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AUTHOR: DANIELA KAVAJA
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Creative cities along water margins / Urban and cultural regeneration of Shkodra, city of water

Phd Daniela Kavaja

Lecturer / POLIS University Tirana

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The culture of water in the contemporary world

Water has always influenced human life and has shaped the entire planet. It was the fundamental element for the economic and cultural development of all populations, to the point that the evolution of civilization depends on the way in which man has relied on water.

The need of man to have water resources near the inhabited places is a constant necessity in time. The domination of water as a source of energy and wealth for the city is an essential model of urban evolution.

The contemporary city no longer tends to territorial expansion, but to the regeneration of marginal areas, especially those rich in resources and potential. From this point of view, the waterfronts are those spaces that transfer to the city the possibility of continuous change and improvement of the entire urban fabric.

In the contemporary world the interest in redesigning and exploiting coastal margins has increased more and more, in order to build ever more efficient relations with water and create new images of waterfront. "When these relationships become creative, the city becomes capable of generating a new urban form, of producing new landscapes and of feeding, through the perennial flow of urban culture, the great relational networks, making them more vital, communicative and competitive" (Badami, Rosivalle, 2008, p. 7)

Bruttomesso (2007) states that "the cities of water will be the leading cities of the 21st century and these will not only be the

existing water cities, but also the new ones, those that are being built and designed in these years" (Bruttomesso, 2007), the water cities, which can be closely related to the sea, the lake or the river. European experiences are very significant and give an idea of how the relationship between city and water can change, rediscovering the interest of society for its centrality aspect. These are cities that after having expelled nature, feel the need to find it again. There are several relationships with the water that the cities have built, according to their type. The fluvial cities exploit the riverside as an area formed by more or less large equipped bands, so as to make them become dynamic places for meetings, movement and entertainment for the city. An example of this is Paris and Berlin where the beaches equipped with swimming pools on the riverbanks of the Seine and the Spree have been rebuilt.

Cities overlooking the ocean tend to create megacities, carrying out projects that go beyond urban boundaries.

The Mediterranean waterfronts and those of many European cities, are generally meeting places for various economic, cultural and touristic functions and activities.

In the interventions that take place along the waterfront, which are cities that overlook the sea, the river, the lake, or hybrid cases of a relationship not really direct with water, the key feature that unites them is always the centrality of public space, as a priority place for relaunching the city, also at international level, through cultural and touristic



Fig 1 / Beaches facilities on River Seine
source / siviaggia.it

programs. Over the last few decades, the waterfront has assumed an increasingly strategic role, stimulating new reflections on the city in general, but above all by dragging into the regeneration process even wider territories of backwaters. These reflections are also affecting cities that in the past have turned their backs on water, developing rather inland. Rome itself, over the centuries, has expanded into the hinterland. The sea, "despite its great proximity, has never represented a real attraction: apart from the choice, originally, of the place to found the city, a choice determined, probably, by strategic reasons linked to that specific place, one can not understand, as it has never been, (...) an attempt, perhaps a desire, to bring the expansion of the city towards the delta of the river " (Quaroni, 1976, p. 19-20).

And with the due differences, this is what also distinguishes Shkodra.

The city is characterized by a building expansion towards the hinterland, giving its back to its lake, and its rivers, which are natural as well as economic and cultural resources. As a consequence, the presence of water has never had the right importance, and has never been the protagonist of urban development due to the absence of a real connection and dialogue between the waterfront and the hinterland.

Only in the recent years, the city has embarked on an attempt of development that focuses on the redevelopment of waterfronts and their integration into the urban context.

But what is the right direction to take with the best effect on the regeneration of this

relationship which is still complex today? You can find answers in many examples of urban centers that have previously experienced urban regeneration starting from the water margin, and the transformation processes that have led to a development in the economic, cultural and tourism sectors.

The analysis of the Shkodra case has its roots in the history of urban planning in the city, focusing on the events that have in the past characterized (very often constraining) the relationship between the city and its water resources.

Today the city is preparing to live a new phase of regeneration that mainly involves an economic growth based on the revival of tourism, the result of a new relationship between the city and its lake and the rivers Drin, Buna and Kir.

Only by comparing the studies already carried out or those that are taking place, one can get to the choice of the best ingredients, which will serve, and which today are still lacking in the city, for a new economic, touristic and cultural revival.

In the last thirty years, the value of water in cities has undergone a real revaluation, thanks to numerous studies and projects aimed at highlighting this added resource.

'The waterfront is not just a line, but a network of places, functions, grafts and reconnections between the coast and the city, between the port and urban activities' (Carta, 2006, p. 227). These places cannot be defined as border areas, but rather as permeable margins, places of connections between land and water. It is right in these places that new centralities are often placed where new ambitions are



Fig2 / Forum area views in Barcelona
source / inexhibit.com

concentrated for the improvement of the city's future.

