

## Re-shaping Spaces For A New Economy. The Case Of Genoa

### Genoa as a City-Port

Genoa, one of the regional capitals of Italy, is an industrial town and a great port. Located on the extreme north-western ridge of the Mediterranean basin, Genoa is the natural access to the sea for a large and economically developed hinterland, that includes the metropolitan areas of Milan and Turin, Switzerland, south-western Germany.

Genoa is considered an outstanding and long lasting example of a City-Port: i.e. (i) a representative type of a city whose morphology and economy are strictly connected to the presence of a port and the way it works; (ii) an exceptional one, as the city has maintained its basic function – being a place for maritime trade – modifying many times its physical structure and its social and political organisation in order to match temporal opportunities.

Genoa was originally settled in pre-roman times, as a landing-place and a market protected by a fortified hill on the route between Italy and the Greek colonies of southern France. In the Middle Ages it was a great naval power that controlled routes to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries it was an independent republic, integrated in the Spanish empire, that joined to the exploitation of South America and played a role in establishing modern capitalism in Europe. In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, Genoa participated significantly to the process for unifying Italy; then was able to find its place in the new country as the major port and the biggest concentration of the industrial activities connected to the sea and the maritime transport (shipyards, steel production, oil refinery).

As a matter of fact, Genoa has proved to be very adaptive, being able to survive as a City-Port for many centuries. But now the city is facing a challenge of a new kind: today the identification between a city and its port seems to be no longer effective. Ports are now highly specialised and mechanised tools for moving goods (and, sometimes, persons); they work as gears of a mechanism that connects sea routes and land transport networks and must improve efficiency diminishing frictions; so they tend to be enclosed places, physically isolated from the urban fabric and not permeable to the local flows. Definitely, if a great port can survive without a city, a great city cannot find in a port its only *raison d'être*.



**Genoa, a dense city: the Old City, the renewed Old Port and, in the background, a modern container terminal (photo: R. Bobbio)**

### **From the City-Port to the City on Water**

In the 1970's Genoa's economy risked to definitively collapse: the facilities and the labour organisation of the port were obsolete, the whole industrial apparatus had missed competitiveness. Maritime traffics almost stopped, steel factories and oil companies closed, population started a dwindling trend (850.000 inhabitants in the 1960's, less than 640.000 today). As other former City-Ports with apparently solid industrial basis (see Baltimore, Bilbao or Liverpool), Genoa was declining and had to tackle a program of deep renovation.

Adapting the port to the traffic changes was the first natural outcome: new terminals for container ships were built and the cruise and ferry terminals renewed. As a result, in the 1990's the goods and people movement increased. Today Genoa ranks back among the Mediterranean major ports and the maritime activities are thriving again.

The success of the port has a significance that should be valued not only in terms of quantities: it is fundamental to confirm the city's identity, to assure the confidence of the entrepreneurs and to reinforce the self-reliance of the citizens.

But the relationship between the city and its port is changed under the point of view of economy and physical integration. First, the maritime activities do not produce wealth for the entire city population; the port does not fuel industry any longer, nor the vicinity to the port is a reason sufficient to establish new productions. Secondly, the dimensions and the overall impact of the port system (due either to the traffic movement and to the permanent structure of terminals, roads, railways) are unpleasantly affecting the residential neighbourhoods and cause problems to the environment.

Whereas the relations with the port are becoming less intense and more critical, Genoa is re-discovering its waterfront. The city stretches alongside the sea for more than 30 km but in many points it is less than one kilometre wide. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the central city incorporated the smaller towns situated on the western and eastern coast, each of those has maintained its identity and has its peculiar relation with the sea. Accordingly, the seashore is a multi-functional resource for the whole City: a privileged location for trade and production but also for recreation; a crossing place of international flows but also of the neighbourhood social life.

The definition "City-Port" could be substituted with "City on Water": altogether, the last one seems to be a more saying metaphor to describe the present status of Genoa.

### **Getting new spaces through land reclamation**

The coast pattern where Genoa lies is discontinued by steep hills and narrow valleys; planes are rare and very small. The city enjoys a panoramic site, beautiful landscapes and a mild climate; yet it suffers for lack of space. Since its remote origins Genoa has "created spaces" in true terms: that is to say, hills have been dug and land reclaimed by building terraces and filling the sea; the port, the airport and many industrial zones lies on artificial soil. Each new phase of the city economic development and physic enlargement has been marked by a program of *grands travaux* that did modify the soil morphology, the course of rivers and the coastal line.

