Harbouring design: reclaiming civic margins in port cities

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Abstract

This paper presents ongoing research on several geographically diverse but topographically distinct port cities of differing scale and settlement history: Genoa, Oslo and Hobart.

In considering the landform setting of these port / city environments the author recognises that in order to re-consider the traditional ‘harbouring’ role of ports, diverse layers need to be considered, including their underlying geo-morphologies providing a foundation to subsequent ‘urban’ morphologies.

The paper is mindful of the relationship identified by Levi Strauss, when referring to an image of 18th century ports, that their value lay in a relationship that still existed at the time, where a port was ‘a human settlement which did not completely destroy, but rather gave pattern to, the natural relationships between geology, geography and vegetation, and thus offered an exceptional kind of reality, a dream – world in which we can find refuge’.

Re-engaging the spatial identity of the port, as part of the extended civic domain of each city, is a common strategy and design consideration.

The principal case study is Sullivan’s Cove, the historic port focus of the City of Hobart and its region, and the evolved spatial layers, which progressively inform urban design policy across its diverse scales.

Introduction

For the first time in history the majority of people live in towns and cities. By 2050 it is anticipated this will rise to two thirds of the world’s population (UN Habitat Report 2006). Although nature and human perception are indivisible, (Schama 1995: 6) this trend, notwithstanding environmental implications, will further accentuate the perceived separation of nature and culture. Deeply ingrained in the cultural development of the city, and rather than acknowledging the continuum of nature, this duality implies wilderness at one pole and the city at the other.

In founding the early city, Rykwert for example refers to the process of loss when the act of enclosing a piece of ground ‘broke the texture of nature by cutting it out of the continuity of landscape’ (Rykwert 2000:13). By contrast the contemporary city’s natural environment and its urban form, when taken together, comprise a record of the interaction between natural processes and human purpose over time (Spinn 1985: 12). As the evolution of the city and its architecture becomes ‘the shape of the earth as it is modified by mankind’ (Scully 1991:1) so it also expresses the terrain of experience, the landscape of nature.

The outcome of this will constitute more than the processes of physical planning, it will reflect not just mind, but also spirit. Those cities where the landscape of nature is still strongly present can offer specific insight to this process. The terrain of experience in these locations is one where the margin between an encompassing nature, and settlement itself, (be that rural or urban) is not only readily apparent, it is constantly being negotiated.

There is a desire in the contemporary era to bring attention to sustaining regional eco systems that lie beneath existing urban infrastructure. Remnant landscapes and settlement patterns are being uncovered, re-viewed and interpreted. Nowhere is this morphological process more focussed than in those locations that have traditionally harboured settlement.

In referring to an image of 18th century French ports Claude Levi–Strauss suggests their value lay in a relationship that still existed at the time where a port was ‘a human settlement which did not completely destroy, but rather gave pattern to, the natural relationships between geology, geography and vegetation, and thus offered an exceptional kind of reality, a dream – world in which we can find refuge’ (in Crowe 1995: 205)

At this time the city and its port still evoked a sense of enclosure within the landscape. The ‘new’ industrial landscape of the city did not truly assert itself until the 19th century. It has been suggested (Meyer 1999: 24) that as this evolution occurred, the port and the city enter a new relationship with each other and with the landscape, forming as it were, the ‘urban landscape’.

In the largely enclosed system of the pre modern port city, the harbour was the final destination of the transportation route, and the ports infrastructure was organised within the enclosed character of the city. This system was replaced by one of maximal openness, in which the port became a link in a long transportation chain and was provided therefore, with a largely linear form of organization. The port was no longer laid out in the city but next to the city (Meyer 1999: 21).

Further analysis gestures to how the (port) city lost its compact shape (and its orientation towards the historical city centre), to take on the appearance of a network where port and city are
divided into specialised fragments, spread out across the territory of the original landscape (Meyer 1999: 23).

Evolving from the entrepot port, where goods are stored and traded within the city, to the transit and then the industrial port, where port and city become increasingly autonomous, the role today is one where the ports have in effect been ‘rediscovered’ by the city as part of the urban landscape. When this process is considered in landscapes where topographic constraints exist, the results are not only less linear and predictable, they also suggest locally specific (urban) design principles.

