

The City and the Sea: Evolution and Transformation of a Controversial Relationship

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Over the centuries, the relationship between the city and the sea has been transformed. Diverse factors (political, economic, social, scientific) have changed the way people see the sea, gradually turning the seafront from being a place of danger into a new development opportunity. In recent years, the demolition of restrictive structures and the construction of promenades along the waterfront has marked its opening to the horizon and contributed to giving a new face to the coastal cities. In addition, the economic crisis of the 1970s led to the decline of many industrial and port areas and the subsequent abandonment of several coastal areas. Since the 1980s, a series of actions began to restore these degraded areas. The various interventions, although different in origin and design methods, had in common the desire to restore the relationship between the city and the sea and the creation of new opportunities for urban, economic, and socio-cultural growth. This study traces the critical stages of a slow and complex process of opening cities to the sea and analyses the transformations from the 19th-century historical promenade into a territorial landmark, a fulcrum of urban, economic, and tourism development. It provides, through a comparative and critical analysis of the case studies, which include famous and egregious examples such as Barcelona and Bilbao, and less known and discrete destinations such as Vigo, as well as some Italian cases, an overview of the extensive experience of abandoned and re-used port areas and suggests a reflection on the city in general. Now more than ever, cities are in search of a new identity, alternative centralities, and environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

Keywords: coastal cities, promenade, waterfront regeneration

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From a Place of Contemplation to an Opportunity for Development

Between the 17th and 18th centuries, the decreasing need for coastal, military defences due to changes in political conditions¹ and the spread of a landscape aes-

thetic that preferred open scenery and natural environments contributed to the establishment of a new urban vision especially evident in coastal cities (Marciano, 2005). The sea was no longer perceived as a danger; it was transformed into a pleasant and sensual place for rest and recreation.

The role of the sea as the bearer of aesthetic, recreational only in strategic points and coastal cities opened up progressively on the coast.

¹ The Battle of Lepanto of 1571 put an end to the so-called 'Turkish danger' and restored the Mediterranean to a climate of peace, after a period of great instability. For this reason, from the 17th century onwards, fortifications arwase con-

ational, therapeutic, and symbolic values is found in every period of the history of Mediterranean civilisations. However, the concept of the modern waterfront was born in the late 18th century, when English seaside resorts were created and organised to provide holidays (Camporesi, 1992; Corbin, 1988). This blended the contemplative Nordic spirit of escape to nature with a typical Mediterranean feeling of those communities that, for climatic reasons, are accustomed to living outdoors to enjoy the landscape, to meet people, and to see and be seen (Massa, 2005).

From that point onward, the waterfront shifted from being a simple transition between land and water and was transformed into a public space par excellence, beloved by locals and tourists. The spatial arrangements become increasingly complex and structured by new features and new functions. These are generally organised in parallel bands marked by sequences of natural (flower beds, gardens) and manufactured (benches, fountains) elements and by buildings for recreation and leisure (Balducci & Orioli, 2006). Architectural essays resulted from the reworking of existing models (hotels, cafes, kursaal) or by new inventions (beaches used for leisure, pleasure piers) (Massa, 2005). Buildings that previously turned their backs to the sea and had their primary facades facing the city were now facing the coast.

Cities, especially those with tourist ambitions, asked the most influential engineers and architects to build monumental marine promenades and seafronts, with a strong visual impact. Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the most famous scenic routes and walks along the coast were built, which often become the subject of literary descriptions, paintings, photographs, and even film sets (Massa, 2005, p. 13): from the elegant Promenade des Anglais in Nice, with its dream hotels and its Art-Deco architectures (Massa & Zucchini, 2005a), to the 'exclusive' boardwalk in Atlantic City, where access was prohibited to beggars, drunks, people of colour, or the badly-dressed (Massa & Zucchini, 2005b), to the Brighton seafront with the Victorian buildings, its piers and terraces from which visitors enjoyed spectacular views (Di Cristina, 2005). Beyond the different names that these routes take in various European

countries,² they represent 'the synthesis between the natural environment and the architectural solutions of urban monumentality' (Marsala, 2002, p. 79).

