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Waterfront regeneration in front of heritage protection: challenges and opportunities in Catania waterfront

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Abstract

Catania waterfront identity is based on spatial relationships between the “Late Baroque Towns of the Val di Noto” UNESCO site and the infrastructures – rail and harbour – that are in front of the XVI century city wall.

Many realised and ongoing regeneration projects in this area (will) have impacts on cultural heritage. Protecting the cultural heritage will be critical to the promotion of a sense of identity and it should be a part of a further development that balances transformations with heritage protection. Like in some realised projects – “Le Ciminiere” expo centre and Old Customs building restoration – this will be relevant in “Archi della Marina” viaduct ongoing regeneration project.

This is the focus in Catania case study of the ESPON targeted research “ENSURE - European Sustainable Urbanisation through port city Regeneration”.

The research has analysed the ongoing transformations in Catania historical waterfront, inspiring some solutions for regeneration project, based on a good practice framework drafted by the research group (RAMBOLL sa, School of Geography at University College Dublin, Department of Architecture at University of Palermo).

Keywords: waterfront, port cities, urban regeneration, medium sized cities

1. Introduction: history and context

1.2 Catania: a long-life city

Catania is a medium-sized city of Eastern Sicily, the second in demographic dimension after the regional Capital city Palermo. It is the main city of the Metropolitan City of Catania, one of the ten biggest cities in Italy, and the seventh largest metropolitan area in Italy [1], [2]. The population of the urban area is 320,000 while the population of the Metropolitan City amounted to 1,116,168 inhabitants as in ISTAT census 2011.

Catania was founded in the 8th century BC by Chalcidians from Naxos and it has had a continuous life until today. In 1434, the first University in Sicily was established in the city and in the 14th century, through the Renaissance period, Catania was one of Italy's most important cultural, artistic and political centres [3].

Its historical centre is very important for the presence of Greco-Roman buildings (thermal baths, theatre, *odeion*, and the second amphitheatre in Italy after Colosseum in Rome) [4] and for late Baroque urban tissues.

Despite it occupies the central position of the Gulf of the same name, the city of Catania does not have a secure natural harbour. The frequent and violent storm surges eliminated any attempt to protect artificially the current site, until the project of King Alfonso de Aragon in XVII century, but Etna fury was added to the fury of the sea [5].

The very large front of the 1669 lava flow reduced the surface of the port area: actually, citizens had wished that the lavas formed a sort of loop, so as to make up for the lack of a natural harbour, but it was a vain hope. Only at the end of the arduous process of reconstruction of the city, razed to the ground by an earthquake in 1693, the problem of the construction of the port was faced in a modern way [6].

Since 1792 the implementation of the “Zahara” project by the Bourbon government had allowed to build a first arm of the outer dock, but only in 1872 the competition induced by the increased demands

of commercial traffic, following the development of steam navigation, led to the realisation of the "Fiocca" project.

Really it was completed after many years, in the early 1900s when the local administration faced the landfill problem, which needed an urgent intervention because of the increase in cabotage. Since 1912 the construction of the "south pier" (Molo di Mezzogiorno in Italian) has started, and it was completed in 1933. With the great works undertaken over the years from 1933 to 1938 the port of Catania took on its modern shape.

At last, the relocation of the fishing port allowed the connection by rail of the new Crispi pier with the Central station.