Reference will be made to three geographically diverse port cities of differing scale: Genoa, Oslo and Hobart. Their spatial identities have evolved from their geo-morphological and topographic features. Assisted by their built form, these have developed to strongly identify not just the port, but the city and its region.

Each city has developed urban (design) frameworks acknowledging the relationship between the city and the extensive field of port operations.

While far from an exhaustive list, an initial assessment, where the natural force of the land is strongly expressed, and where efforts have been made to define peripheries, suggest some common activities and design themes.

It will be suggested that in response to their settings, each of the cities are:

‘Harbouring Design’, by responding to the landform and the natural focus of the water-plane, they are also: ‘Reconsidering Margins’ both within their port and their city. As a result they are: ‘Resolving the tension in public space’ through their waterfront areas.

Against these activities and encompassing design themes, a number of principles emerge which are also common to each. One city will be used to explore each theme, although they are inter-changeable and should be cross-referenced.

Genoa

Urban Design Activity: ‘Harbouring Design’

Design Theme: Each city uses its waterfront to reflect contemporary ideas of the city, its society and culture Design Principle to pursue: Port as cultural process

Each city is generated in the landscape. In Genoa’s case (now a city of nearly a million inhabitants) its streets and public space, carved out of the Ligurian coastline, have never been able to ignore the constraints of the territory and its geography. Established in Roman times at the mouth of five streams which run through the natural amphitheatre of the coastal arc, and on land rising to approximately 500 metres, the town was by the eleventh century, an independent municipality. In the mid 12th century against the threat of invasion, the city closed itself in a circle of new walls.

Its general appearance, from this time until the industrial expansions of the 19th century and the increasing separation of city and port, remained substantially unchanged (Marshall 2001: 101).

In a city where there were no large areas representing central government, the port was the built part of the city with the greatest collective significance (Meyer 1999: 116). In this respect the port became the principal public, or collective area of the city, with a representational or civic function.

Figure 2: The collective significance, and civic focus, of the port has long been recognised in Genoa. Photo: Leigh Woolley, 2005.

Landform, supported progressively by built form, combine to accentuate the pivotal role of the port environs as the primary civic domain of the city.

A chronic shortage of space was partly remedied by a remarkable piece of 19th century urbanism, the terrazzi di marmo (the marble terraces) – an enormous entrepot some 410 metres in length containing warehouses and shops. On the roof, a public boulevard became a favourite space for both residents and visitors – a public facility unequalled in the world at that time.

Figure 3: The nineteenth century entrepot (warehouses with terrace above) sought to reunite city and port c.1880. Photo: Consorzio Autonomo del Porto di Genova, pub. 2000.

This principle of uniting city and port (an ongoing challenge for the municipality) was at this time achieved by means of an urban balcony. Later, even more innovative urban gestures and ambitious plans were required to reconcile the local needs of the city for civic space, and the expanding global demands of the port. The port’s principal aim in recent times has been to develop the traffic line between Europe and Asia (Marshall 2001: 109).

Genoa was the first Italian city to have a port master plan that, together with the city’s general master plan, has made it possible to develop urban and strategic planning of the city region for the near future.

Expansion of the port at the regional scale (and also as national infrastructure) meant establishing a collaborative ‘cultural’ process to retain its intense local focus. The approach meant procuring expertise from noted design practitioners, whose
concepts imagine the port as a series of complex places, integrating port and waterfront into a complete idea of the city (Piano 2004).

The planning interface therefore remains dynamic and challenging with the public administration embarking on complex and ambitious plans to ‘redesign’ the waterfront. Establishing public and tourist infrastructure, while maintaining regional, city-wide and port traffic flows, has expanded the scale of design considerations.

The city now extends along a 35 km coastline of which some 25 km are devoted to port activities. The result is a city and a port whose spatial identity continues to evolve as a built topography, in response to, and as an expression of, the regions geo-morphological constraints.

