

3 Complexity on the urban waterfront

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The twentieth century has come to a close and we are left with an emblematic image of the end-of-the-century "city" which is difficult to connect with the one that opened this historic period in terms of continuity and development. The oldest parts have, of course, been conserved and almost always mark an identity, which has been maintained not only over the last hundred years but in some cases over the centuries. Without a doubt, some urban structures, such as the ports, are still recognizable, both because they have not shifted from their original positions and because they have maintained the profile and shape of places that are easily identified. Moreover, many pieces of infrastructure, such as certain roads or railway stations with their masses of rails, are still in place and highlight the lines of access to large urban conurbations, forming a sort of "framework" of the territory, often a leftover from the late nineteenth century.

The gradual process of growth of the nineteenth-century city came to an end with the urban extension which took place over the last century. This expansion led to the breakdown of the "forma urbis," determined in many European cities, for example, by the fragmentation of the defense apparatus which had "held in" and shaped the urban growth for centuries, both inside as well as outside the band of walls. However, even more surprising was the decline of the "industrial city," which took place in the second half of this century and was often both rapid and vast in scale, greatly modifying the image and structure of the twentieth-century city. These cities are in fact now defined as "post-industrial," a reality successive to the phase characterized by the growth of vast factories and imposing industrial complexes. The consequences of this passage are clear and weighty: firstly obsolescence, then the abandonment of vast industrial areas, buildings deserted, productive plants closed, with the relative problems of deterioration of both a physical and social nature of relevant portions of the urban fabric.

Many cities have reacted to this state of affairs with programs of regeneration and revitalization of the run-down areas, demonstrating that they have understood that the "post-industrial" phase cannot only be experienced through initiatives aimed at limiting the damage of the conclusion