The different perception of the land-water margin as a place of leisure and meeting place for citizens and tourists consolidated and grew until the first decades of the 1900s. However, the various plans for reconstruction after World War 2 did not seem to attribute due importance or respect to the coast. Along the coast and seafront, in fact, the main roads and rail arteries frequently were placed, constituting a physical and visual barrier between the city and the sea; these are focuses of an intensive urbanisation, almost always of poor quality and insensitive to environmental issues, which cannot produce architectural and urban environments worthy of their 19th-century predecessors.

Towards the end of the 20th century, the fate of historical promenades became intertwined with disused port areas within broader and complex urban regeneration projects that impacted ever longer stretches of the coast. The industrial crisis of the 1970s and the evolution of transport and storage infrastructure entailed the reorganisation of commercial activities and the relocation of many pieces of infrastructure. Thereafter, large spaces were liberated, often in strategic locations in contact between the sea and the city, which had been previously denied or inaccessible because of the port and industrial installations. The need for transformation and re-appropriation of these urban voids also stimulated new reflections on the city in general. The seafront was no longer an equipped walk of 19th-century memory or a simple line between water and land, nature and buildings, but was becoming 'a network of places and functions, grafts and reconstructions between the coast and the city, between the port and urban activities' (Carta, 2006, p. 227). There are discussions about how to organise these spaces filled with historical, social, but also economic heritage and activity. The urban centres of gravity have moved, and the presence of water has become an added value and a valuable 'card to play' for these cities to enhance their attractiveness and competitiveness (Brut-

² Passeggiata or lungomare in Italy; promenade in France; marine parade in England; paseo in Spain.

tomesso, 2007). Many cities are in search of new identities and new areas of development, and the seafront becomes the fulcrum around which new urban development occurs (Teodosio & del Caz Enjuto, 2013); it provides an excellent opportunity for growth, including economic growth (Alemany, 2006). The keen interest in the topic is demonstrated by many events, debates, research activities, and scientific publications, as well as by the birth of various associations and web sites devoted to documentation and information about the problems and the experiences of urban settlements defined by their relationship with water.³ Since the 1980s, many various actions have taken place aimed at the physical regeneration of seafronts, at the architectural restoration of industrial heritage and/or the general reorganisation of the city waterfront, including through the creation of various functions (public, touristic, commercial, residential). San Francisco led the way: a remarkable transformation took place starting from the sea and spreading to the inland areas of the city. It was followed by other examples, including Baltimore with its Inner Harbour and the Saint Charles district, New York with Pier 17, Sydney with the Darling Harbour area, London with the Docklands area, Barcelona with Port Vell, Bilbao with the Abandoibarra area, Genoa with Porto Vecchio, and the more recent experiences of Vigo and Salerno.

Spanish Accomplishments and Italian 'Promises'

At the end of the 20th century, in the Mediterranean countries with strong historical links to the sea, waterfront regeneration policies assumed particular importance, creating some emblematic achievements.

In Spain, in the 1980s, with the end of the dictatorship, the recovery of the coast assumed even great political value. The coast had been severely compromised by the *balearización*⁴ phenomenon and by the serious setbacks of the maritime boundary. Therefore,

the new democratic government, which succeeded the Franco regime, decided to intervene through the promulgation of the *Ley de Costas* (1988). This law, which repealed previous ones,⁵ proclaimed the public character of the coast, removing it from the hands of private speculators and returning it to the people (Pié i Ninot, 2005). This law recognised the great strategic value of the shore, even in the economic sphere. Thereafter, thanks to shared and synergistic action by all levels of government (municipalities, autonomous regional governments, state) it triggered a process of transformation that produced solutions with high technical and economic content that became real reference models. They involved projects to regenerate the beach and the marine ecosystem using new maritime engineering techniques.⁶ Good quality, modern architecture has been built on the seafront, and well-equipped spaces and paths have become critical elements of the redevelopment of the waterfront (Trapero, 1988).

The transformation of Barcelona was in the context of the award of the Olympic Games (1986), new legislation, and general, widespread optimism, as well as the availability of substantial economic resources, triggering a significant process of urban renewal. Eventually, it was possible to overcome all the technical, administrative and economic difficulties that had led to the failure of previous attempts to change.⁷ The transfor-

implemented on the coasts of Mallorca during the Franco dictatorship. In the broadest sense, it refers to continuous and massive construction on the coast.