Now, about thirty years after the first experiences on international waterfront, you can easily identify the common characteristics that distinguish these interventions, their strengths and weaknesses.

The main feature is undoubtedly the great symbolic and evocative value of these marginal areas, which then affect the rest of the city. This is why the redevelopment processes in most cases resume and reinforce the city's identity.

Waterfronts enhance a city both from a qualitative point of view, through redevelopments that affect the economic, cultural and social aspects of the city, and from the quantitative point of view, with the possibility of building new structures necessary for the city.

The rereading of some planning experiences on the margins of water, allows us to understand and deepen the meanings attributed to the place of physical relationship between urban context and the edge of water. When one intervenes in the waterfront, projects characterized by dynamism rather than by static (Meyer, 2009) are required, because the margin of water "is the result of the intersection between the rules of the city and the rules of nature, between the urban and the territorial, between permanence and indeterminacy" (Forino, 2003, p. 13).

The marginal spaces between city and water, often degraded places, are an opportunity for recovery and allow a reflection on their form and function in the contemporary.

The social changes in contemporary culture have given rise to studies on the new uses and meanings of public places, as these are the places that reflect the needs of both collective and private life.

What are better places, if not the onboard areas, to concentrate such research, and to manifest these changes in collective life?

The recent studies and projects, which aim at the recovery of marginal areas, and the relationship between urban centers and water, investigate at the same time the configurations of public space, as creative areas and relaunching spaces, through regeneration in different aspects at once, such as the social, environmental, landscape aspect and many others. One of the main characteristics of the city is change, transformation, as well as the private and social life of each citizen, who does not rotate in a circle but advances and evolves in a straight line. The city of Barcelona has undergone changes in the coastal strip that have fully represented the social, cultural and aesthetic changes of the city. If before, this city had not taken into consideration the sea for many centuries, now, thanks to the recovery of the margin, it enjoys a new awareness of its territorial condition.

With the recovery of its maritime front, the Barcelona experience has become emblematic in current trends for the redevelopment of the maritime fronts. Like few other cities, in a single urban context, we can appreciate very different models and results, deriving from very different planning, economic, political and



Fig3 / Museu Blau by Herzog & de Meuron in Barcelona (left) and the photovoltaic pergola on the Explanade, South-East Coastal Park by AZPA/FOA (right). source / inexhibit.com and Boschetti 2011

urban choices. In the coastal strip of this city the most consistent changes of the city are implemented, making the water edge, not just a border line, but a place of communication, as well as a new form and image of the city. It is a sliding towards the water, a new opening, completely absent before.

Creative cities on the water / The cases of Lyon, Bilbao, Antwerp

People are the main driver of economic growth and social aspects of the 21st century. As emerges in the studies of Richard Florida, the investment in the creative and cultural education of people, involves a rich cultural offer, which then attracts further human capital with increasingly qualified characteristics.

Creating a repertoire of uniqueness means enhancing the history, tradition, culture and values linked to the place.

A strong desire to relaunch economic, touristic and cultural policies, so as to strengthen economic growth, is reflected in the collective image of the city.

The creation of a favorable image of an urban context, able to represent a strong identity, and consequently to also arouse curiosity, is an important factor to succeed in being successful both nationally and internationally, attracting not only tourists and investors, but above all by relaunching the relationship with citizens and residents.

Not all cities have the appropriate characteristics for a creative development. A unique historical environment full of distinctive features is certainly an

important starting point for creating the differentiation.

Art and culture have been key elements of economic and social awakening for many cities, because creativity and local culture are an authentic source of differentiation.

The concept of creative cities dominates the political thinking of many contemporary European cities, which apply it, especially in areas of cities with greater potential for development and with distinctive characteristics. These areas, which serve as a starting point for a redevelopment of the entire city, are often the margins of water. "Creative city, economy of culture, strategic planning and effective governance are new keywords to guide the development processes of the city, but at the same time they must constitute resources and procedures for the new city project" (Carta, 2007, p. 17).

Each case has unique, non-repeatable characteristics, because each city enjoys its own resources and its own identity that by their nature escape from the seriality (Carta, 2007). We can mention the case of Lyon, a city at the confluence of the Saône and Rhône, important waterways between the Mediterranean and the North Sea, which occupies a very strategic position in the European urban system.

Among the various planning plans, the water plan is the one that focuses on the regeneration of the banks of the two rivers that cross the city. The entire intervention aims to recover the relationship between the city and its two rivers, through the design of quality spaces and new pedestrian and cycle connections between the banks, as well as the enhancement

of the natural environments of the river landscape. This plan has had major effects on the economic, social and ecological aspects of the city.

