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The process of transformation of European city

Federica Alcozer

During the year 2004 many people who had previously visited Genoa but that had not returned for years, rediscovered it and commented: "It has the sense of being a European city, like Barcelona, Munich, Milan, or London". This is not the comment of a specialist, but rather the expression of a nonnative observer's feeling of being 'in a European city'. But what exactly does this mean? A visitor's feelings are difficult to break down by a rigorous method into distinct parts, but allude to a series of visible aspects that have brought about a transformation that brings together peoples of different nationalities and communicates a cultural liveliness, that treats history and contemporaneity, that transmits care for the proper urban forms and qualities of spaces. But when did this process begin? Which are the determining moments and subjects for such an urban regeneration? What are the elements of continuity and specificity of a process such as this? Three phases can be identified, three periods which intersect in which the transformative events of the waterfront are directly and indirectly integrated with those of all the historic center, in which the functional choices have contributed only partially to the success of the interventions, while fundamentally it was the centrality of the public space; three successive phases in which the logic of urban rehabilitation is steadfastly the basic design choice, even in the completely new interventions, for redefining Genoese image and identity. This begins around the middle of the 1980s when a

series of diverse circumstances brought about ideas that had very different roots. One is the Christopher Columbus Celebration of 1992: the choice of transforming to 'urban uses' an area until then used only by the Port Authority. This decision was made in 1985 by the Triport Commission, in which the Region, Municipality, and the autonomous port Consortium signed a protocol of intention of transforming the area of the historic port of Genoa into an area for the city and together drafted a plan for the re-use of a large part of the waterfront, defining a rough outline of the functions by which to locate the spheres of intervention. This became the first fundamental step for the transformation of the Genoese waterfront, still today in evolution. But another fundamental fact in this initial phase, even if not as visible from outside the city, was the moving of the School of Architecture into the historic quarter in 1990 to complete the cultural complex of Sant'Agostino (museum, theater, auditorium, school). The force and determination in bringing about such a choice, even if with many disputes, was repaid by the effects induced by that intervention in every context, from the point of view of interventions of renewal that with time are multiplied, as well as for the economic and social regeneration that have responded to the new demands created by the young university students. It was not the only intervention of this period, but it was the first able to demonstrate in the short term the potential of transformations of the historic fabric. In the following years appeared a 'more successful' intervention in the Porto Antico itself. One may recall in fact the years immediately after 1992,

when the functional uncertainty of most of the buildings rehabilitated specifically for the Columbus Exposition in 1992 placed in doubt the outcome of the intervention, leaving many of the volumes empty. It was precisely in this predicament that the intervention demonstrated its strong points: the tourism activated by the Aquarium (1,300,000 visitors annually), and the offer of an ample public space in direct contact with the sea, unique for the historic center. These two interrelated aspects attract a multiethnic and multicultural population. From that moment the definition of the functional choices in the area of the historic port (Cineplex, City of Children, Congress Center, commercial spaces, pool) consolidate the prevalent use of the area for free time. In the local context, it is an equipped urban park for the historic quarter, in the urban context, a center and place of services, and in a territorial context, a touristic destination. In the following years the administration directed the attention to the big problems of Genoa: traffic, relying upon a plan by Bernard Winkler; it was adopted in 1995, and in 1997 a revision was begun. This plan is proposed to reduce the vehicular traffic by removing pure transit from the center by placing it on the periphery; it calls as well for the optimization of the public transport system by distributing it throughout the city. The instruments for realizing such objects predominantly concern the reorganization of the flows, reducing as much as possible the structural interventions on the road network. The biggest merit of this plan is promoting the environmental re-habilitation of the occupied center and in particular of the historic center by reducing the vehicular load and creating

new pedestrian areas. The first phase of the intervention called for the improvement of piazza De Ferrari, via XX Settembre, the vehicular/pedestrian reorganization of piazza Caricamento and access to the historic port. The second phase called for the reorganization of piazza Verde for public transport, and the reorganization of the rotaries for multiple directions for both piazza Corvetto and piazza dell'Annunziata with via delle Fontane. These choices are at the base of two of the more meaningful interventions in the change of Genoa's spaces: making via San Lorenzo pedestrian and the system of via Garibaldi-via Cairoli-via Balbi. Even though it is a sectoral plan, this surely has established the bases for the improvement of large areas of the historic center and created the conditions of urban design so as to take best advantage of the special financing for two big events: G8 in 2001 and being the 'European Capital of Culture' in 2004. In particular, a large operation of 'urban maintenance' with interventions on palazzos, piazzas, and public spaces began with the financing activated by the *Special Law for the G8 summit meeting* (n. 149/2000). In the same period the waterfront improvement proceeded toward the west with work on the Darsena with the Calata Vignoso promenade. To this is added still other interventions for improving the public space of the Expo, with a large quantity of geometric planting of palms and the construction of the *Bolla* by Renzo Piano, a glass sphere for ferns, butterflies, birds and tropical plants. Next, the interventions of recent years have followed the logic of regeneration of the historic quarter and of the waterfront taking advantage of the occasions offered: Urban 2 (called for

in the 2000-2006 planning period by the European Union) and 2004 (combining national and community financing with that of local entities and private citizens). With Urban 2 the Municipality proposes projects of a 'physical' and 'infrastructural' nature together with actions aimed at economic and social regeneration, in particular through the development of the cultural and touristic potential and the livability of the historic center.

While Genoa was the 2004 Cultural Capital of Europe, the following were called for: still further interventions of urban maintenance and improvement, of public spaces, of the facades of historic palaces, bringing to light parts of the built heritage invisible until recently, through attention to details, new paving, and the artistic lighting of streets and palaces. With Genova 2004, another part of the waterfront was completed in the Darsena area, with the rehabilitation of the Galata area for the Museum of the Sea and Navigation and the Caffa and Metellino areas to build the Center of Contemporary Art and the House of Music. Looking to the future, the Porto Antico will be further transformed through the Ponte Parodi project, to be completed by 2010 to the design of competition winner Ben Van Berkel. A large piazza on the water is called for with recreational, sport, touristic, and commercial functions. Passing through the central areas from one place to another, considering them in diverse periods, is assisted in the variations of functions and of uses, of forms of social aggregation on the part of a multitude of peoples. The areas and open spaces designed in the last fifteen years with at times different logics come together without solutions of continuity to propose a new image of contemporary Genoa and still tenaciously witness of its own historic

identity. Perhaps this renders the sensation of its being a European city.