

The “Respect Ribbon” of the Port in Prà (Genova, Italy). Neighbourhood Action From the Preservation of Local Interest Toward the Strategic Urban Project

The study case

Subject

The “Respect Ribbon“(my translation of the Italian “fascia di rispetto”) of Prà is a park, a canal and a sport area that separates the residential neighbourhood of Prà (Commune of Genova, Italy) from the VTE (Voltri Terminal Europa), a container ship terminal of more than 100 hectares.

The Respect Ribbon has a total area of about 50 ha (including the water surface); it contains a rowing centre, a marina for about 1.000 sailing boats, a green area (8 ha), a swimming pool, sport fields, a car parking (700 cars), the new commuter train station of Prà on the line Genova-Ventimiglia-France.

The canal has been obtained by detaching from the coastal line the land filling of the new port terminal. The park and the facilities have been paid as “works for the mitigation of the impacts” (e.g.: concerning the impact of the new railways tracks) and with exceptional public investments (e.g.: the funds given by the State for organizing in 2002 an international rowing game).

At present (June 2007) the Respect Ribbon is managed by *Prà Viva*, an association with more than 1.000 members: many individuals (who pay 10€ per years) and the 22 sport clubs (some have up to 500 members) which are located in the Ribbon, along the canal (most of them already existed before). The City Municipality and the local Town Council have their representatives in the Association Board, whose statute needs the approval of the City. Initially conceived to satisfy the a generic local demand for basic services, the Respect Ribbon grew in ambition and specialization; now it is one of the more qualified sport plants in the Genova metropolitan area and it represents a great opportunity for the City to compete at the international level in the field of rowing games.

Main frame

It is known that today the seashore is a very powerful attractor for people and activities – and an ideal location for many kind of urban projects, strategic or not.

Globalisation stretches the importance of the coastal cities, as the volume of exchanged goods is constantly increasing and the seaports are playing a fundamental role in the world trade. Sea resorts are major attractions in the era of the global tourist boom and the coastal towns are – almost everywhere – a favourite place for living.

Nevertheless, the coast is a fragile environment, which has paramount importance both as an ecological equilibrator and for its social and aesthetic values. Different uses are very often concurrent on the coast but not always compatible: competition can grow strong.

In this context, the local demands do not have many chances to emerge; a successful project that not only is capable to satisfy needs but is also strategic in a wider context must be constantly revised to match the incoming challenges and is always threatened to be seized by external forces aiming to transform it into something different.

City frame

The City of Genova stretches for more then 30 km alongside a coast that was once famous for its natural beauty and its fine villas surrounded by lush gardens, but is now prevalingly artificial and occupied by the port (among the busiest in the Mediterranean), the airport, factories, depurators and other big plants.

Since the late 19th century, the littoral has become attractive for many new activities and now it is the place where the competition is stronger among different users (and users-to-be).

Today maritime traffic is increasing, so the port needs much more space; industry has dismissed large areas inland, but it maintains the more profitable seashore locations. Leisure and culture are now demanding their spaces on the sea. The University moved one of its Faculty to the waterfront. Accordingly to the City policies aimed to restore the historical inner district and to foster tourism, the site of the medieval harbour has been completely transformed with museums, restaurants, an aquarium, hotels, shopping areas. The success of the Old Harbour (Porto Antico) is prompting ideas for the development of new urban projects: now every part of the City is expecting to get more from its piece of coast. In 2004 the architect Renzo Piano presented his "*affresco*": a project for enlarging the port and re-modelling the entire City waterfront. Piano's proposal, introduced by the President of the Regione Liguria (the main elected authority in Genova) and heavily sponsored by the local press, got the immediate appreciation of the Mayor. The Region, the City and the Port Authority soon established a Commission to study how the *affresco* could match the interests of the big stakeholders of the Port and be integrated with the City Master Plan. No matter how good the project could be, this is a typical up-down process. The City's communities, which in a recent past have been deprived of their beaches (by similar processes) might now look for a compensation as far as they are able to modify the process and be recognized as full actors.

Local contest

Prà is a small town on the coast, 12 km west of central Genova. Its 22.000 inhabitants are almost equally divided into three neighbourhoods: the two on the coast (Prà and the former rural parish of Palmaro) are strictly integrated; the third (Cà Nuova) is a cluster of big public housing estates spread on the hills, physically isolated by rest of the town and socially apart. A former fishermen's village, Prà grew with the industrial boom at the beginning of the 20th century. It was eventually incorporated in the Municipality of Genova in 1926, as a part of the industrial district of the City. The solidarity bounds of the ancient fishermen's community provided the base for the development of an evolved workers' class culture. In the 1980's the general shrinkage of the City's industrial economy swept away the factories - and the jobs. On the hills, the biggest project of public housing in the City was under construction; the inhabitants were new comers, who were causing problems of safety and would have never melted with the "natives". Moreover, the littoral was to disappear: according to the plans of the Port Authority, the port should expand westward and the beach of Prà should be totally replaced by a new container ship terminal. There are some fine old buildings in Prà, something remains of the old village and the rural landscape; but an "urban quality" is missing; the only square is a mere open space, not really a *piazza*. The beach represented the value in Prà, it was its bit of world, its communitarian space; not only a place for the individuals to play, swim, take the sun, but the place of the clubs (fishermen's, rowing, sailing and other sport clubs): a long line of wood and brick huts where the social life took place.