The new urban waterfronts along the two rivers, become places of relationships between citizens and nature and influence the quality of life in this city. Rhone and Saone, embrace the city as a precious commodity and flow directly to the same goal, the Confluence. On the southern tip of the area, at the confluence of the two rivers, the new Musée des Confluences "also accentuates the confluence of knowledge: the human and natural sciences". The Lyon experience demonstrates the reconstruction of a city in itself, redeveloping the public spaces of the city center and the suburbs, redesigning the urban landscape and reinforcing the relationship and dialogue with its waterways. Urban quality involves social, cultural and aesthetic quality, where vegetation and water are the central elements of every intervention.

Another city, with an imputable relationship with water, is Bilbao, due to its crucial position near the sea and along Nevriòn river. Throughout its history, the transformations of the city have never ignored this important presence. The main interventions focus on the redevelopment of disused industrial areas and the recovery of the city's relationship with its waterfront. The case of Bilbao represents one of those riverfront regeneration interventions that entail the reinvention of the entire city. The transformation of this city is very radical because it consists in the search for a new image starting from the urban development along its river Nevriòn, which also represents the identity of Bilbao.

In the new image of the city, the river is conceived as a new axis of connection through the construction of new transversal crossings¹. In addition, the engine of the entire urban transformation of the city is the Guggenheim museum of F. O. Gehry. The location of the museum along the Ria also triggers the redevelopment of the entire riverfront of the city, in addition to the famous "Guggenheim effect", capable of "capturing global trade in an environment in which architecture is called to play a key role"(Rajchman, 1999, p. 10-12).

Antwerp, the second largest city in

Belgium after Brussels and situated on the right bank of Schelda river, also owes its importance to its advantageous geographic position. The current transformation scenario of the city of Antwerp has its roots in the process started in the '90s, Stad aan de Stroom, "City and River", with the aim of reviving the less used areas of the port, such as new views towards the river. Through these processes of transformation, Antwerp is able to deepen the theme of cities of water in many ways.

The main purpose of the planned interventions is the urban revitalization of the city with a new system of relationship with the river, creating physical links between the two shores, and the revival of new ambitions with which to treat the port area. Nowadays, along the river Schelda, a wide range of cultural, recreational and tourist events have been launched that extend along the two banks of the river, strengthening even more the link between city and water and making it more and more a place of leisure and of interest for all citizens and also for tourists. After a long period of darkness, due to economic and social problems, industry begins to leave space for culture in this city. With its project Stad aan and Stroom, the city on the river, Antwerp manages to radically change its appearance.

Towards recovering relation with water

History tells us that "the life of many peoples is always, or almost, linked to the presence or absence of a watercourse. The map of human settlements corresponds, in practice, to that of rivers in the world. The power of the cities depended on the power of a river, on the fear of floods "(Ercolini, 2010, p. 54).

Shkodra has always been a city of water. The main feature of this city was its important geographical position, being on the banks of the two rivers, Drin and Buna, and next to the largest lake in the Balkans. From the time of the early Middle Ages it has been a very important center, a hub of exchange for all the Balkans.

Thanks to its geographical position, the city has been recognized as a confluent point with a certain number of trade routes connecting Central Europe with the Mediterranean basin, between East and West.

The economic development between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is reflected in the social and cultural life of the city of Shkodra, as well as in the urban

1 / On both sides of the Guggenheim two pedestrian bridges are built, the Zubi Zuri Bridge of Calatrava, which means "Ponte Bianco" in Basque, and the Ponte Pedro Aruppe of Fernandez Ordenez.



Fig4a-b-c / (dall'alto) Confluence of Saône and Rhône rivers in Lyon (2017); View of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao from the Nervion river side (2015); MAS Museum in Antwerp. source / the author (a-b) and www.lonelyplanet.nl (c)



and architectural aspects. The city, trying to detach itself more and more from its past, largely influenced from the oriental cultures, expresses its maximum interest in the culture of the countries of the West. This phenomenon, which is a strong interest for Western cultures, embraces all the countries of the Balkans.

One of the most important figures of the new image of the city of the early twentieth century is certainly the architect, as well as painter and musician, Kol Idromeno.

It is thanks to its great contribution that the city today enjoys a characteristic historical center, with the first houses built in true western style, with commercial activities on the ground floor and residences in the floors above. These new buildings, which are located on the main pedestrian axis that bears the name of this architect, reflected the awakening of the city and the desire for change towards a new social, economic and cultural reality.

After the Second World War, Albania experiences radical changes in political, social and cultural aspects.

The "deep gray" architecture, characteristic of the communist regime, and the town planning characterized by vast spaces, express the spirit of this long and tiring regime.

The city of Shkodra, as well as many other Albanian cities, radically changes its appearance. New residential districts, with living spaces created with elements of low constructive, functional and aesthetic quality, and with the same types of facades, are realized under the strict rules of the dictatorship. The years between

1945 and 1990 are characterized by standardization, in many ways. The new regime acts by canceling any link with the past, thus eliminating a part of the historical heritage, and controlling in detail every aspect of the future of the country, such as urban growth and the life of citizens².

