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Landscape Project Role along the Boundary between City and Sea. A Case: Urban Seafront Parks

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Changes that occur in the urban landscape of coastal cities may be understood by looking at the renovation processes undergone along the boundaries between the city and the sea. The waterfront may be considered a boundary, a transaction area that marks the passing from different kinds of landscapes: from the city to the coastal environmental system. An introduction to the complex issue of the undergoing processes highlights some critical elements that go with many operations, therefore some choices to obtain higher sustainability solutions. Amongst the possible procedures, a possible key to obtain a better co-existence between the different systems may be sought in some contemporary examples that offer specific interpretations of role played by these border areas: urban seafront parks. The goal is that of finding feasible project criteria in order to obtain new public spaces that should function as open and dynamic systems, losing their mere “façade-like” condition but instead gaining their status of “boundary landscape”.

Changes that led to contemporary urban seafronts

When global trading networks began after the end of WWII, the harbour and industrial facilities that used to occupy large areas between the cities themselves and the sea became obsolete and no longer able to meet the needs of the new transportation and stocking mechanisms. Their partial or complete dismissal brought the need for a full re-thinking of the role played by cities, and presented important opportunities for the renewal of urban imagery. This widespread process of development and renovation began during the 1960's in the USA and Canada, along with post industrial vision of urban development. From the following decade, they were implemented in many European cities. These different experiences had in common an overall discovery of "new" parts of towns and a chance to redefine their international image.

Some geography and town planning studies, developed since the 1980's, highlighted the need for a multidisciplinary approach to the changes brought to waterfronts (Vallega, 1982; Hoyle, Pinder & Hussain, 1988; Hall, 1992). The strongpoint of these renovation processes is given by considering them as a connection of spatial and time relations within the urban landscape of coastal cities, lost during the time of industrialisation.

The development of these boundary areas is therefore an important strategic action. If it's well-performed, it can lead to the renovation of the city's landscape, making the public space easier to live. To make this although possible, the set of renovation processes should no longer produce mere "water-fronts", empty façades on the water, but actual landscape systems, where rebuilding relations able to enter and enrich contexts.

The most common limits of these kind of operations are generally recognised in the little ability to reinterpret the areas, leading to realisations lacking a real regeneration potential. With operations led sometimes as mere speculative actions, the "new waterfronts" areas are often parts of cities that show a little formal resemblance with the contexts, sometimes overthrowing the original sense of places.

If we carefully look at the contemporary realisations, we can note a tendency to apply ready-made development models, assuming both their good and bad features. The critical elements that may lie in seafront transformation approaches may brought down to three types of attitudes:

the re-proposal of a "seen somewhere else", when the interventions are based on the choice, even though custom-made to a certain place, for success models. This attitude tends to realise standard spaces out-of-context from the city and its rules.

The making of "spectacular façades" when the action strategies are mainly based on the construction of extraordinary structures, like buildings made by world-famous architects. This attitude, together with marketing strategies, has limits in its self-reference, and in little ability to make its way in the context.

The realisation of "closed-off islands", that function as harbours for big yachts, and the related structures for the few and privileged. This attitude, aimed at lifting the local economy and at increasing international visibility, though in fact creating closed-off enclaves that can give place to strong social contexts.

The need to find out new strategies to overcome the fragility of many contemporary interventions, has though been part of a cultural debate on the definition of new development models¹.

Planning the limit between the city and the sea

A return to the attention given to waterfront development is linked to a new awareness if such operations are well done, from the scale of design of small areas to the scale of entire parts of town, they may effectively contribute to make some important parts of towns look better, giving them a more authentic dimension and avoiding the risk of tragical or ridiculous photocopies of well-known international operations (Bruttomesso, 2007).

1 An important achievement in this direction are the studies led by the "Water cities center" of Venice in collaboration with the berliner society Wasserstadt GmbH, which led to the drafting of the Ten principles for sustainable development of Urban Waterfronts, presented during the initiatives of Urban 21 (Berlin 2000), for the Expo 2000 World Exhibition of Hannover.



An important resource to mark the way towards a new way of thinking the waterfront areas, is given by an increase in the sensitivity of the public opinion towards environmental issues and towards the opportunity to make use of better quality spaces, meeting local needs in order to gain back the identity of places.

The current positions are therefore aimed at looking for a better integration of urban landscape and environmental policies, with interventions aimed at re-building sea or coastal eco-systems, and at looking for a better way of interaction between the city and the coast line. Changes in this direction are designed through strategies that no longer care for market dynamics, but for actual local needs. Within this general picture, it may be worth while to try moving one's eye from strategies and policies to the rules of design language: more attention to the small and medium-sized scales, that results in looking for new instruments for the project, may allow to obtain better integration results. The project dimension is in fact an excellent experimental field in which we can imagine actions aimed at the birth of new relation systems rather than defined forms. The project theme is looked upon starting from the peculiar feature of the area in question, as a *boundary between two different systems*, and by checking the correct functioning through the study of the possible interaction modes with the landscape context. This boundary condition, that recalls a sense of separation and at the same time of union, is indeed a good expression of the inclination of these areas, situated in between and communicating with dynamic entities: the defined shape of cities, modified by human actions and the self-poietic processes of nature and its forms.