The Port Terminal of Voltri and its impact on the town of Prà

Recurrent crisis and recovery of the Port of Genova

The existence of Genova is intimately connected to the sea: the first urban settlements was demonstrated to be a pre-Roman mooring place; in the Middle Age the City was a major naval power; then Genova gave to modern Italy its largest and busiest port. So the City is unable to imagine a future without being a great port. As late as the 12th century, the City waterfront was completely occupied by the port, one of the first in Europe to be provided with masonry piers. During the 19th and the 20th century the City grew as a linear conurbation, swelling the smaller towns located along the coast; shipyards and steel factories were built on the seashore, but until World War 2 Genova still

had beautiful beaches, intensively used by the inhabitants round the year and frequented by the tourists in the summer.

The City economy severely deteriorated from the 1970's to the late 1980's when both the industrial and the port activities entered a severe crisis. It was clear that the port suffered for lack of space and deficiency of competitiveness.

In its long history, the port had encountered many period of crisis; at every time the path to recovery had been the same: new infrastructures, improvements of the equipments, reorganization of the work. One time more, in order to fill the gap with the other Mediterranean ports and regain its leading place, the City developed a multiple strategy of recovery.

The structure of the Port Authority was totally remodelled, the labour associations accepted to work in a different way, new operators were solicited to settle; the political, economical and social forces of the City lobbied for obtaining from the State investments to be employed in an ambitious campaign of *Grands Travaux*.

Two big projects were to be accomplished: a new container ship terminal and a motorway (200 km long) to connect the terminal with the alpine tunnels, after crossing the Apennines and the plane of the Po river. The new terminal used to be called "*Porto di Voltri*", after the name of the biggest nearby town, situated at the extreme west of the Genova conurbation; but it was actually built alongside the waterfront of the smaller town of Prà.

The growing Port and the City

The idea of a port in Voltri already appeared in the 1920's, when the expansion of the harbour and the industrial areas seemed to be the best possible way to use the littoral. But later some doubt arose.

Between the 1930's and the 1950's the western part of the Genova conurbation, commonly named the "*Ponente*", the West, had dramatically changed. The beaches, the gardens and the beautiful suburban landscape of the towns which were more close to the central city - Sampierdarena, Cornigliano, Sestri - had disappeared to make place to the port, the shipyards and the steel factories. The Ponente was transformed in one of the major industrial district of North Italy; its inhabitants had to carry the burden of industrialization, modernization, overwhelming immigration in order to make Genova a big and wealthier City. But in the late 1970's, when the factories began to close and the mechanization of the port began to require less employment, the Ponente suddenly realized that it was missing its job opportunities and was threatened to become a poor commuters' suburb lacking urban quality and facilities.

If economic success had lasted for such a short time, should the project of a new productive plant or infrastructure permanently cancel the quality of the urban environment? And how far such a project could pass over the problems of the inhabitants and avoid to be confronted with other strategies of development?

Yet the City Master Plan adopted in 1976 and definitely approved in 1980 merely recorded the project of the port of Voltri and the connected motorway junction without any proposal aimed to the improvement of the nearby neighbourhoods – so following a negative tradition. In Italy the littoral is a public dominion that the State can directly lease to privates or entrust to other public bodies. The Port Authority of Genova is in charge of the whole littoral – while the City has no right on it. So the Port Authority has been accustomed to have "full sovereignty" on the coast and to decide new works without consulting anyone – the City neither. Of course, the Port Authority keeps the duty to make the port work and to improve maritime traffic; it does not care about the needs of the citizens nor is interested in developing any strategic project for the benefit of the City as a whole.

The City Master Plan passively accepted this trend. Its only reaction consisted of the insertion of a thin strip of mix land use where the town of Prà was to be in contact with the port. Inside this strip it became possible to transform the urban fabric and substitute the residential buildings with new ones for business activities. This solution soon appeared to be a very timid response to the port gigantism and an *escamotage* for integrating the town with

the port that, in spite of producing local benefits, was to utterly affect the integrity of the town and threaten its identity.