⁵ *Ley de Aguas* (1866, 1918), *Ley de Paseos Marítimos* (1918, 1957), and *Ley de Costas* (1969), where the laws that favored the privatisation of the territory.

⁶ Since the late 1970s in Spain, there has been discussion about coastal erosion. The engineer Enrique Copeiro del Villar attributed the degradation to the construction of infrastructure (marinas, especially) and to the positioning of the breakwaters that interfered in the natural dynamics of the sea and he stressed the need for 'suaves' (sweets) and non-invasive actions (Copeiro de Villar, 1978, 1980).

⁷ The first attempt at coastal redevelopment is represented by the *Plan de Ribera* (1965), promoted by large businesses. The plan, much disputed and fortunately not implemented, envisaged a very dense development of residential building along the seafront.

³ Among these, the *Centro Internazionale Città d'Acqua*, an association founded in Venice in 1989, to develop and promote research initiatives on different aspects of water-city relationship; *RETE*, an association between ports and cities; the *WIN* (Waterfront International Network) specialized website on the themes of the waterfront.

⁴ A term coined in the late 1950s to indicate urban destruction



Figure 1 Barcelona, Port Vell (Photo by Author)

mation also involved areas not directly affected by the Olympics and led to the demolition of about thirty buildings, the regeneration of 30,000 m² of beach (Nóvoa, 2005) and the construction of the Port and the Olympic Village that become the symbol of the new Barcelona (Martorell, Bohigas, Mackay, & Puigdoménech, 1988). The Special Plan of the Olympic city – Plan Especial de ordenación Urbana de la fachada al mar de Barcelona en el sector Carlos I y Avenida Icaria (1986) – includes a series of structural and infrastructural works and pays particular attention to the waterfront area. Here, it sought to reduce the separation between the city and the sea (by relocating railways and removing remnants of the industrial activities of the Poblenou district), redeveloping the stretches of sand, building quality public spaces (parks, squares, port) and opening a wide coastal road. The new maritime walk, the Ronda Litoral, became the backbone of Barcelona and plays a key role with its playful, symbolic, and representative character, but it is also functional, ensuring the connection between the various parts of the city by promoting communication and social aggregation (Trapero, 1988).

During the same period, Bilbao undertook a process of renewal in which the Guggenheim Museum is the most famous and striking, element but which, in reality, is the result of a different set of factors that are rooted in the political, economic and social history of Bilbao (Cenicacelaya, 2004). The Basque city, located inside the Ria of the Nervion River, is an important

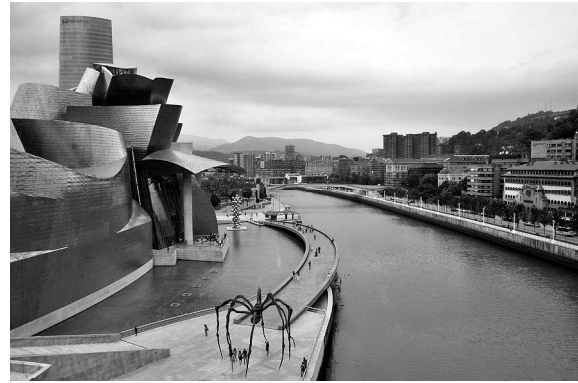


Figure 2 Bilbao, View of the Ria with the Guggenheim Museum (Photo by Author)

centre for shipbuilding, as well as for steel production and manufacturing. Factories, warehouses, and stores occupied the entire coastline, creating an urban skyline with a purely industrial character. With the economic crisis, the changed political conditions resulting from the death of the dictator General Franco and the flooding of the River Nervion in 1983, Bilbao had to undertake a process of renewal. This time the starting point for the redevelopment was brownfield sites located on the riverfront. This required significant infrastructure projects (e.g., the relocation of the port and the railway line, the construction of a subway line along the Ria) and two detailed plans (Plan Especial de Reforma Interior) were drawn up for the areas of Abandoibarra and Ametzola. On that latter area are the Guggenheim Museum and the Euskalduna Palace of Music and Congress; they became the two ends of the new urban route along the banks of the estuary, a fitting public space for the city (Ronzani, 2006).