Modifications have become more and more dramatic in the last century and some of their consequences are critical. First of all, the combination of hydro-morphology alterations, progressive abandon of rural settlements in the mountains together with the peculiarities of the Mediterranean climate (marked by violent and sudden storms after long periods of draught) has triggered more frequent and more disastrous floods.

There is no more available space for building in the metropolitan area of Genoa; therefore establishing new activities now demands either new land reclamation or the re-use of areas already built: the first action affecting the environment, the second one implying the involvement of many actors; both eventually being complex and expensive processes.

The area of the port was almost doubled filling the sea in the 1970's-1980's; the enlargement took so many years because money arrived piecemeal from the Government. During the 1990's (see below), when the City Administration promoted the re-use of zones formerly

occupied by the steel industry, funds provided by the State and the EU had been needed to make polluted soils sound.

Recently land reclaiming has been proposed again as the solution to the city problems. The architect Renzo Piano, when asked by the Region administration to make a proposal for the future of Genoa presented (May 2004) his “affresco”(RPBW, 2004): a series of drawings and a big model showing a brand new city waterfront that stretches further in the sea with artificial islands and peninsulas where new equipment and facilities can be settled: port terminals, shipyards, a new international airport, marinas and sea resort areas, a fishing port, a long row of trees that connects green areas in a great linear park... The “affresco” raised enthusiasm, so the City and the Region Administrations and the Port Authority soon created a Commission to study how it could be made compatible with the standing plans and quickly implemented.

Yet Piano’s drawings are unlikely to become a real project: it is evident that the proposed works would cost a huge amount of money and have a strong impact on the environment. But above all the “affresco” appears merely a brilliant vision that can excite ideas for a renovation, a contribution to a common brainstorming about shaping the city of the future which may lead to very different decisions.

Occasionally, Piano’s proposals confirm solutions already discussed. For example, in order to build the new railway that is needed for linking the port to the network of the great European corridors, a long tunnel under the Appennini mountains must be excavated; the cheapest way to get rid of the dirt is to use it for filling the sea; so an artificial island is probably to be constructed, even if its size and use can be different from what has been proposed by Piano.

No doubt that the “affresco” has had the positive effect to push forward the debate on the city’s future. It has made clear that the city redevelopment requires new spaces which should not be obtained piece by piece but should be connected in a general plan, in order to create a new structure and a new image of Genoa.

The development of a new economy for the city passes definitively through a process that includes finding new land and creating new spaces; but first the idea of this economy must be created. The series of operations that have been carried out in the last decade began to outline this idea.

### **In the search of new economic sources**

During the 1970’s, when many large factories were reducing employment, the City was still considering the crisis of its productive base as a transitional one. The 1980 City Master Plan provided new areas for industry, aiming to foster the rehabilitation of the old factories and the stay of the traditional activities, but this proved to be an illusion: the change of the productive system was an irreversible one and a global phenomenon that local decisions could not direct.

Some private developers, who were more keen to regard the change as an opportunity, began to speak of Genoa as a city that had to lay aside industry and become a primary centre for business and finance (as it has been in the late nineteenth century); they were proposing the construction of offices, dwellings, facilities. Eventually, the City Administration accepted this idea to transform an old industrial area situated near the port into a modern Business Centre and a long procedure was started up in order to correct the Master Plan. Eventually this way for searching a new economy proved wrong. Today a bunch of tall buildings stand on the line between the city and the port, in a no-man land; one, that was more accurately designed (by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, a world renown New York based architecture firm) copes with the nearby Lanterna (the 16<sup>th</sup> century lighthouse that is the symbol of Genoa) and has definitely become a visual reference in the skyline for the citizens; but the offices inside had been staying vacant for long and have been finally occupied by some City Administration Departments, not by new profitable activities.