**Oslo**

Urban Design Activity: Resolving the tension within public space

Design Theme: To mitigate disconnection between city and port, each city has reconsidered the civic role of its public space

Design principle to pursue: Uniting city and port

Oslo, with a population of around 525,000 is one of the oldest capital cities of northern Europe. Eight rivers run through the built up area connecting the higher ground of the adjacent forests within the city boundaries (approximately 700 metres elevation) with the deep water of the fjord.

The municipality has actively sought to limit peripheral growth in order to maintain its vegetated perimeter and its image as a ‘blue/ green’ city - the ‘blue’ of the fjord and the ‘green’ of the forested hills.

By pursuing a comprehensive urban development strategy with a prescribed building zone, development limits are determined. Together with this urban ‘intensification’, comes a more focused appreciation of those natural features and characteristic landscapes which underpin the city’s urban structure. As a result waterways and other natural edges, including their reclaimed port spaces, are being intensively reconsidered and re-vitalised.

A legacy of the city’s more recent seafaring history - rail lines, freeways and freight and passenger terminals – had formed a barrier between the city and the fjord (Department of Planning and Building, Oslo 1997).

With the closing of vehicular traffic at the City Hall Square, a renewed connection was realised in 1994 with a civic forecourt and promenade. The city’s busiest street has been tunneled, providing both a visual and functional connection from the civic centre to the edge of the fjord and its local passenger ferries. Level pedestrian connection to the redeveloped former shipyard area of Aker Brygge, and dating from the mid 1980’s, provides an extended civic domain and public focus.

The expanded strategy, the Fjord City Resolution (City of Oslo 2006), however goes much further. Aimed at making the city one of the world’s most sustainable capitals, it now seeks to relocate other transport and cargo areas currently located along the waterfront. Construction of a further 675 m long sub sea tunnel will remove existing motorway traffic from the next major precinct. Divided into 14 project areas, this will release a further 225 ha for mixed-use urban development, stretching over more than 12 km.

The result of defining the urban margin has been to generate a vital city core, consolidated port facilities and a more accessible waterfront.

**Hobart**

Urban Design Activity: ‘Reconsidering margins’

Design Theme: In struggling with its topography, each city seeks to ensure the ‘naturalness’, which underpins its culture, is not lost

Design principle to pursue: Topography as culture

Hobart, capital of the state of Tasmania, is one of only a handful of ports at latitude 42º south or below. In this context its population of 200,000 makes it one of the few substantial cities at this locale.

A drowned rift valley focuses the dwelling region. The urban character derives largely from the relationship of contained, developed low ground in contrast to undeveloped high ground. The resulting vegetated backcloth, counter-posed by the extensive water-plane of the river and harbour, provides the dominant image and regional datum.

The sense of scale and proportion provided by nature has a powerful presence in this setting. It provides deep prospects and constant orientation within the layers of the landform. The natural urban focus provides both ‘containment’ (by virtue of...
the high ground) and ‘release’ (across the water-plane of the harbour). The ‘inner harbour’ and the historic port (Sullivans Cove) exist as a counter-points to the wider embrace of the ‘outer’ harbour (the River Derwent).

No other nineteenth century trading port in Australia is as substantially intact as Sullivans Cove. The concentration of items of cultural significance, make it a place of national significance. (Shelton / Woolley 2000: 15)

The experience of, and movement across the land, is intensified in this setting by its diverse terrain. The movement of water has helped shape the land and now provides an interpretive experience of it. When following the alignment of the principal watercourse from high ground to harbour (the Hobart Rivulet), an opportunity is revealed to appreciate urban structure beyond built artefact.

While the course of the rivulet, from mountain to cove, is now largely obscured by the urban blocks that came later, its generative influence on the urban pattern of the city remains formative (Woolley 1991: 3.20). While the densest urban blocks respond to the landform and accentuate adjacent ridges, the rivulet has ‘become’ the city as it has assisted in forming the space and urban pattern of the central area.

