

Museum review

Brazilian railway heritage in search of an audience

Museu da Companhia Paulista, Avenida União dos Ferroviários 1760, Jundiaí, São Paulo, Brazil. Phone + 55 11 4586 2093; website www.museudacompanhiapaulista.com.br

Like many railway museums in Brazil, the Museu da Companhia Paulista in Jundiaí is hidden from the public gaze. The visitor has to undertake a degree of detective work to discover the address, opening hours and directions to the museum, especially when local taxi drivers appear uncertain about where the museum actually is. In this case the effort is well worth it to find an example of a transport museum that is full of creative ideas about community involvement and the development of its display practices. The challenge is for the museum's managers to secure adequate funding for these projects and to find ways of connecting with a wider audience.

Jundiaí is a satellite town of 322,000 inhabitants, 60 km to the north-west of São Paulo, lying in a broad valley surrounded by large coffee plantations and food-processing factories. The Companhia Paulista de Estradas de Ferro was in 1872 the first railway company in Brazil not to rely on British entrepreneurial capital and as such played this nationalistic card to create bonds of loyalty amongst its work force and shareholders.¹ Its network stretched into the west and north of São Paulo state, transporting coffee from the plantations to the coastal port of Santos. In 1922 it became the first Latin American network to run electric traction and was for much of its life one of the main passenger transport providers for people living in the interior of São Paulo state. The company was privatised in 1998 and what remains of the network now forms part of the Ferrobán SA freight network.

A museum was first opened on this site, the former administrative head-

quarters of the Companhia Paulista, in 1979. It was recurated and reopened in 1995 with initial funding from the railway company and the São Paulo State Governor's office. The museum is managed by a charity, the Association for the Preservation of the Memory of the Companhia Paulista, which consists of a small full-time salaried team. 'We're four madmen who want to preserve the company's name,' remarks Carlos Toniolo, a former Companhia Paulista administrator with thirty years' service, who since 1993 has been in charge of the library and museum.² The rest of the team consists of two retired railway technicians and a marketing officer. The Association employs one person who is responsible for opening the museum each day, collecting admission fees, and interpreting the exhibitions for visitors and school groups. None has any previous museum experience and can be congratulated for creating arguably one of the best presented railway museums in Brazil.

The visitor approaches the museum by car along an urban dual carriageway from the existing passenger railway station 4 km away. Glimpses of freight yards raise the expectation of a rail centre of some kind. The approach on foot, down the hill from the bus station in the centre of Jundiaí, gives a better view of the magisterial museum building: the tall pale red brick facade in the grounds of the former workshops silhouetted above the traditional low whitewashed buildings of the rest of the cityscape. The whole rail site covers several acres, and lack of signposting within brings confusion to the visitor as to what is a museum building and what is part of the local authority secretariat, which uses some of the former railway buildings as offices and departmental space.

A bronze plaque outside the exhibition hall declares that the museum is 'in homage to the company which contributed so much to the development of



Plate 1 The Museu da Companhia Paulista, a beautifully restored example of 1890s Brazilian railway architecture

Plate 2 Object-rich but lacking context; the rear ground-floor exhibition room at Jundiaí



the state [of São Paulo] between 1872 and 1971'. It is a mission statement that has not yet been fully realised. The exhibition space is divided into four large rooms, each simply furnished with open wooden beams, clean whitewashed walls and polished wooden floors. The museum interior is rich in small objects ranging from tickets, uniforms and lamps to directors' furniture and scale steam locomotive models produced by workshop apprentices.

Themes of the public's historical interaction with the railway are picked out through displays of furniture in the contexts of 'waiting room', 'ticket office', 'station manager's office' and, on the upper floor, 'the director's office'. This first step towards the contextualisation of smaller objects is to be welcomed. Jundiaí is one of the few railway museums in Brazil which has thought about ways of displaying and how to make the connections between artefact, life, memory and history. But this approach to display does not extend to the entire museum space. The back room on the ground floor is a rich mix of further smaller artefacts, from washstands to wooden models of points, from coal shovels to locomotive nameplates and clocks. For an enthusiast with a detailed knowledge of railway technology it can give a feeling of involvement and discovery, almost like being in a junk shop. For the general public it is unlikely that a line of four different signal lamps without labels will be appreciated. Instead it was observed that visitors would handle the reversible wooden second-class carriage seat (despite the 'no touching' notice) and declare that they recalled travelling in a coach with such seats when they were young. There is clearly scope for using such artefacts to increase visitor connectivity, for example by telling stories of the geographical growth of towns in the interior of São Paulo state as the railway spread its tentacles across the landscape.