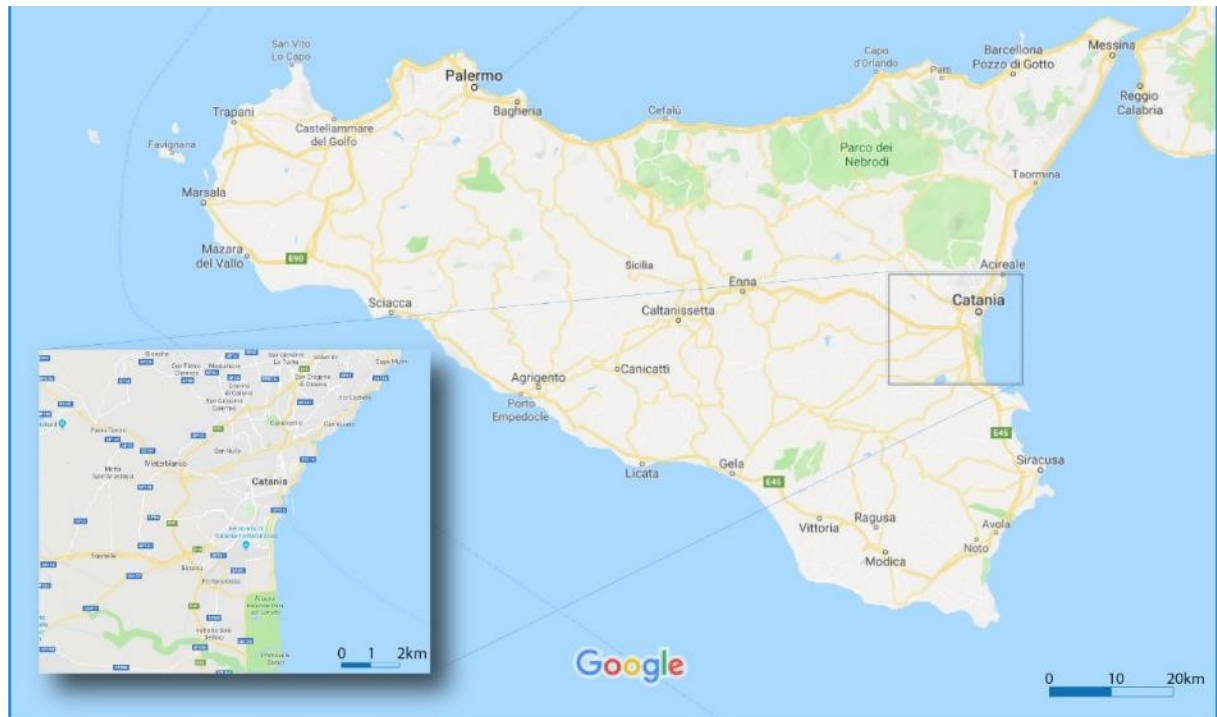


Fig. 1: Map of Sicily, zooming on the Eastern coast, Ionian Sea. Source: Author, based on Google Maps.

1.2 The Late Baroque in Val di Noto serial site characters in Catania harbour identity

In 2002 many late baroque buildings in Catania were admitted into the WHL of UNESCO, in the "serial site" called "Late Baroque in *Val di Noto* (South-east of Sicily)" [7].

The Late Baroque Towns of the Val di Noto is comprised of buildings and urban tissues located in eight towns in south-eastern Sicily: Catania is one of these (the others are Caltagirone, Militello Val di Catania, Modica, Noto, Palazzolo Acreide, Ragusa and Scicli). These historic centres and urban environments reflect the great, post-seismic rebuilding realised in the decades following the catastrophic earthquake of 1693, which ravaged towns across south-eastern Sicily. The rebuilding, restoration and reconstruction of these communities resulted in the creation of an exceptional group of towns, all reflecting the late Baroque architecture of the 17th century in all its forms and applications [8]. The eight towns of the property differ in size and represent a range of responses to the rebuilding needs. Only a specific urban area of Catania is included in the serial site, because Catania was rebuilt on the site of the original town and so many buildings were simply restored, while others were rebuilt in the new baroque style.

The city exhibits a plethora of late Baroque art and architecture of high quality and of a remarkable homogeneity as a result of the circumstances of time, place, and social context in which they were created. However, it also displays distinctive innovations in the town planning and urban rebuilding. The property also represents a considerable collective undertaking in response to a catastrophic seismic event and the new Baroque urban plan for Catania is the result of the 1693 earthquake in this region and the strongest reaction to the risk from earthquakes and eruptions of Mount Etna.

The late baroque properties in Catania are owned by the Church, the Italian State and local Government authorities, and the entire property is identified in the town plan as Historical Centre Zone (called 'A' zone in Italian law), where the existing urban and architectural heritage can be submitted

only to rehabilitation and maintenance works that fully respect the historic and cultural vocation of the town.



Fig. 2: Eruption from Etna in 1669, as painted by Giacinto Platania [6].

1.3 The early XX century transformation along the city walls

Many late baroque buildings are in front of the ancient harbour, among others the Prince Biscari Palace, the Archbishop's Palace, the Cathedral, are in front of the sea, but in harbour area from the XIX century to the early XX century a new rail viaduct changed the skyline, and consequently the shoreline.

Consequently, the three late baroque buildings over the city wall (Biscari Palace, Archbishop's Palace, and Cathedral) were separated from the harbourside.

Despite in this context, and currently, the activities of protection and valorisation of historical centre of Catania are mandatory in face of the challenge of waterfront regeneration, for twenty years local stakeholders have been trying to start a new regeneration season for urban waterfront [9, 10].