A similar, but yet very different, operation was realised in Vigo between 1994 and 2004 by the architect Guillermo Vázquez Consuegra, winner of the competition 'Abrir Vigo al mar' promoted by the Consortium of the Zona Franca de Vigo. The competition was aimed at the redevelopment of the waterfront to revitalise and integrate it into the city centre. The Andalusian architect worked on a long and linear band delimited by two squares – Plaza de la Estrella east and Plaza de Berbes west. This led to the creation of an extensive public space, with pedestrian paths, gardens

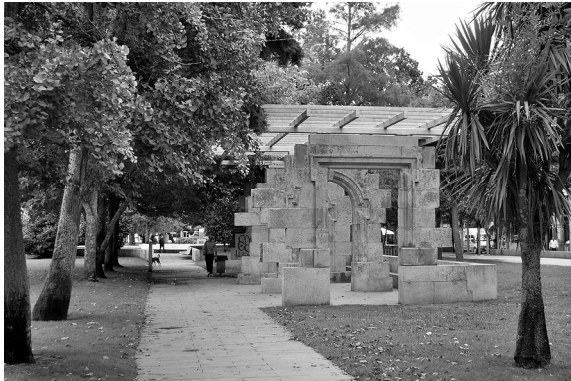


Figure 3 3 Vigo, Waterfront designed by Guillermo Vázquez Consuegra (Photo by Author)

and fountains, large sculptures, public buildings (theatre, maritime station, shopping centre, aquarium), along with some underground infrastructure (tunnels, parking lots). He realised a high-quality project, using a stripped-down vocabulary, a skilful choice of good-quality materials (granite, galvanised steel, corten steel, white concrete for the exterior, glass), precise design, and careful execution (Vázquez Consuegra, 2008). Consuegra, with its poetic and discreet work, transformed a marginal area in a central location and opened to the sea a city with a historically consolidated industrial and port. His scheme, although using small-scale interventions compared to other celebrated cases in Spain, has been recognised as a good example of the redesign of a marine frontage for a city (Pittini, 2006).

In Italy, with its 8000 km of coastline, interest in the redevelopment of coastal areas is becoming increasingly important in urban policies. Since the 1990s, many coastal cities seeking to emulate the positive results of international examples have equipped themselves with planning tools based on growth forecasts expected from a renewed relationship with the sea. Unfortunately, the Italian situation is very different from the Spanish one; there are still many critical issues and conflicts that need to be solved, primarily at a bureaucratic and legislative level. Coastal areas, where industrial and port areas exist, are potential places of conflict between the many institutions that have jurisdiction (state and local authorities, port authorities).

The administrative and procedural complexity, the lack of clear and shared strategies, and a chronic lack of economic resources have led to the failure of almost all the proposals.⁸ Years of discussions, disputes, and hundreds of architectural and urban projects designed to regenerate the waterfront across Italy, have not, in most cases, produced the desired results (Savino, 2010) and, despite the few concrete achievements, the initiative has often been ceded to private investors, a dangerous trend that, in some cases, has produced problematic speculations (Pierotti, 2010). Many ambitions have not been realised (Pavia, 2012) and, although projects have begun to progress, thus far the only concrete and completed programmes are that of the Old Port of Genoa by Renzo Piano, (totally renovated to mark the occasion of the Columbus celebrations of 1992), while in Salerno the 'Sea Front' designed by the Catalan architect Ricardo Bofill is a project headlined by the construction of a monumental Crescent (Teodosio, 2014).

Intervention Strategies on the Seafront

The redevelopment of the land/water margin involves a set of tangible and intangible interventions, which are complex and varied. There is no single method and universally valid operational criteria for such projects, but as a result of completed schemes, it is possible to identify common strategies that characterise the regeneration of these areas.

The re-appropriation of these places cannot be separated from their accessibility. Therefore, it is essential to eliminate of all physical barriers between the city and the sea, through the demolition of the enclosing walls of the old ports; the removal or rerouting of railway lines and main roads and the construction of underground car parks). In addition, the upgrading of public transport and pedestrianisation make the recovered spaces generally more accessible and usable, providing locations for sport, leisure, and culture. In Barcelona, Moll de la Fusta (1983–1987), with its cross-section with steps, allowed the funnelling of traffic through an underground tunnel on top of which

⁸ Examples of unrealised schemes include for the waterfronts of Naples, Palermo, Messina, and Reggio Calabria.