Other office buildings built in the immediate vicinity of the city centre encountered similar problems in finding occupants. At the end of the decade, it was apparent that the idea of a new economy based on business, independent from an industrial base, had failed; it was not

a vision but a mere bet that now had to be paid: as a matter of fact, some developers went bankrupt, while the construction sector shrunk and still now has not regained the dimension it had in the 1960's, when the city was growing under the impulse of the industry.

The 1990's stories were different, yet still unsatisfying. Then it was retail to play the game. The city network of shops was inadequate; big stores were missing and (as no new area was available, see above) national and international retail companies were pushing to convert industrial areas for their use. Projects sprouted wherever an industrial activity had ceased, from smaller areas set in the urban fabric, to the largest suburban ones; most of the projects were based on a mix of functions (as usual in this kind of operation), but commerce always kept the core. So, the site of an oil refinery has been refilled with a maisonettes neighbourhood *and* a big food store; a large steel factory has been dismantled to build warehouses *and* some durable goods stores; one of the most ancient industrial area in Italy, just outside the port, is now occupied by high-rise dwelling buildings *and* a shopping mall. Undoubtedly, these have been successful stories, but their contribution to the city economy has been negligible. The jobs created are not only very few, but definitively less qualified than those provided by the industry and the ancillary activities development has been very poor.



**Re-qualification of the Old City of Genoa: restoration works in progress and a new park (photo R. Bobbio)**

### **New life in old spaces**

In the last two decades Genoa has greatly changed and it is now reputed one of the most interesting urban renovation cases in Europe (see the study by the French Ministry of Planning: de Gravelaine, 2004).

Attracting tourism was the key strategy for the launching a new phase of development. This strategy had been formulated in the late 1980's, when Genoa was still seen as one of the vertices of the Italian "industrial triangle" (the others being Turin and Milan), a place for work and business not worth to visit for leisure or culture. It seemed to be a strange fate for a city that had been among the major ones in Europe for centuries and has one of the largest historical centre (113 hectares); but 150 years of industrial growth had overshadowed a much longer artistic past. Indeed, the rich heritage of the city had been surviving through the years, though totally neglected; however, as the industry was moving away, the idea that this heritage could be regarded as a possible resource started taking its pace, but it seemed hard to modify the way the city was perceived and to find the money for a large campaign of restoration.

U.S. Cities Waterfronts appeared as a model for a renovation process that could spread to the nearby neighbourhoods; the organisation of big events seemed to offer opportunities for promoting a new image of the city and collecting the extra funds that were needed.

The oldest part of the port, still located in the site of the medieval and ancient one, was obsolete and almost completely deserted by the ships; this place was chosen to build an Aquarium and to hold the 1992's International Exposition dedicated to the ship and the sea (Bisio and Bobbio, 2003); it was just the first step of a process of transformation, still in hand, that gave rise to several project which have been since concentrating on Genoa the interest of the architects (*mad'e*, 1/2002).

In this process, a crucial episode was the demolition of the grain silos, a massive concrete slab built in the 1960's that oppressed the landscape of the small circular bay where the Old City lies. The demolition of the silos was an impressive event that had several effects: aesthetically, the city skyline regained its proportions; symbolically, it was demonstrated that the era of the industrial port inside the city had gone; strategically, a vast area in the city core was made free. This precious space should be used to built a centre for culture and *loisir* to stay open 24 h a day and the square on the sea that the city never had; on this purpose, a competition was held and the winning project, designed by the Dutch architect Ben Van Berkel, is to be implemented by an international investment group).

Once the transformation of the Old Port had found its way, it was possible to intervene in the Old City with more chances of success. The City Administration adopted the policy of re-qualifying public spaces and giving financial support to the private proprietors that intended to restore the external of the building; eventually those painted and stucco decorated facades, that had been a peculiarity of Genoa since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, found again their brightness and colours.

Definitively the programme for transforming the Old Port and support the rehabilitation of the historical centre to promote tourism and city renovation has proved to be successful and new activities have sprouted. The overall dimension of the new economy generated by the urban renovation has not been evaluated, but some indicators are telling. In the 2000's, the amount of people visiting the city increased by an average 30% from the 1990's and the Aquarium, with more than 1 million visitors every year, scores now third among the tourist attractions in Italy. Recent studies (Silvano, 2004; others are under publication) have calculated that since the year 2000 the commercial value of the estates in the Old City have increased by about 40% (20% in the rest of the city). A considerable number of new restaurants, pubs and wine-bars have opened and the dehors have transformed the aspect of many little squares. The Old City, no longer forgotten and set apart, is a lively place, integrated to the commercial and business core of the city, and has become a centre of nightlife specially loved by young people.