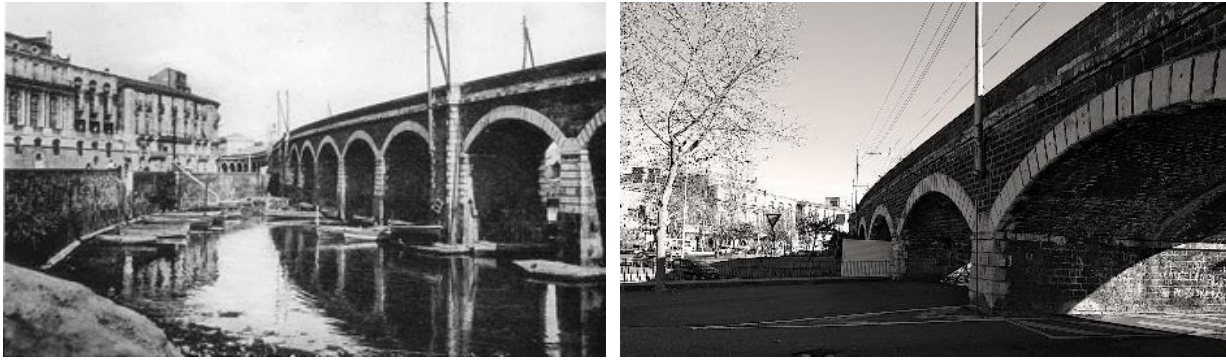


Fig. 3: The waterfront, in a 1912 picture and in a contemporary view. On the left in both images, the Biscari Palace as “beacon” over the ancient harbour.

2. Materials and methods: the assessment of central waterfront transformations

The regeneration of Central waterfront is mainly reliant on the realisation of the approved project for the railway line by-pass and the possible implementation of the results from a recent urban design competition for the regeneration of the waterfront [11, 12]. Furthermore, some completed interventions have not been able to trigger a regeneration of this area. These are:

- the “**Old Customs Building**”, **refurbished** in 2011 by Port Authority as a filter security area for cruise tourists, and not properly a cruise terminal. It is not part of a plan, but only a sort of “beacon” to stimulate the transformation.
- the “**Mulino Santa Lucia**” **former mill building** purchased in the early 2000s by the *Acqua Marcia* group and transformed into a business centre, with offices and shops. After many legal disputes about the administrative regularity of the project, since 2016 the building has been again available to the owners, but it has suffered the action of vandals and disrepair of the last ten years, and so it is not actually usable.

2.1. New RFI “railway bypass” program

With the aim of putting at least a partial remedy to the *caesura* between the sea and the historical centre, defined by the “Archi della Marina” viaduct, RFI, Rete Ferroviaria Italiana, over the last few decades, had proposed a design hypothesis, within the scope of realisation of a by-pass line, which provided for the burying the rail tracks along the Caito cliff as well as the central station [13, 14]. In 2013, RFI formally started working on four new planning options shared with the Municipality and finally the new solution, called “Porto 3”, was approved by the City Council on May 10th, 2018.



Fig. 4: “Porto 3” solution for Catania railway hub (2018). Source: RFI (2018), downloaded by <http://catania.mobilita.org/opere/passante-ferroviario-nodo-di-catania/> (accessed on 2019/01/03)

The negotiation activities put in place for choosing the final solution is described by each interviewed stakeholder as an important innovation in procedures to define the project, and all stakeholders agree on the success of the negotiation process, based on a steering committee. The main aspects that characterise the new solution, in a 4,790 m long path, are strongly related with the regeneration of port city interface area along the city wall of the historical centre:

- Improvement of the entrance to the “Duomo/Porto” stop from Piazza Paolo Borsellino.
- Transformation of the disused railway viaduct section between Piazza Borsellino and Castello Ursino into a cycle / pedestrian area aimed at favouring the continuity of the urban fabric spaces.

The new railway line and the new stations project, in the aboveground parts, will also be affected by interventions of the redevelopment of the waterfront and of the interaction areas of the city with the port and the railway.

2.2. The competition for waterfront port-city interface

In 2019, the Municipality of Catania has proposed a call for tenders for a program of urban redevelopment that could integrate the interaction areas of the City of Catania with the port district and the railway.

The call for tender was aimed at defining an "optimal methodology" for the redevelopment of the entire urban waterfront.

Unfortunately, the results have not been published: the results should be used by Municipality of Catania and the Port Authority as a suggestion for the redevelopment.

3. Results: regeneration process, project and outcomes

Taking into account the state of transformation, there are not many outcomes, defined as direct results of the regeneration process. However, as result of the analysis, this paragraph describes them and tries to define the elements necessary to complete the regeneration. For the last 25 [15, 16] years we have had no systematic realisation of all the outcomes of planned projects and programs. Typical reasons for the lack of outcomes are:

- A drafted project or programme has not been approved and implemented.
- A project has been stopped by judicial proceedings for supposed illicit activities.
- A building refurbishment was not completed due to external problems, for example, a funding problem.

Table 1 summarises the objectives and concrete outcomes of the regeneration process in the central waterfront port area.

Table 1: Overview of the objectives and outcomes of the regeneration of central waterfront area.

