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MAIN SECTION

A Creative Approach to the Port-City Relationship: the Case of Zones Portuaires in Genoa

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ABSTRACT

One of the goals of 2030 AIVP Agenda is to strengthen port-city relationship by “promoting and capitalising on the specific culture and identity of port cities and allowing residents to develop a sense of pride and flourish as part of a city port community of interest” (6th goal). In order to do that, AIVP suggests to encourage the creation of Port Centres, to provide, by any means, daily news and information on port and city life for residents, particularly young people and school students and to organise temporary or permanent cultural events in port areas. This paper aims at presenting the Zones Portuaires Genoa experience as a device which since 2015 has experimented with new methods for attending these objectives. The text will critically observe some projects that have been carried on within this process and will place them in the framework of a “research in action” approach.

KEYWORDS

Port, Research In Action, Festival, Recognition

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Introduction

Several initiatives exist all around the world, aimed at displaying, showing and promoting local forms of port-city culture, variously interpreted from the emic point of view of their makers as the heritage, identity, and excellence of a territory. These initiatives—port centers, museums, and festivals—are generally characterised by a broad consensus within the local communities and qualified by experts as the “best practices”¹ for thematizing port-city culture. Often, however, more than *thematizing* it, they take the shape of folkloric re-enactments and are aimed at *celebrating* local work traditions, historical activities or heritage, and as a matter of fact are more linked to the past than to the present of the port. In some cases, local city governments also bet “on improving attractiveness by strengthening maritime leisure facilities, cultural institutions and infrastructures [...] in many cases embedded into wider processes of change of image, attitude and identity and a considerable proportion of the public budget for culture is spent on such event and ‘festivalisation’ programmes.”² As temporary events, they catalyse waterfront revitalization³ without necessarily questioning the spatial, cultural and political border between the port and the city or the symbolic role of this pre-assumed port culture for citizens.

Starting from the idea that port-city culture cannot be abstractly assumed as an *a priori* concept, but has to be understood as a particular, site- and time-specific creation, the authors with this paper introduce a creative methodology for critically investigating the idea of contemporary port-city culture(s) while presenting Zones Portuaires experience in Genoa (ZPGE onwards): a reflexive device, shared and co-produced with local communities, which, through the *medium* of art, has been providing knowledge on the subject starting from the local Genoese dimension and opening to a larger scale through comparative projects. Since 2015, the authors have personally been at the initiative of ZPGE by experimenting a technique of action and creation research⁴ which exploits the makings of synesthetic, metaphoric and narrative methods for exploring the symbolic representations and the concepts that port communities adopt for speaking about themselves, their values and social relationships and for their strategic positioning both at the local and at the international scale.⁵ As we will see, an important break between the port and the city is supposed to exist in the discourse of many local Genoese players, and it is linked to the way

1 Patrizia Lupi, “Ti porto in porto. Best practices, culturali e didattiche, nei porti italiani”, *Portus Plus*, 11 (2011): 17.

2 Günter Warsewa, *The Transformation of European Port Cities: Final Report on the New EPOC Port City Audit* (IAW Forschungsbericht, 2006).

3 Simona Corradini, “Temporary Uses as Catalyst for Waterfront Revitalization”, *Portus Plus 2* (2011).

4 Alberta Giorgi, Micol Pizzolati, and Elena Vacchelli, *Metodi creativi per la ricerca sociale: contesto, pratiche, strumenti* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2021).

5 Günter Warsewa, *The Transformation of European Port Cities: Final Report on the New EPOC Port City Audit* (IAW Forschungsbericht, 2006).

many public institutions refer to the port and to its role within the city. In order to understand the reasons and to which extent this is specific to the city of Genoa, the work of ZPGE is focussed on better comprehending the port-city relationship. This relationship is here intended as a prerequisite for grasping the layered port-city culture's sense and the role of public communication, especially an institutional one, in orienting the feelings of belonging and recognition.⁶ While describing their methodology and the role of art as a trigger for letting representations emerge and express in the very port area, the authors point out the contribution of this research to the possible definition of a more general "port-city culture" as well as the pertinence of the use of creative technologies both for epistemologic and pragmatic purposes. As George Marcus says while introducing the proceedings of the meeting *Performance, art et anthropologie* at Quai Branly Museum in 2009: "Performance art delivers spectacle; ethnography now delivers descriptions as concepts about contemporary life as a scene of emergence, of social change toward an anticipated or definable near future. To do so, both need to engage actors as collaborators, create designs out of natural settings, show care for the audience as dynamic, as a public, and be aware of the ethics of staging". The production of knowledge could not be dissociated from the researchers' engagement to actively intervene for improving the functioning of the port-city relationship itself: this is the reason why epistemological and pragmatic purposes were actually aimed at converging. After an historical and theoretical contextualisation, the paper displays the different techniques adopted to involve local Genoese stakeholders in this process of content analysis and action through artistic creation.

