

# The Cities of the Mediterranean are Reluctant to Lose Their Identities

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Light, essential and subtle, as were the invisible cities of Italo Calvino. According to their creators, the latest interventions on the public areas of Bologna salvage the singularity of each public place for the purpose of coexistence: rescue them from chaos and commotion, from the separation and segregation of activities, from the traffic and the unclear definitions. These interventions take the form of a series of so-called silent elements, which have been prudently introduced in the public areas of the city, after a meticulous investigation into the habits and customs of pedestrians. And also in Bologna, in a peripheral area, the old Mercato Navile has been reinvented and converted into a new centre, an area that is extremely well connected – to a new high speed railway station, a station of public transport networks, and which also functions, at a different level, as a link between adjacent neighbourhoods. In accordance with criteria of environmental efficiency, the centre applies new technologies of cogeneration, solar and photovoltaic panels and recycling systems. It is no coincidence that in many Mediterranean cities and regions further transformations similar to that of Bologna are being projected; in Turin for instance, the 2006 Winter Olympic Games are being used to propose several great projects of landscape recreation in areas occupied by railway infrastructures, such as has been affected in Cadiz, with the railway tunnel constructed under the new Avenue of Juan Carlos I. In the Veneto region, a Plan of Strategic Development for 32 municipi-

palities has been started, which will integrate physical and socio-economic aspects. The C2M group is based in Marseilles, and combines the cities of Marseilles, Lyons, Barcelona, Genoa, Seville, Malaga, Naples, Tunis and Casablanca in defining cooperation networks when Europe is occupied with the east rather than the south. At present, new projects and new types of urban, strategic, environmental and territorial plans are emerging, reinvigorating the old centres and re-urbanising the multiple and disperse peripheries, to ultimately reconnect fragmented areas and segregated uses, and to delimit and define each place before it can be swallowed up by a soulless and undifferentiated confusion of anonymous town planning. Although the overall Mediterranean landscape is no longer the balanced civilised landscape that it was, where opportunities were possible but excess was not the norm, in a modern world that has been rapidly urbanised, some traditional values of Mediterranean urban development are being re-evaluated: the cities are open to all flows and influences, and internally well-organised in areas of social and economic relations; they are able to absorb and integrate the diversity, in order to become unique, to continually recreate themselves to evolve while never losing their particular identity. Perhaps the reason for the re-evaluation of the ideals of the Mediterranean city is that these attributes are in danger of extinction. At the beginning of the XXI century, all the cities of the Western World, that are submerged in technological and demographic revolutions that have accelerated its activities and sense of urgency, want to resemble, Mediterranean cities, particularly those which indeed used to

be just that. The fact that the ideals of a Mediterranean life-style and habitat still prevail, and moreover seem more attractive than ever, due to a horror of modern excess and its capacity to continuously evolve and self-organise, integrating tendencies and places, the open with the closed, is perfectly compatible with the fact that our cities have been radically altered during the second half of the XXth century. In the especially fragile territory, which include precarious vegetation, mountainous landscapes, and without abundance of natural resources, urban growths have taken place of a suburban and peri-urban nature – it has also been considered para-urban – which break away from the traditional discourses in town planning. And meanwhile the most depopulated inland areas are host to isolated rural-urban activities such as electric power stations, military research centres or scrap yards and other industrial recycling plants, golf courses, and fields of crops cultivated according to subsidised programmes of the CAP. How should we manage the agricultural and forest landscape when it ceases to be economically profitable and the public subsidies are inclined to give priority to the conservation of the good agronomic conditions of the soil rather than to production itself?

At present, after experiencing processes of suburbanisation, peri-urbanisation, de-urbanisation, rural-urbanisation and other similar developments, the Mediterranean landscape seems fragmented in its specialised usages, organised according to a network and global market logic rather than to geographic proximity. Thematic parks such as Port Aventura in Catalonia or Terra Mítica in Valencia operate in the same way as any other international thematic park. They have

## WEB SITES OF INTEREST ON MEDITERRANEAN CITIES AND NETWORKS

### EUROCITIES:

[www.eurocities.org](http://www.eurocities.org)

### MEDCITIES:

[www.medicities.org](http://www.medicities.org)

MedRegio, Southern and Mediterranean Regions:

[www.medregio.org](http://www.medregio.org)

### Cyburbia:

[www.cyburbia.org](http://www.cyburbia.org)

European Urban Research Association:

[www.eura.org](http://www.eura.org)

METREX - The Network of European Metropolitan Regions and Areas:

[www.eurometrex.org](http://www.eurometrex.org)

European Council of Town Planners:

[www.ceu-ectp.org/e/index.html](http://www.ceu-ectp.org/e/index.html)

Société Française des Urbanistes (SFU):

[www.urbanistes.com](http://www.urbanistes.com)