Objective	Expected outcome	Realised Y/N
Restoration and new function of the Old Customs building in multifunctional commercial space	An interesting space for sharing activities between port and the city, but useful only with cruise tourism flow	Y
Social policies and urban regeneration activities in support of physical restoration of the historic centre of Catania	Some outcomes produced by Urban EU programme, but only during life of the programme.	Y
Integration between the port, the railway and the city for the enhancement of urban facilities	Still no outcomes. Waiting for accompanying actions.	N
Moving from viaduct to the underground level of railway line from Central Station to Acquicella Station, including new underground Port rail station	Still no outcomes. Waiting for accompanying actions.	N
Strengthening and specialization of the ports of Catania and Augusta	Still no outcomes. Waiting for accompanying actions.	N
New public spaces in the city-port border areas	Still no outcomes. Waiting for accompanying actions.	N
Moving from viaduct to the underground level of railway line from Central Station to Acquicella Station, including new underground Port railstation	Still no outcomes. Waiting for accompanying actions.	N

The only realised and operating transformation is the refurbishment of “Old Customs Building”, into the Port District. It is not the outcome of a complete regeneration plan, but a “beacon” produced by Port Authority to stimulate the transformation.

This transformation produced a security area that connects a cruise tourist area to the city centre with a little commercial area and incoming services; it hosted the museum of local puppets theatre, called “Opera dei Pupi”, but the owners decided to transfer the museum.



Fig. 5: The interior courtyard of the Old Customs transformed in public space that introduces to the waterfront (photo: Daniele Ronsivalle, 2019)

4. Discussion: the economic, social and other impacts

Impacts are here defined as the indirect, medium- and long-term results of the regeneration. Due to the timing over a long period, long-term impacts are not visible. However, the potential impacts of the planned and ongoing regeneration over the coming years are discussed below, in terms of:

- Attraction of new functions - The Old Customs Building for some years after opening has been place of many commercial and recreational activities, but remains isolated from the city centre, due to presence of the “Archi della Marina” viaduct that is cutting the transversal connection between port and the city. Other functions could be attracted in the buildings that are abandoned to date, e.g. the former mill “Mulino Santa Lucia”.
- Preservation of city port heritage - Many realised and ongoing projects (will) have impacts on port heritage. Protecting the cultural heritage will be critical to the promotion of a sense of identity and it should be a part of a further development that balances transformations with heritage protection. This will be relevant in “Archi della Marina” viaduct regeneration project in relation to the historical centre.
- Urban quality - The urban design frameworks along all the waterfront suggest that it will become a live-work-play-visit destination, but the creation of a sense of place is critical to ensure development momentum is sustained and increased. Despite the UNESCO site property and the Old Customs Building, the waterfront area is still today a “peripheral place” due to many incomplete regeneration projects. Therefore, the abandoned areas and buildings that are expected to be transformed, implicate negative impact, e.g. squatting, crime, etc.
- Changes in the mental maps of the city - All the ongoing transformation will contribute to change the mental map of the city, but in particular, we need to consider the potential effects of “Archi della Marina” viaduct transformation into a cycle / pedestrian area: it is a landmark in the waterfront area and its transformation will aim at favouring the continuity of the urban fabric spaces from the rail station to the Ursino Castle and from the harbour to the historical centre. The changed use of the viaduct will definitively modify the mental map of the port city. Thanks to the next improvement of Augusta port and to a new Special Economic Zone area, port activity relocation could contribute to reconnecting the central waterfront to the historical centre.

- Regional, national and international impacts - The programmes for infrastructural updating have produced relevant impacts on the accessibility to the city centre from the hinterland and the ongoing programmes about national railway and the update of port handling areas will contribute to improve the relevance of the port in EU transport policies, while the relocation of some port activities to Augusta port could change the regional relevance of Catania port.

5. Conclusions: suggestions and lesson learned

The pace at which redevelopment has been occurring, has not increased and this is generally due to delays in the **urban and port planning**. The importance of an updated local planning framework, inspired by a new development paradigm [17–19] that is supportive of local ambitions and help to protect the UNESCO properties, has become apparent in relation to Catania. In particular only the 2019 Strategic Document of General Town Plan will provide the context within which more strategic planning can now occur across the port and city district and further across the metropolitan area. The new General Town Plan strategies require that all waterfront regeneration should be in a harmony: this may be a game changer in terms of planning for the central waterfront, as there is potential to put much more emphasis on old harbour redevelopment, and perhaps a sequential planning approach, as a core strategy for the city. In particular, the results of the recent architectural competition for the waterfront should be integrated into the choices in urban planning with a complete technical and economic feasibility process.

In this renewed planning activity, citizens' involvement is no less important both in idea generation and in implementation steps. The results of involvement activities need to help ensuring an in-depth, well-timed assessment of the needs and preferences of the citizens and users for potential planning elements.

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