Nowadays, the city gives its back to the greatest resource of the area: the lake. And this is precisely the place of revival, the reversal of urban relations on which we want to insist on defining the new image of the city through a new element: the waterfront. The ecological dynamism of the lake, which in the different periods of the year draws the boundary between land and water is the new resource that serves to give life to an image that accepts the particular, against the generalization and the certainty of a future that could soon be compromised.

The common thread of this reflection on the city is the relationship between urban space and water, which today is broken and denied. We must try to identify various directions for a subsequent development trying to think of Shkodra as a place of touristic attraction, making the most of its historical, architectural and environmental heritage.

Shkodra is among the oldest European cities and has been a cultural center of all Albania. Numerous archaeological evidences indicate this region as being continuously inhabited since the Paleolithic period until today. After a thorough Environmental Strategic Assessment



Fig5 / Waterfront, Shkodra (2017)
source / the author

(ESA), the Municipality of Shkodra in collaboration with POLIS University, Arizona State University and Metropolis sh.p.k has drawn up the new PRG in 2016. Created according to the main national and community strategic guidelines on the redevelopment of the territory, this new program represents one of the most important challenges that the city is facing in recent times and its main objective is the improvement of the environmental and functional quality of the entire region through a revitalization of the current urban, architectural, environmental and cultural status. Starting from a new reading of the signs of the places and characteristics of this city, and also a rereading of the previous Plans³, the new PRG focuses on the landscape and urban aspects that would result in an improvement of the economic, social and cultural aspects of the city. The innovative character of this Plan lies in the enhancement of the landscape resources that characterize the region of Shkodra. Urban regeneration places at the center of its problems the relationship of the city with river courses, with the lake, and with other environmental resources. It explores and identifies the distinctive features of the region, which is already a way to master it (Corboz, 1998, p. 185), knowing its strong identity. Of course, the development strategies of this Plan

foresee future visions of Shkodra as a polycentric, eco-sustainable city, of tourism and leisure, of economy and production, of culture.

We have seen how the city of Shkodra is almost totally surrounded by water, and the regeneration policies can not but enhance this resource of primary importance for the life of many cities: the waterfront. The future projects of the image regeneration of this city are focused on the recovery of water fronts, on their reorganization, and the restoration of the relationship between water and the city. The reconversion of the areas, which today present problems of degradation and abusiveness, in places equipped for leisure, for creativity, for sport, is one of the primary objectives that the city has decided to tackle. Shkodra is a student city. A wide educational offer that every year attracts young people, residents and non-residents. The city center is characterized by numerous school and university facilities. These facilities are well integrated into the urban structure, making university life and everyday life perfectly intersect with each other. Shkodra is also a city of art. Architecture, painting, literature and many other disciplines have always characterized and enriched the life of Shkodra citizens. It is also this cultural aspect that has always

2 / The writer Ismail Kadare, on a trip to Rome during the years of communism, with his friend writer Dritero Agolli, recalls: "We had not yet visited anything in Rome, we did not have the possibility to make any comparison with the sad Albanian reality, but a small night bar was sufficient, in a remote lane, and a coffee taken humanly, as over the hundreds of years in the night cafes, for having awakened an unbearable nostalgia". In H. Kadare, *Insufficient time*, Onufri (2011).

3 / For the preparation of the new PRG, all previous plans were consulted and analyzed, such as: (i) Regional Shkoder-Lezhe Plan, 2005; (ii) PRG of 1994; (iii) Local General Plan of the Municipality of Shkodra, 2010; (iv) Local General Plan of Velipoje, 2015.



Fig6 / Buna bridge in Shkodra (2017)
source / the author

attracted many young people and creative people, making life in the city very dynamic and pleasant. The new generations are finding in Shkodra a fertile ground for the development of new activities so far absent or in any case not very encouraged. Shkodra is identifying its strengths, which are also the guidelines that allow the city to transform its face. However, it isn't about turning the page, but simply about recovering those that have always been its strengths, starting from the main resources of the city and from the analysis of the life of its citizens. This city that contains within it a commercial, cultural and artistic heritage has been able to fully overcome its negative periods, and today seeks to differentiate itself by focusing on a renewal and redevelopment of its image by exploiting its "added value". In the scenario of the Albanian cities, we can say that Shkodra is an atypical city, so it is worth paying attention to what will be its future scenario. We need to know how to plan in a long-term basis and have the maximum support and collaboration of its citizens. The resources are there, the great desire for change as well, so the road seems the right one that other countries notice this amazing city.

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Fig7 / Views of Shkodra's lake (2017)
source / the author