Zones Portuaires: from the Festival to the Research Project

Originally, Zones Portuaires (ZP onwards) is a film festival focused on port-city images from all around the world; it was born in Marseille in 2010 thanks to the initiative of Emmanuel Vigne, film-maker holding a movie theater in the industrial site of Port-de-Bouc. Since it moved to Genoa in 2015—first as a retrospective project on the French edition—ZP progressively transformed into an interdisciplinary project aimed at exploring the peculiarity of port cities from a cultural point of view. Due to the respective personal paths of local promoters—the two authors of this paper, general managers of the initiative—the project has both an academic and an engaged approach, which tries to conjugate research activity with an effective action aimed at understanding and sharing port-city culture. As an independent initiative, it is autonomous from that of the Port Authority, as well as from any other local territorial institution, even if it has obtained technical and juridical approval and an active support in the consolidation

6 Charles Taylor, *The Politics of Recognition* (Princeton University Press, 1994).

phase, after some years since the first edition. ZP was implemented in Genoa by UniGE urban studies laboratory “Incontri in città” and the association U-BOOT Lab as the organisations which would have formally led the initiative; then, some other kinds of actors were involved, such as governmental administrations, port services, enterprises and associations. This large participation turned the original “festival” into a more complex device for territorial analysis and active community involvement. It now works to understand and promote the connection between port and city with a long-term research project, articulated in several actions: walks, sailing, guided tours, site specific productions of artistic exhibitions and performances, conventions, informal meetings. The scope and effectiveness of these actions have changed over time. While the climate of trust developed over the years allowed access to environments, data, and contacts that were initially unreachable, expectations regarding results have also become more ambitious in the involved communities, up to the general aim of recovering the disconnection between port and city in Genoa. This separation is taken for granted in the discourse of the most of the stakeholders the authors met. Since the beginning, they expected ZPGE to contribute to blurring it, as a prerequisite of their support. This put the researchers in an ambiguous position⁷: should they adhere to this purpose, and to which extent? The text explores this experience of recovering port-city continuity in a reflective way: with concrete examples to observe the functioning of the device implemented together with port communities and its outcomes, trying to grasp its scientific, cultural and social aspect in an integrated perspective. The diachronic dimension allows to understand how the different stakeholders shifted from a passive role to a stronger engagement in the process and, then, in the conceptualisation of a port-city culture.⁸

The Port-City Break in Genoa

From the administrative point of view, Genoa and its port became two separate entities at the founding of an autonomous port consortium in 1902, which officially marked the “formal break between the city and its port.”⁹ But if we look at the same object from an identitarian and cultural perspective, these two dimensions have long worked in a symbiotic, precisely until a few decades ago, when each family still counted a dock worker, sailor or ship owner as a relative. The “break” which port

7 In the article “Le « je » méthodologique. Implication et explicitation dans l'enquête de terrain”, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan explores the gains and the limits of such methodological positioning. Coherently with his approach, the authors acknowledge its epistemological potential and assume their involvement in the project as a non-ambiguous positioning.

8 For example, Port Authority's and Coast Guard's contribution was initially just delivering authorisations, but now it can also consist in the co-creation of performative actions aimed at promoting port-city relationship.

9 Felicitas Hillmann, “Big Ships on the Horizon and Growing Fragmentation at Home Genoa's Transformation of the Urban Landscape,” *Erdkunde*, 2008, 305

communities speak about as well as its effects, has to be found in more recent times. The progressive mechanisation of activities and an Italian urban vision that considers city and port as separate realities has deteriorated the connection in governance and daily practices, even if not from a cultural and symbolic point of view. The following section will explain this apparent contradiction.