The works for re-qualifying the Old City have been either a cause and a consequence of transformation in the construction sector.

Since the local municipality and the other public administrations concentrated on the external works and the estate prices started growing, the private owners found their interest in spending for internal works, so upgrading their properties that had been let without any maintenance for many years. The facade restoration works require a know how that was next to disappear so far as the last craftsmen were retiring; now the new demand started stimulating new apprenticeship and some young people began to qualify for this specialised work, connecting the traditional manual ability with a new scientific knowledge.

Another consideration concerns the structure and dimension of the firms which are taking part in the restoration process that, considering the size and the complexity of the Old City, can go on for decades and produce a considerable stable load of maintenance work. In the 1970's, Genoa aimed to become an international centre of the construction sector: at that time, public companies like Italmimpianti and Ansaldo, which had the capability to perform the turn-key construction of industrial complexes and infrastructures, and some big private companies, that could lead the building process from the design stage to selling, had their offices and headquarters in the city. This aspiration was totally unaccomplished, because public companies were liquidated and the private ones fell (see above). From the disaster smaller building firms and project offices rose up, which are unable to undertake big works but are very adaptable and appropriate for taking care of a great number of minor works and repairs. So, today Genoa is shut out of the international market of construction but in the city the sector is not dead: a network of "feeble" operators exists that is able to match local demand and can produce valuable know how for the interventions of restoration and maintenance.

### **Spaces for the industry of the future**

In Genoa the heavy industry provided more than 60% of the jobs in the 1970's, a mere 20% in the 1990's. It took many years to accept the idea that the era of heavy industry had finished, but finally the city did it and began to shift its hope of an economic recovery to the ICT industry that had spontaneously created a hi-tech cluster in Sestri Ponente (a western neighbourhood that is one of the more ancient industrial district in Italy).

In the last two decades the ICT industry has become a steady point of reference for the city; nevertheless, a thorough increase of this sector is always expected but still to come and occasional busts are not infrequent. For example, a few years ago the Genoa branch of the British group Marconi was expanding and asked new areas for its plants; the City Administration immediately intervened, adopting new projects and providing areas and buildings, but in a very short time a crisis occurred and the company was cut into pieces.

But, in spite of its alternate success, ICT has deposited in Genoa a know how and created a favourable environment where new activities can blossom.

At present, much attention is put on the project for an High Tech Village to be built on a hill that in the 1950's was cut and flattened out to obtain earth for landfills and is at present used for storing containers. The Village should integrate different functions: production, research, education and housing. Local companies and the University are specially interested to the projects, but also some international groups and the Italian national research centre are likely to open laboratories there. Genoa High Tech Village could offer some good opportunities: scientific and working competencies are in Genoa as high as in bigger cities but require smaller salaries; the Village would be directly connected to the port, the airport and the highway network; the dimension and the multi-functionality of the Village will determine a critical mass that can foster business, research and individual improvement; today Genoa can offer to employees living there a good climate and its newly gained glamour.

A group of promoters has been created to run the project that is presently under discussion to get political support and to collect the citizens' consensus; Renzo Piano has laid out a first scheme. No doubt that the possible success of such a project may really change the perspective of growth of the entire city.

### **Re-shaping the waterfront**

For a sea city without an inland, like Genoa, the waterfront is the only facade and the place where most things happen. La Ripa (the Shore), the medieval city waterfront, is a compact row of tall, luxurious buildings connected by a long arcade sided by warehouses and shops: both a representation of the city wealth and a place for trade. In the last century and a half waterfront has been a strip where port equipment and industrial plants massed, leaving no space for other activities. Today re-shaping the waterfront is necessary to find new profitable uses, to enhance the quality of life, to reconstruct an image of the city that can express a new identity: an operation essential for any urban politics. The transformation of the Old Port has given to the central city a new vibrant waterfront; but much more remains to be done to obtain a similar result along 30 km of sea shore.