Figure 4 Salerno, Maritime Terminal designed by Zaha Hadid (Photo by Author)

pedestrian areas were created. The solution, designed by Solà Morales, solved the problem of crossing the road and contributes to the opening of the city to the sea. The relocation of the railway line from the Bilbao riverside freed the left bank of the estuary and established a large urban park. In Vigo, the burying of vehicular traffic in the Túnel de Beiramar, which runs under the boardwalk, allowed the reconfiguration of setting the coast.

Ports began to take on a new strategic role. Within old harbours, there were various port functions (leisure, traditional fishing boats and passenger), but these are compatible with urban use. These areas have taken on new functions thanks to the renovation of decommissioned port heritage; for instance, Genoa's Convention Centre is located in the former cotton warehouses, exhibition spaces have been created in Venice, and a hall for temporary exhibitions has been established in the former Trieste Fishmarket. The construction of new buildings also often assume a paradigmatic role. Salerno's maritime terminal, designed by architect Zaha Hadid and inaugurated in April of 2016, with its sinuous and daring forms, now dominates the old commercial port (Teodosio, 2017).

The role of representing the transformation and the new status acquired by a city often relies on the construction of a 'symbol building.' The case of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is the most striking example in this category. There are other less well-known cases, such as the Crescent in Salerno. Such

buildings, often large and even bombastic statements, emerged on regenerated waterfronts and aspired to become, not necessarily always successfully, a new fulcrum around which the public space and social life of the city are organised. They stand as monuments of contemporary town planning, symbols of a renewed city's identity, a sign of renewal and rebirth. However, despite good intentions, many of these seem to seek only sensationalism and originality at all costs, by offering design solutions and an architectural vocabulary almost always out of context, which can be difficult to assimilate.

However, the redevelopment of the coast concerns not only sensational and futuristic architecture but often also includes a series of actions that, although less dramatic, are of fundamental importance. These include interventions needed to secure the natural character of the seafront, dictated by a growing sensitivity to environmental issues, including the nourishment of the beaches of Barcelona and land reclamation and the clean-up of the waters of the estuary in Bilbao to repair damage resulting from the former presence of steelworks.

Conclusion

In these various examples, a range of different approaches have been applied, and the regeneration programmes have varied according to the uses to which the regenerated areas will be put. The characters of the individual urban areas are very different, as well as the historical, geographical, political, social and economic conditions. Moreover, the success of some schemes does not imply that their 'model,' once exported, can guarantee the same results. Indeed, at times, it can generate bitter disappointments and disastrous failures. This happened at Barcelona, where the attempt to repeat the success of the operations related to the Olympics of 1992 generated the failed operation of the 2004 Forum of Cultures (Borja, 2004; 2010). This occurs whenever the regeneration of an area relies on the mere presence of a prominent building (Busquets, 2006).

The examples already undertaken can be useful models to inspire other architects and cities, who can draw lessons for future actions, provided that they do

not 'copy' uncritically the model, but understand the essence and detect the underlying logic, its fundamental character, and the background processes.

Today there is a need for a co-ordinated overall. Therefore, any project for the regeneration of a waterfront must align itself with contemporary town planning thinking and propose approaches that promote the construction of new cultural attractions, while also attempting to find areas to allocate for residential and commercial functions. It favours a functional mixité, namely the peaceful coexistence of multiple functions. It is necessary to avoid the mass tourism, gentrification or the marginalisation of the area and to ensure that the regenerated coastal areas can be used and enjoyed at any time of year, at any time of day, by locals and tourists.

Waterfront regeneration and the recovery of abandoned port areas often change the face of the city, moving the physical centre of gravity of urban activities, creating a new equilibrium and improving the quality of life. The promenade becomes a public space par excellence, a meeting place for social gathering, and an attractive tourist destination. These interventions have a positive impact providing that they are based on an urban planning project of quality and they maintain a strategic balance between the necessary private profits of some activities (commercial, recreational, tourist) and the compelling visions of social development, along with the preservation of services, equipment and public spaces. The most successful projects, in fact, are those based on strategies that have been able to intelligently combine urban regeneration and economic development with respect for the natural and built environment and social needs.

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