Accordingly the central area can be interpreted as a ‘basin’ bisected by the rivulet trough, the outfall of which is the low ground of Sullivans Cove. It further confirms the sense of the city as a topographic experience, with the foundation of its urban structure generated by the land beneath one’s feet.

Sullivans Cove: culturally significant spatial form.

Within Sullivans Cove the landform gives way to a reclaimed, and therein negotiated margin, between land and water. The built form substantiates the ‘harbouring’ role, and through this the identity of Hobart as a port city.

In contrast to the natural rise of the landform, which offers elevational scale and enclosure even at the regional scale, the reclaimed edge (now broadly identified by extensive concrete aprons) has come to offer the city its public frontage, as a differentiated realm. This distinction also assists appreciation of the passage of time by identifying and acknowledging pre-settlement margins. The reclaimed space is in contrast to the given landform, the margin of which is more or less identified by an edge of 19th century buildings. The interplay between these elements, the “floor” (as the horizontal plane of the aprons and water), and the “wall” (the 19th century buildings), now provides Sullivans Cove with its distinctive built spatial character.

The robust spaces in design and finish developed as an industrial surface suitable for port operations. This utilitarian character, requiring ease of movement, also offers flexibility and choice. This capacity for ‘change’ means that at different times of the year diverse activities occur in environments never designed for them. ‘The concept of something being civic lies somewhere between the private realm of one’s existence and the public domain of officialdom’ (Rowe 1997:66). Occupancy however temporary confers this status. Neither land nor pontoon, they provide a space apart – a multi-directional platform offering a built margin adjacent to the deep water of the port and by association, the ocean beyond.

Maintaining these surfaces as uncluttered, utilitarian spaces ensures a unique public platform for the city and the state. To do otherwise by significantly altering, appropriating or elevating them is to mis-understand their significance (Shelton / Wooley 2000: 29 -31). It is also to limit choice. The design intent therefore needs to allow for ‘changefulness’ or varied use, within the space, but not of the space. As their civic role increases so too does the pressure to beautify, and with it an implied completion. The management task, compelled by their increasing civic purpose, needs to maintain a dynamic ‘tension’ between the ‘raw’ (engineered state) and the process of change.

Hunter Street, (the ‘Old Wharf’) and its buildings are a case in point. They stand facing the Salamanca Place, (the ‘New Wharf’) or southern side of the cove, a bulwark to the elements and a three dimensional reminder of the necessity to create a causeway and breakwater to allow the port and the town to grow. Here the port apron (or quay) is still a public street indicating an unbroken connection to the early stage of port operations (that of the ‘entrepot’ port).

Probably more than any other space within the city, this still functioning quay is a built topography expressing the fusion of underlying landform (it is formed over the original Hunter Island) and pragmatic building, melded in the service of creating the port, and the city.

The tough, resilient space of the cove, particularly the concrete aprons, is synonymous with being in Hobart. They reinforce the contrasts within the scale of the place, and the sense of being ‘on the edge’. Their abrupt immediacy adjacent to deep water, gestures to the often harsh reality of confronting ever changing weather, and of the movement and harbouring of vessels within...
an oceanic landscape. They orient and help locate citizens, both within their city and the world.

Landform, assisted by built form, provides the means of negotiating the setting.

In contrast to the undulating terrain and relative formality of the city centre, the rawness of the cove is essential in maintaining its differentiated, working port functions and its distinct, yet idiosyncratic role as ‘civic’ space within Tasmania. Maintaining this spatial distinctiveness is a challenge for the city as, in parallel, is managing its high ground margins. 2

Conclusion

While ports and their waterfronts have in many places become synonymous with visions of exuberance (Marshall 2001: 97) the challenge is in not losing their essential functional character, derived in the first instance from the harbouring role of topography, then progressively developed through the engineered aesthetic of its working port functions.

By considering the layered morphologies of our ports and waterfronts we are reminded of how cities are made, and indeed how they can reveal the places in which settlement occurs. Their spatial identity, often developed in response to the force of the land, also magnifies the intersection of urban activities. In our waterfronts we not only find expression of our evolving spatial culture but we confront our urban nature.