The key to understand this, refers to a technical picture that places the urban dimension as central for the analysis, basing it on an analytical plan placed on the disciplinary themes of the landscape architecture. Thinking landscape-wise on the chances given to every project action, leads to acting with the basic awareness that area details, social and economic interests make each action unique and coming out of its own context. Therefore making each further study able to lead to leave solutions open to any possibility. The project's role is therefore studied in-depth as a chance to underline the morphological and semantic complexity of seafronts, and to define the new relations both *with* and *inside* the context, orienting therefore attention on the rooted nature of the landscape architecture as "an art of places" (Forino, 2003).

An example: urban seafront parks

Urban public space on seafronts present today hybrid features connected to the different attitudes that the areas have when determining a balance between diverse functions.

If the relation between sea and city has mainly urban features, the formal rules of public areas (esplanades, terraces, sea-side promenades), will determine the organization of the waterfront system. In cases where the two elements are mediated by the old harbour system, be it fully or partially run-down, any renovation will give way to new cohabitations between urban and harbour functions. Two examples might be Genoa's Porto Antico and Barcelona's Port Vell, that could be included in a type of public area named "harbour-city" (Provenzano 2008).

A third type, that needs further study is that of urban seafront parks. In these cases, the hybrid comes from the search for a more organic coexistence between urban usages and functions and forms of the coastal ecosystems, through operations that "project with nature" and that work on the boundaries with the intention to create a stronger bondage with the topography and nature of places. Beneath this approach, the research changes direction from the traditional urban planning criteria. It defines new composing criteria obtained through studying the potential linked with this boundary condition between urban and natural space. The new features of these places are so given not by the Euclidean geometries typical of cities, but by their natural original aspect, the curvy lines of their orography and their topography, like the dune landscape, the wetlands, the riverbeds, the same coastline.

In the late 90's, a number of significant experiments were carried out in this direction in Europe. The Poble Nou Park in Barcelona (Fig 1), realized in 1992 is a connection park between the city and the coast, whose figurative themes originate from the Mediterranean landscape's features, through the use of forms that recall the wave-like movement of the dunes and of Mediterranean vegetation.



Figure 1 | The Poblenu Park in Barcelona

These are overlooked by a functional layer of geometric routes similar to the map of the city close-by. The issues related to boundaries are here discussed using a slight design variation, along side city-sea gradient, where diverse profiles create perspectives that are sometimes open, and sometimes more mediated, so defining a large filter area potentially high from the ecological point-of-view.

The Tejo and Trancao Park (Fig. 2), was made in Lisbon for the 1998 Expo, and designed by the Hargreaves & Associates, together with João Nunes. This is not exactly a seafront park, because it is situated near the estuary of two rivers, but it is anyway interesting to look at because of the conceptual features that brought to its realization. This is also an operation aimed at the reconstruction of a natural system with a high environmental and symbolic values, as it refers to the erosion of nature that has moulded the coast line. Going from the coast line towards the interior, “the rhythm and form change of the elements that are part of the soil, suggests the distance increase between a natural condition (the river) and a constructed one (the city)” (Lambertini, 2006).

The formal research carried out by the designers, was not so much aimed at the closed rules of composition, but at the open rules of catalysis, bringing forward new interactions that placed at the upmost point the environment and the ecosystem. The park therefore recreates “an organic breakthrough that moves and that is never finished. (...) In its own heterogeneity, it traces the environmental awareness of a landscape composed on a jumble of spatial, biological and social networks.” (Vaccarino, 1995).

Some more recent experiments of this type of approach, that still cannot be seen as implemented, rend the viewer of some Italian operations of the past few years. Among the most interesting, are the waterfronts of Bari and Salerno (Fig 3).



Figure 2 | the Tejo and Trancao Park in Lisbon

Bari's project originates from the belief that the intervention on this landscape should generate new forms of

The rules were no longer taken from urban logics, but from natural dynamics, starting from the idea “of a landscape that goes from the sea into the city” (Morabito, 2009). This may be done, by building a filter area towards the city with declined layers and close-knit vegetation, ending on a rigid containment system towards the promenade. Here, it makes small closed-off area of “artificial nature” that goes in like waves inside the city, integrating in the whole system of reciprocal exchange of forms and relations.

The Salerno waterfront project, brings to the top the contemporary tendency toward the research of a stronger organicity between urban design and ecological intervention, recreating not only a formal production but a real “mix of functions”. In the southern part, the project provides the reconstruction of a wide coastal ecosystem functioning both as an urban park and a naturalistic area (Ruisanchez 2009). The new park is composed on the sea side by a system of filters and barriers for the nourishment of the beach; on the internal side it is characterised by an area of dunes and wetlands with salty and fresh water composing micro habitats for Mediterranean flora and fauna. Trough the usage of open forms, where the abiotic features and the vegetation change help the dynamics of coastal ecosystems, this new park, once realised will increase new interesting ways of coexistence between the urban uses and the need for recovering ecologically degraded areas, defining a more sustainable way of landscape design.

The current focus on these intervention on the limit between sea and the city points out an interesting way that it's worth to follow: the experiences of urban seafront parks are useful examples for the research of a better integration between different forms and functions: this can provide new fields of methodological interest for the landscape design. The definition of tools to redefine the landscape in between, can contribute to create a new balance among social, ecological, scenic, functional values, finding in the regenerative capacity of natural marginal areas the ideal items for a new landscape quality.



Figure 3 | The projects for Bari (above) and Salerno (below) seafronts

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