

## Waterfront redevelopment

### A strategic choice for cities on water

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#### **Premise**

In recent years the issue of waterfront development and requalification has become one of the most hotly debated questions in international conferences, seminars and lectures. This seems to me to be one the most obvious signals, on the one hand, of the extraordinary results being achieved all over the world by waterfront transformation processes, and on the other, a signal that despite the increase in the number of successful cases, many issues still remain to be resolved, making it a long and difficult process to produce effective and convincing development projects.

My contribution intends to offer some thoughts in this field and to present a number of suggestions, with specific reference to the experiences involving several European cities.

#### **An initial question**

I would like to start by asking a question.

Why is it so important, or better yet, why does it seem to be so essential that a city on water invest its resources, economic and otherwise, often in significant measure, to renovate, enrich and revitalize its own waterfront?

It is obvious that there are many answers to this question, each city can provide a different response, based on its own experience, it can emphasize one specific aspect that may be considered as the key to understanding its success.

Yet I believe the significance lies in the question itself rather than in the answer.

What I mean is that it seems truly extraordinary to me that today, more and more, the following question is being asked all over the world: how can excellence be achieved in waterfront redevelopment projects?

Because it seems obvious to me that that there is a substantial unanimity in considering the waterfront as an extraordinary resource for a city, to be used 'strategically' to revitalize and reinforce its economy and to 'build' or consolidate its specific 'image'.

In this sense, for example, the two cases of Barcelona and Bilbao in Spain are now universally recognized as 'reference points', two examples replete with indications and suggestions for those who intend to work in this field.

In my lecture, I would like to dwell on three factors which I consider to be very important:

- a. the waterfront as a strategic urban resource
- b. the renaissance of the waterfront as a statement of urban identity
- c. the waterfront as a test for a balanced relationship between city and port.

### **The waterfront as a strategic urban resource**

First of all I would like to explain why I consider the waterfront to be a '*strategic urban resource*'. I believe in fact that the waterfront is not just another 'district' in the city (business district, residential or commercial areas...)

The waterfront is above all a very valuable resource for the city, because it is a precious, limited and non-renewable asset. Its major value derives primarily from its territorial position, that is from being an area located on the border between earth and water, which enjoys indubitable advantages of location, such as, for example, being an authentic seam between movement systems on the sea and on the mainland.

Like all limited and non-renewable assets, ever since its value was recognized, there has been an increased demand for these spaces, both by the private and public sectors.

Public entities increasingly consider waterfront development as a mandatory choice for the revitalization of the economy and the image of the city, developing an area that was previously considered peripheral or unimportant, and often had severe problems of accessibility, urban disorder and environmental pollution.

In these cases the revitalization of the waterfront involves 'rediscovering' a fundamental heritage of natural spaces, infrastructure, and architecture: a heritage that can be adapted to new functions and fresh uses, so that citizens, visitors and tourists can appreciate heretofore unknown aspects of these cities on water.

The study of many successful cases reveals the extraordinary capacity of waterfronts to represent the new image of the city, a sort of brand new urban icon, the synthesis of a new 'idea' of the city, pursued by its government and its public administration.

A 'powerful' icon that attracts public and private investments.

For private operators, particularly in the real estate business, the waterfront has become a terrain in which to pursue their most significant work, which can ensure secure long-term growth for real estate investments.

Hence the recognition of the 'strategic' value of waterfront development projects, which often extend their effects on wider portions of the city, far beyond the border area between earth and water, bringing significant change to various facets of the social and economic life of the city.

### **The renaissance of the waterfront as a statement of urban identity**

An aspect that must be carefully considered is the requalification of waterfront areas as an essential element of a wider strategy to rediscover and consolidate the image of the city, that can correctly and wisely underline the identity of the city itself.

Quite often, this urban identity has been strongly weakened or profoundly altered over the years, and particularly during the period following World War II, when processes of standardization first and globalization after led to forms of marked similarity between various cities, with the result that the same models continued to be proposed for the development of parts of cities.

The diversities, the specific factors, the distinctive features of places were gradually replaced, absorbed or softened by works that produced affinity, homogeneity and uniformity.

Though the same schemes were often presented time and again, the waterfront operations did however allow these urban areas to reclaim an identity they had lost; on the contrary, rediscovering the meaning of places and implementing a significant development program in many cases allowed the city to discover the presence of water and its extraordinary role in improving and guaranteeing the quality of urban life.

### **The waterfront as a test for a balanced relationship between city and port**

Many cities on water, particularly the most important ones, are also port cities. For these cities, the port very often represents the primary economic resource, with an influence and an importance that goes beyond the city limits and extends into the vast surrounding territory.

The waterfront areas are often a source of discussion and even conflict between port and city, given their 'central' position in the urban structure and their significant land value, deriving from their location.

The new works, which are excellent in many cases, deliberately raised the issue of avoiding the forced relocation of port activities away from the heart of the city, seeking on the contrary to keep and even to favor those that are most compatible with urban uses, for example activities related to passenger traffic and in particular the cruise market, which derive a significant advantage from having terminals close to the heart of the city.

The waterfront can thus become an area that can determine the development of a balanced relationship between the needs of the city and the requirements for movement in the port, building a 'mixed' urban area that obviously responds to the most recent demands for 'security' in port zones, while simultaneously allowing citizens and tourists to access the renewed waterfront, which often represents one of the major attractions and most popular tourist destinations in the city.

**To conclude, 'ten principles for new interventions on the waterfront'**

To conclude this lecture I would like to present a small, but hopefully useful initiative. On the basis of many exemplary cases of waterfront redevelopment, built in cities in every part of the world, the public company of the Berlin Senate, in collaboration with the Centre for Cities on Water in Venice, developed "*10 Principles for a sustainable development of waterfront areas*" for the Global Conference of the Urban Future (URBAN 21) held in Berlin in 2000; I believe they continue to be valid, though some time has passed since they were first presented.

These ten 'principles' are actually ten 'suggestions' that may be extended to those subjects– especially in the public sector – who must operate in these areas, with the purpose of making these new projects more effective and responsive to criteria for improving the quality of urban life.

I hope this modest contribution has been helpful to point out and highlight some of the aspects that I consider to be essential for a balanced and innovative development of our urban waterfronts. Thus we will allow our cities to continue to 'grow', not through a constant increase in surfaces and volumes, but by being aware and sensitive in working to requalify the heritage of existing areas and facilities that represent our past history, and that could become the pilasters on which to build our future.

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He curated the Cities on Water section at the 9th International Architecture Exhibition Metamorph, Biennale di Venezia, 2004 and the exhibition entitled Los nuevos waterfront urbanos for the 10<sup>th</sup> Bienale Arquitectura de Buenos Aires in 2005.

He will be the Curator of the special section entitled "The new City-Port' for the 10th International Architecture Exhibition at the 2006 Biennale di Venezia. He has authored many publications on urban waterfront revitalisation and urban design in cities on water.