The evolution of intermodal logistics has increasingly linked the port to the productive world of global industry rather than to the commercial world of the city. Workers in the port have decreased, partly as a result of the mechanisation of various tasks^{10 11} and partly because shipping companies are now more likely to employ their own staff for tasks that were previously attributed to the local workforce.¹² The Genoese people's knowledge of port work has faded; familiarity "from the sea's point of view," whether experienced by oneself or communicated by a close relative or acquaintance, has been lost. From this point forward there is a feeling of some form of loss, of a vanished public recognition. The role of port workers, which remains central to Genoa's economy, is not at all obvious to a large part of the population and humiliates the pride of some professions, which have historically been involved in political struggles and claims of primary importance in the city's memory. For example, it is generally well-known the role that Genoese dockers, called "camalli" played in the events of 30 June 1960, which then led to the fall of the Tambroni government.¹³ The event is remembered and celebrated every year by members of the Compagnia Unica as well as by anti-fascist militants in Genoa.

About twenty years later, when Genoa became interested in the process of urban and image transformation, administrators re-used the city's port identity for benchmarking. However, their focus was not placed on port work. In order to express the city's historical vocation for international openness, port identity was strategically recalled as a tool for city-marketing,

10 Maria Elisabetta Tonizzi, "Il porto di Genova: 1861-1970," *MEMORIA E RICERCA*, no. 11 (2002). Maria Elisabetta Tonizzi, *I Numeri e La Storia Del Porto Di Genova* (Unità Organizzativa Statistica, 2004).

11 Marco Caligari, "La ridefinizione del concetto di tempo: i portuali di Genova di fronte all'introduzione dei container (1969-1989)," *Storia e problemi contemporanei*. 13 (2013).

12 "The bridges used to be named after shipowners, and the shipowners were the big families of the city - explains a retired port worker in an interview - today we work for the multinational firms". Workers have got used to commonly referring to their superiors with expressions such as "the Japanese" or the "the ones from Singapore".

13 On June, 30th 1960, Genoese dockers were on the front line of the public protests against the congress of neo-fascist party MSI, planned in Genoa on the following day, and against the inclusion of this party in the coalition of the Christian Democrat prime minister Fernando Tambroni. This event was the first of a series of public protests that spread out all around Italy up to the collapse of the government, in July 1960, which led to a shift to the left in Italian politics until 1990s. The episode is a central piece of the anti-fascist memorial heritage of the city and a source of proudness also for contemporary dockers.

mainly through the usage of “mega events”¹⁴ and periodic events¹⁵ “as a resource for substantial regeneration.”¹⁶ Moreover, the transformation was not limited to the symbolic plan: it regarded instead both architectural and urban planning interventions. The Old Port of Genova, *Porto Antico*, the Darsena area as well as the Galata Museum were adapted for institutional communication purposes. The International exhibition in 1992 was dedicated to Christopher Columbus and geographical explorations. The European Capital of Culture theme 2004 was “the voyage” and focused on the spaces, logics and figures of Genoese maritime history. The current strategic planning of the Municipality has, among its main axes, that of “Capital of the Sea”, for which a dedicated event has recently been established: the Blue Economy Summit, since 2018, with a dedicated public place for both public and private “blue” activities,¹⁷ the Genova Blue District, since 2021. The port has been included in the speeches of political representatives, institutions and the business world, without any explicit reference to its workers. In a process of *inverse filiation*¹⁸ the narrative construction woven by the local institutions (and especially the Municipality) into the public sphere over the last forty years through these events, has thus relied more on the instrumental use of the functional past instead of the present knowledge and narration of those who inhabited and animated the port during that time. That is why people from both sides of the frontier now perceive, deplore and even denounce a division between the port and the city they suppose did not exist in ancient (but not precisely defined) times.

A Matter of Communication?

The subject of “division” between the city and the port, variously called “break”, “separation”, but also “oblivion” and “conflict”, emerged as the

14 Chito Guala, “Per una tipologia dei mega-eventi,” *Bollettino della Società geografica italiana* 7 (2002).

15 Some historical initiatives are the International Boat Show, since 1962, or the Genoa Shipping Week, born in 2013 from the merger of Port&ShippingTech and Shipbrokers and Shipagents Dinner.

