

Thousands of (missed) trains to Malpensa

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It was Assolombardia who strongly put out the alert ten months ago, and now, in some cases, this alert has really come true: many works conceived for the Expo will not be completed in time. This is due to the crisis and to the lack of funding, affecting many different works, most of which have already been started. Pedemontana, similar projects and even rail connections are just some examples; maybe the most evident issue is the absence of a train connecting Malpensa airport directly to the area of the Expo, towards the Rho-Però area. The most direct line between Malpensa and Milan – the one which uses the national railways, going through Rho and Legnano – was put on ice in December 2012, after the Council of State rejected the project of the third Rho-Gallarate railway track and the reopening of the VIA route. However, the direct connection is just the tip of the iceberg. In fact, 15 years after the opening of the international railway yard, the many projects started over the time have had to cope with the lack of funding, technical problems, planning not always accurate: we have counted eight solutions which have been conjectured and often described as “strategic” but most of which have not been completed, sometimes even begun. This is a real record.

Of course there has been for ages a main connection: the Malpensa Express leaves from Milano Cadorna and is the quickest train (35 minutes). This was the “temporary solution” used in 1998: connecting Malpensa to the closest railways (those of Ferrovie Nord in Busto) was the only possible solution, waiting for better alternatives. For the time being, no better alternative has taken shape. In the meanwhile, therefore, the “temporary solution” – a railway line with level crossings, which had become troublesome for the road traffic in the area between Busto and Legnano – has been improved, but at a high price: €140,000,000 for the tunnel in Castellanza (which, we have to say, also includes the laying of a second railway track, with resulting advantages for all the trains, not only those to Malpensa).

However, the most direct route to get to Malpensa from the centre of Milan would go through Legnano (on the national railways). It would then continue on a short feeder track, known in jargon as “Raccordo Y”, and it would get onto the existing railways towards the airport. The problem? If it is already hard to manage the existing railway traffic between Milan and Legnano, how could we cope with additional trains to Malpensa? (here you can find an in-depth analysis of the saturation of the Milano-Gallarate railway line). The solution was expanding the railways, but the project (€402,000,000) was stopped in December 2012: the Region first asked for an evaluation of the environmental impact for a third railway track, but then planned a third and a fourth track. Since an additional railway track is not a joke, in such a built-up area as that of Legnano, the TAR and the Council of State had to agree with the committees opposing the project (the picture shows the densely built-up area of Canegrate, which expanded around the railways). This put a stop to the “shortcut” and probably also to the hopes for a direct connection to the Expo area or from Milano Centrale. To say nothing about the fact that the project for “Raccordo Y” has a significant local impact, with expropriations in residential areas almost at the sides of the centre of Busto.

In the meantime, it has been possible to create also a direct connection between Milano Centrale and Malpensa, **the so-called “passantino” (railway link) that links the Central**

station with the tracks of Ferrovie Nord, within the city of Milan (photo). But also here a “buffer solution”, that makes necessity a virtue, has been realised inside the urban area and its cost was substantial: **€87.5 million for 8Km** and a connection that is not very fast (29 minutes to reach Saronno against the 18 minutes that take trains from Cadorna).

While projects and constructions continue around Milan, another project that concerns connections with Lugano and Canton Ticino has started. This is characterised by a series of trains that pass from the slow and scenic line Bellinzona-Luino-Gallarate and that for the first time they use the FS and FNM junctions of Busto Arsizio.

But once again, **this is a temporary solution. The final one is called Arcisate-Stabio that, in the meantime, is stranded in the shifting sands of Valceresio**, where the construction sites completely stopped (after having slowed down in the past few months) due to disposal problems of soils that contained arsenic, an unforeseen event not taken into consideration by RFI (however municipality’s technicians affirm that everybody knew about the arsenic in the area) that cancelled the tender and blocked everything.

This is not all. To reach Lugano and the Gotthard Pass, it has been thought about another piece of connection towards the North: **a super-tunnel that linked the two Terminals directly with the railway to Varese**, more northern than Gallarate, avoiding to pass through Busto Arsizio. It is such an expensive work that also the Region, in this case, gave a signal to put it aside despite the fact that some recent declarations made in Malpensa showed a renewed interest for the project. Is it a *grandeur* worthy of a press conference or a change of mind?

Last objective: the connection towards the East that started a long time ago. The reopening of the Saronno-Seregno line offers new possibilities of connections towards Bergamo, Brescia and Veneto, however, for the moment, only Trenord regional trains are allowed on the line and not the long-journey trains or freight trains that were presumed to travel on the “Pedemontana railway”. To make the train competitive the great bridge on the Adda would need to be rebuilt (€1billion were needed for a completely new line).

In conclusion, **among dreams and “strategical projects”, the impression is that the several interventions all end up being temporary or incomplete**, regardless of the strategy and efforts asked to the municipality (in the picture: Arcisate), in addition to the money that citizens spend. At this point, the question to ask to politicians should be: **what is the priority of the Region?** At least to avoid wastes. And to avoid the condition of having no money left to make trains travel in the future, which is a serious issue in Italy; just have a look at Piemonte, where the Region has closed hundreds of kilometres of railways on which expensive investments had been made in the past few years and that today have become totally worthless.

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