Asociación Española de Técnicos Urbanistas:

[www.aetu.es](http://www.aetu.es)

Sustainable Cities Network

[www.hull.ac.uk/geog/research/html/suscity.html](http://www.hull.ac.uk/geog/research/html/suscity.html)

Mediterranean Network of Wastewater Reclamation and Reuse

[www.med-reunet.com](http://www.med-reunet.com)

Centre de Documentation de l'Urbanisme

[www.urbanisme.equipement.gouv.fr/cdu/index.htm](http://www.urbanisme.equipement.gouv.fr/cdu/index.htm)

Associazione Nazionale degli Urbanisti e dei Pianificatori Territoriali e Ambientali (ASSURB)

[www.urbanisti.it](http://www.urbanisti.it)

exclusive railway services and hotels and their iconography recreates global stereotypes. Along with the appearance of these extra-urban, tourist, scientific or logistic parks, many urban centres are thematised and old paths and sea fronts eventually become stereotypical places, and common tourist areas, because the competition of the tourist industry compels us to make each place offer typical specialist facilities to the rest of the world. Although the Mediterranean landscape has changed radically in the last 30 or 40 years, at present the idyllic image is kept alive, as another layer to the many superimposed layers of urbanisation; from the tertiary, commercial and tourist areas to the science parks that are connected to the trans-European communication and transport networks, and the more or less polycentric regional networks of cities made up of old and new districts. That is why Mediterranean cities are projecting themselves without nostalgia or mysticism in order to maintain as much as possible their Mediterranean identity as open and memorable. The recent debates on the town planning organisation of the Mediterranean cities, brought together in the congress of European town planners held in April 2003, show us that we must learn to observe the cities in a different way. The networks of infrastructure currently function as the nervous system of the cities; through which people and goods, electric energy, gas, water and information circulate and interconnect at all levels, and which is converted into the neuralgic system that connects all these activities. Moreover, the cities themselves constitute interconnection points of ubiquitous networks that extend all over the whole planet. And it is possible that these de-urbanised contemporary landscapes have generated discontinuous, simplistic and unconnected geometries with more and more segregated uses,

specialised networks of disparate logics, chaotic landscapes with unnecessary environmental costs, almost irreversible. But what is the nature of the order that we want to restore? Today, this order is the result of attending to the successive connections at different levels, and like the geometry that supports all living forms, is fractal. To connect and reconnect these spaces at all levels is in fact what the current Mediterranean cities intend, through projects aimed at all levels, in order to facilitate the emergence of social networks, networks to channel any type of flow that guarantees the efficiency of the system, ecological networks to ensure the environmental quality and security, and a certain sense of the memory and the identity of each place in order to recreate new cities without false nostalgia that are both open to external influences and capable of facilitating diversity and the spontaneous interaction of their inhabitants. Where else can Bologna, Turin, Marseille and many other Mediterranean cities turn to, in order to continue this identity? There are little-known episodes of the Mediterranean urban history, such as the nineteenth century enlargements in Turin, Valencia, San Sebastián, Bari or Barcelona, which emerge today as possible suggestions for organisation – imposed geometries that assisted in the decentralised growth processes that with the passing of time will organise themselves to produce non-traditional urban forms that will nevertheless be capable of conserving the same values of reception and internal organisation, and maintain the capacity for the traditional complexity. So perhaps the Mediterranean cities, more complex and open to any types of flows, and especially to new waves of migration, also need to recreate their former common neutral places – deliberately unfinished public areas where citizens can meet on im-

pulse and which they can make their own. And perhaps they also require particular references that bring a purpose to the larger indistinct areas of the peripheries, the blurred borders between private and public areas. We need to pay more attention to the filters between areas than to rigid borders between them, and to concern ourselves less with the forms of occupation and more with the strategies of transformation and the levels of quality and environmental security. The situation requires, in the end, the reconciliation of flows and places, to reinvent cities that are both open to external influence and densely articulated internally. This is the inherent order, and the structure that supports all the living organisms. The common denominator of the projects and hopes of the Mediterranean cities of today is to not cease to be, despite everything. But the most important still remains: that the possibility of order must come from the voluntary decision of society to impose limits on its own ability, almost infinite, to occupy and transform the landscape. Without boundaries, as few and as unbreakable as the natural laws – the law of gravity or the laws of thermodynamics, there is no possibility of order. Insights have already been hazarded concerning the type of new limit that we could impose on ourselves, beyond the legislations of the conventional usages of land. Finally, we have not yet made sufficient advances in the incorporation of citizens into the definition and implementation of re-urbanisation plans and projects, through new authentically democratic participatory processes, at least with the intensity with which it has been instigated in the cities of the north of Europe. Perhaps this problem, which is found within the most basic structures of governance, and which is closely related to the new boundaries that our cities require, will be the issue of next year's report.