The approaches to display, management and curating within Brazilian railway museums differ from the methods being used in transport museums in Europe, the United States and Australasia. This is a reflection, in part, of the cultural,

political and social history of museum development in Brazil. It also makes it particularly difficult to compare and contrast countries and cultures, and it is why this review compares the museum at Jundiaí with similar sites in Brazil rather than with players on the international stage. Museum visiting does not form a major part of the culture of leisure for Brazilians. Observation over a four-hour period on a public holiday found only eight visitors, each of whom stayed on the museum site for just over forty-five minutes. Like most railway sites in Brazil, the museum has no refreshment facilities. It does however, uniquely, have a 'shop' where, from the display cabinet, visitors can select t-shirts, caps, badges, 45 r.p.m. records, books and model trains. The low visitor numbers may also reflect the entrance charges at Jundiaí, which are roughly the equivalent of 1 per cent of the legal monthly minimum wage and place the museum experience out of reach of low-income households.

Visitors were keen to discuss their reactions to the museum; the majority said they had come out of curiosity to learn about their local history. One respondent said, 'I've come here to learn about the future. To learn about the future you have to understand the past.' Culturally and historically the Brazilian nation has, since the 1930s, been fascinated with the notion of progress and building for a future.³ Visitors were observed to be enjoying the experience of recalling memories. 'I remember when the full-size version of this model steam train was working.' 'I remember sending a telegram with this machine.' 'I remember making journeys when I was very small; the locomotives, the tickets, the uniforms.' In these respects the museum at Jundiaí is fulfilling a crucial role for this minority of the population, but there is much more potential within the spaces and representations than is currently on offer.

The Museu da Companhia Paulista is the only site of its kind in Brazil which has an active policy of community involvement through the use of its buildings for adult education, retirement group meetings and dance classes. In 2001 the museum organised a folk dance festival,

an open day to promote voluntary groups, a 'Coffee with Art' festival of painting and music, and an exhibition of children's art inspired by the museum environment. The challenge is to maintain such vital community links and attract these members of the public into the museum exhibition spaces for repeat visits.

Labelling inside the exhibition rooms is superficial, restricted to naming the object rather than offering an explanation of how, when, where and why it was used. Outside, the large exhibits remain unidentified. This is typical of the tendency of many railway museums in Brazil to present objects without contextualising them. It is a shame that this museum does not possess a single steam locomotive from the Companhia Paulista, but a long-term aim of the management is to obtain a working example which could offer rides along a short section of track in the museum grounds. Currently in the open air, and unprotected from the tropical atmosphere, are four abandoned diesel electric locomotives, an oil tanker wagon, a steam crane and a General Electric pantograph power unit from 1924. The fact that this has been restored to its original colours and was one of the first electric locomotives to be used on the network becomes clear only when the visitor reads the free museum leaflet.

The academic visitor is left with an impression of a museum-in-progress: a site which can rightly be proud of its architectural beauty and its rich collection of smaller objects but which needs to concentrate its curatorial skills on telling stories within the exhibition spaces that can attract and connect with the expectations of the visitors. The further question is whether funding can be found that allows the acquisition of a fuller range of

locomotives, and which can provide for their maintenance and preservation in adequate climatic conditions, in order to reflect the iconography of the large artefacts and their part in the history of the railway company. Interestingly, another group of enthusiasts uses a neighbouring locomotive workshop on the site as a closed storehouse for its private collection known as the Antique Car Club of Jundiaí. The environmental and political conflicts between the development of road and rail in twentieth-century Brazil could provide a rich source of interpretive inspiration for a joint museum of transport on this site in the future. It would be refreshing to visit a museum in Brazil which attempted to display contested histories.

Notes

- 1 E. von L. Massarani, R. Delellis and O. Maretti (eds), *A era do trem: imagens da saga da ferrovia na formação do estado de São Paulo* (São Paulo, Editores LF&N, 1999), pp. 20–33. Other historical data from the Museu da Companhia Paulista visitor leaflet (2001).
- 2 This museum review is based on fieldwork data and interviews collected at eighteen railway museums and steam heritage sites in Brazil. The full results of the survey appear in a forthcoming master's thesis by the author, 'Railway Heritage and Preservation in Brazil', Institute of Railway Studies, York.
- 3 For a discussion of nation building through State management and the place of museums in Brazilian culture see D. Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil: the first Vargas regime, 1930–45* (Durham NC and London, Duke University Press, 2001).

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