The dismissal of the steel factories and the oil refineries has stopped the biggest sources of pollution and has disclosed the possibility to improve the environment in the western neighbourhoods, which have been long doomed by the more intrusive and dangerous cycles of production; but opportunities for a new economic leap are also needed. The loss of jobs in the ex industrial suburbs and their concentration in the central city is taken for granted; yet something must - and probably can - be done to re-balance the situation. Genoa suburbs are small towns that have preserved until now an identity and a social life, due to complex historical reasons but also because they never stopped to integrate different functions: housing, production, retail, education. The character and vitality of these towns are one of the most valuable specificity of the city; so any change should be driven with a view to maintain them.

The City Master Plan approved in the year 2000 looks towards a future where further enlargement of the port and the settlement of new activities along the seashore do not hamper the improvement of a urban waterfront where culture, sport and social life can find their place and foster development. *Waterfront Transformation* has been one of the two subjects (the other was *Social Welfare*) of the Strategic Conference that the City Administration held in May 2005; it will be a decisive component of the incoming political developments.

As a matter of fact, most of the biggest projects under work or discussion in the city are located along the seashore or immediately behind; some of them can give an idea of the intention to create new spaces to foster an overall development: not strictly economical, but able to enhance the social and cultural level of the city.

*The sea promenade in Voltri.* Voltri, a former industrial town (shipyards, steel factories, paper mills) at the extreme west of Genoa, is today mostly a place of retired people with a large beach flanked by old industrial pavilions, casually reused. The project of a promenade connecting an high school, sport and culture facilities, a complex for the production of theatre plays must now be implemented. This initiative is expected to produce a new waterfront, able to trigger the urban renovation as well as to strengthen the local identity. At present it is under discussion the construction of a fisherman harbour in a fringe zone at the end of the beach: the idea is to concentrate and offer better facilities to all the fishing boats that operate in the area of Genoa, now berthing in marginal areas of different ports and marinas.

*The "respect strip" (fascia di rispetto) in Prà.* With the construction of a big terminal for container ships, the small town of Prà has lost its beach, that constituted the essence of local social life: a gathering place with many clubs. After a long battle, the inhabitants obtained that a canal and a park were built between the new port and the town. Social life is thriving again along the canal, that is used for competitions and has the potential to transform Prà in an international centre for canoeing and sailing all the year round.

*The Marina in Sestri Ponente.* Between the airport and the old shipyards where Italian transatlantic ships were built (and today cruising ships are constructed) there is a strip of land where precarious sport cabins jam around an aircraft factory and a water surface crowded with pleasure boats. Many plans have been made to rearrange this area and the final is still to come; but the new road now under construction can accelerate the finding of a solution. This is the ideal place for a large marina and for a resort area connected to the airport that can also satisfy the needs of Sestri (a population of 60.000 and a centre for the growing ICT industry -see above- without any sport and leisure facility).

*The museums in Nervi.* Nervi, the most eastern suburb of Genoa, was one of the first resort of the Mediterranean (a place with an exceptional mild climate where the European aristocrats of the 19<sup>th</sup> century used to spend their winter vacations) and has always maintained a good provision of hotels, restaurants and luxury shops. Nervi accommodates three museums of modern art in old villas surrounded by luxuriant parks that face the sea. The renovation of the museums has almost been completed as a part of a wider project for making Nervi an high place of the tourist offer and the culture entertainment of the city.

These examples show how the waterfront is often conceived as the front line for starting urban regeneration; but being so strategic, it attracts any kind of activities and is coveted by every promoter. A big argument is taking place now regarding what to do of the artificial peninsula of the steel factory of Cornigliano, located between the airport and the industrial port built in the 1950's, the only steel plant surviving and still functioning in the city. The present occupant, one of the biggest steel producer in Italy, wants to renovate the plants; population wants to stop steel production and asks for a compensation, after years of smokes suspected to have killed hundreds people; port operators want the area to be converted to ship trade; the administration is worried for the jobs that can be lost by removing the steel factory.

Definitely, waterfront is the field of confrontation among the different ideas about the City future: should land reclamation continue or stop? should development be intended as output growth or as improvement of the quality of life? must the economy be turned to culture and tourism or a solid industrial base is still necessary? does traditional industry deserve a place or attention must be paid only at high-tech productions? These are major items in the present debate.

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