban infrastructure project, as both material reality and a discursive strategy for constructing particular urban futures as desirable, attainable, worthwhile or otherwise. Seen as an extension of the duration of the present, reversibility becomes a political claim that a particular future can be avoided or postponed (Wolff 2021). However, as the Euston project demonstrates, reversibility does not become part of an infrastructure's trajectory through one or another technical characteristic or agreed temporal threshold. In line with other research which finds infrastructural temporalities to exceed single categories such as 'present' and 'future', the temporalities of the Euston redevelopment multiplied to include reversibility not as something that is, but as something that can be summoned through mechanisms invisible and inaccessible to most infrastructural publics. Reversibility is thus not simply itself, but an opening to an alternative future. It is a glimpse of an infrastructural reality which may otherwise have been narrated out of existence at an earlier juncture.

The production of reversibility as a political tool, and the delivery of actual infrastructural reversal, are related yet distinctive and independent of each other. As of 2025, the reversal of the HS2 terminus at Euston is tentative, and the future of the section of railway which is to link Euston to London's periphery remains uncertain. The Euston project thus highlights important differences, conceptual and practical, between the politics of infrastructural reversal (see also Keskinen 2012) and the politics of infrastructural reversibility. Rather than the reversal per se, it is the unequally held power over defining the moment of no return that renders reversibility political (Wolff 2021). The ability to define infrastructural reversibility thus equates to the ability to evoke particular urban futures not only as possible, but also as (still) avoidable. The politics of reversibility thus highlight broader questions around anticipating future urban space, and the opportunities for diverse publics to identify the moments when demands, objections and decisions can make a lasting and certain (i.e., not reversible) difference.

5 | Concluding Remarks

A narrative of reversibility holds an ambivalent position within infrastructural temporalities, as it simultaneously re-affirms and subverts linear infrastructural development timelines. As the HS2 redevelopment at Euston shows, the 'phases' of infrastructure projects may be presented as clearly defined, linear and sequential, yet they are rarely straightforward and predictable in practice, while the capacity to reroute their development even when construction is underway is held unequally.

Returning to the challenge of public engagement in large infrastructure projects and the comments of HS2's CEO with which this commentary opened, the implications of discussing reversibility and its politics are multiple. Crucially, the quoted 'no regrets' claim hints at the elusive yet politically and affectively charged possibility of talking about infrastructural regret. I want to argue that this possibility should be taken seriously as a way of fostering open and inclusive discussions on infrastructure. Such discussion is much needed when it comes to the slippery notion of infrastructural reversibility and the power to define and evoke it. Opportunities for different infrastructural publics to express regret—whether the disappointment of projects completed and in use, or the emotional lives of infrastructures unrealised, abandoned or demolished (Guma 2020)—are woefully rare. Explicitly attending to infrastructural regrets brings into focus the multiple and often conflicting emotions which charge large infrastructure projects, while also expanding the temporal horizons over which expressing and debating such emotions is rendered possible and meaningful. The latter is a significant point, given how quickly even the most controversial project disappears from public debates upon completion. Conversations around regret would firmly establish emotions not as peripheral to technical and economic expertise, but as another way of 'knowing' infrastructure (Bondi 2014). In contrast to brief and tokenistic consultation processes which are exclusive, confined to particular moments and may be only begrudgingly received by decision-makers (Klaever and Verlinghieri 2025), making space for infrastructural regret can invite diverse societal actors and new forms of expertise and engagement into the production of urban futures.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

[1] I would like to thank Sherin Francis for highlighting this point. For more on the sunk cost fallacy in relation to large projects, see Jennings (2012).

[2] During the time of writing this commentary, the future of the HS2 station at Euston has changed repeatedly and as of May 2025 remains uncertain. I have continued to write on the assumption I had at the beginning of this project, which was that the plan to have HS2 trains stop at Euston had been reversed.

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