The Respect Ribbon of Prà

Prà facing the project of the new port terminal

The Town Council of Prà first supported the decision of the Port Authority and the City Municipality to build the port, but also asked for getting “something back”. Since then, the Leftist parties had always monopolized the political life in the workers’ towns of the Ponente, but were a minority in the City Council. At the end of the 1970’s, for the first time, the Left won the election and began to administrate the City. The Central Administration, “politically homogeneous” with the Prà Town Council, expected the Council and its President to make palatable to the inhabitants the project of the port terminal, without any modification. But the Town Council was reluctant: a community that is missing its beach –they said– should receive some “compensation”.

The City accepted to revise the Master Plan and cancelled the business district: the urban fabric of old Prà should be maintained and the inhabitants could remain in their homes. That seemed not enough: Prà asked for the urban services which were missing. As the deal was going for long, the inhabitants of Prà began to feel deceived by their representatives in the City Hall. One day, someone wrote “No al porto” (port away) on the big stones which were used in the land filling of the sea. The President of the Town Council definitely decided to support the protest and began to look for a brand new solution that could positively change the destiny of Prà. The process that led to the Respect Ribbon had started.

The people did not want to miss the contact with the water; the sport clubs lobbied for maintaining a place and the accessibility to the sea. The idea of a canal connected to the open sea began to gain approval. Some architects put forward drawings and models which were widely discussed in many public assemblies. Finally the Town was able to present to the City Municipality an effective proposal: not only a project for reducing the impact of the port and creating a leisure and sport public area, but also the idea that a new local actor should implement the project, accommodate the public areas take the facilities in charge. At the mid of the 1980’s it was established the Committee for the preservation of the littoral (*Comitato per la salvaguardia del litorale di Prà*), co-ordinated by the president of the Town Council, that cared the implementation of the project. When the City received from the Port Authority the concession of the coastal public domain, the Committee was transformed into an Association that offered to manage the Respect Ribbon on behalf of the City. A new, larger association, *Prà Viva*, appeared in 2003 and is presently managing the whole area.

A case of success

The case of the Respect Ribbon of Prà can be taken as an example of a strategic urban project which is the result of a bottom-up process of decision making.

Definitely, this case stands as a major example (for Italy) of co-productive ways to confront the local interests of a community with broader ones and to produce a new vision of the future for an integrated development.

The process started from the opposition to an authoritative intervention that did not take into consideration the inhabitants’ needs; this opposition could have simply produced a negative action – just a way to hamper the intervention and minimize its effects; or the inhabitants could have been satisfied with a mere reduction of the impact of the new port. What happened is probably more than the promoters themselves expected: first thought as a form of compensation for the “stolen beach”, the Respect Ribbon eventually became an urban project able to produce benefits not only locally, but to the entire City.

I would try to stretch some aspects of this study case in order to detect the reasons of its success.

A constructive opposition, a local visioning. The local community was able to pass from the protest to the proposal thanks to its capacity to capture external expertises (without being “swallowed” by them), to accept new ideas and to produce innovative visions of the future.

An effective local representativeness, a recognized leadership. The elected representatives of the people who were nearest to the local community (i.e. the Town Council and its Presidents) were able to lead the discussion “at home”, to interpret and express the local will when discussing “at the centre” and to be effectively credible and authoritative - in the sense of being able to warrant at one table the respect of the decision taken at another table. The role of the local leaders was of paramount importance in addressing the protest and “use” it as a positive instrument of pressure on the City and the Port Authority.

The local attitude to co-operate, learn, change. The people of Prà were able not only to make the protest arise and to stimulate the discussion but to be active actors of the transformation and to assume collectively new responsibilities. New stakeholders (the Committee, the Associations) were created using a capacity of co-operation trained in the solidarity culture of the fishermen’s village and the workers’ town. People consciously accepted the challenge and invented new roles in a “Porto Alegre spirit”.

Un uncertain future

The success of the Respect Ribbon has become maybe too big.

Now many people – not only the locals – have “other” ideas, “new” things to say. The way the Respect Ribbon has been managed seems to be poor, not “open minded” enough; someone accuses the Association to make mistakes and not to have the needed capacity. As always happens, these accusations are not completely wrong.

The political parties are annoyed because they do not control the situation. At many levels, the technicians of the public administrations feel cut away from any decision. Some private entrepreneur is eagerly looking at the big business the Respect Ribbon could be.

If the Association loses its present role, the Respect Ribbon of Prà could at the end prove to be a failure under the point of view of the participative management; but, as odd as it can be, this failure would be the paradoxical confirm that this has really been a great urban strategic project - too appealing to be let in the hands of its promoters.



Genova. The Port Terminal of Voltri (upper left), the Respect Ribbon with the Rowing Canal (centre) and the town of Prà (right) (photograph: E. Pinna)