16 Günter Warsewa, “The Role of Local Culture in the Transformation of the Port-City,” *Portus* 23 (2012): 1–13.

17 Blue Economy Summit is a national event that has been organised since 2018 by the Municipality of Genoa and dedicated to the opportunities given by the maritime sector for growth and development of the territories, employment and permanent professional training. During the overall week conferences, round tables, interviews and talk shows are scheduled and, since 2020, broadcasted in live streaming. It is part of Genoa Blue Forum initiatives, promoted by the Municipality of Genoa, the University of Genoa, the Chamber of Commerce in Genoa, the Liguria Region and the Associazione Agenti Raccomandatari Mediatori Marittimi (Association of shipbrokers and agents).
For more info on the event: <http://www.besummit.it/>

18 Gérard Lenclud, “La Tradition n’est plus Ce Qu’elle Était.... Sur Les Notions de Tradition et de Société Traditionnelle En Ethnologie,” *Terrain. Anthropologie & Sciences Humaines*, no. 9 (1987): 110–23.

common feature of all the kick-off meetings we organised.¹⁹ This led us to the reflection on the meaning of a Genoese port identity, which is part of the recent and current public discourse on the city, although it is not frequently analysed.²⁰ The desire to be known and understood was presented to us by the various professional categories. At a first glance, their need for visibility could apparently be solved by better communication: an area to which the maritime and shipping world in itself is not all unfamiliar. The communication carried out by large groups, however, responds first and foremost to the logic of commercial marketing and is aimed primarily for the international market. Thereby, it focuses on a specific activity, service or product sold rather than the structure that makes it possible. Directed to potential clients, on a local scale it is practically non-existent, with the exception of patronage or solidarity initiatives set up to give the brand prestige and to improve the image of the companies that are often at the centre of conflicts with local communities. Conflicts concern, for example, environmental and noise pollution due to the oldness of port equipments,²¹ to the passage of heavy vehicles that provide loading and unloading of goods, or the placement near the built-up area of deposits of materials considered excessively dangerous.²² In most cases complex solutions are required for these problems which cannot be implemented by a single company or operator, but need coordination among terminal operators, direction and extraordinary investments by public, port and city institutions. Therefore, many terminal operators and port companies prefer to adopt green-washing strategies and very rarely concern either their real and concrete daily activity or the workers.

Nevertheless, when they complain about the lack of a participative dimension within communication, the workers do not address these sectors, which are focused on tasks that have always been relatively distant from their everyday work. Nobody was charged of talking about them and their work, yet the interest in them by the “other side”—that is, inhabitants, institutions, local stakeholders—was real. They were seriously considered as interlocutors by social and political players and people could even engage

19 From this point onward, the authors will use the first person “we” for speaking about the actions they have personally led as general managers of Zones Portuaires project for achieving both the scientific and the pragmatic purposes as previously illustrated. The researchers’ kinds and methods of involvement in this process claim for this explicitation (see also footnote n.7).

20 The studies conducted on the port dimension of the city are mainly limited to the economic and logistic fields (see in particular the works of Hilda Ghiara and Enrico Musso of CIELI - Italian Center of Excellence on Logistics, Transport and Infrastructure from Genoa University), industrial history (central are the texts of the historian Marco Doria) and of labor (Caligari, 2013, 2014), of urban planning and architecture (Gastaldi, 2017), but after the geographical reflections of Massimo Quaini (e.g. 1978, 1998) or Adalberto Vallega (1984, 1992), rarely (Gazzola, 2010) in more recent times has the identity and symbolic aspect of the city-port relationship been problematised; let alone outside the university world.

21 For example, significant is the protest of the inhabitants of the Di Negro-San Teodoro retro port area against exhaust fumes which are emitted by cruise ships and ferries, because in absence of electrified docks, even when moored they need to keep their engines running to power the internal electrical system and therefore air pollution particularly matters.

22 For example, the protest against the placement of the petrochemical hub under the Lanterna, Lighthouse of Genoa, in 2015

into large-scale mobilisations for supporting them in the case of a conflict.²³ Today “the city”—generically defined in opposition to the port—is almost unaware about what happens beside the port customs, that have become narrower. Urban and port spaces have become distinctly more separated and, once common, everyday interaction has become a rare event.

Testing New Tools for Communicating Port-City Relationship

In establishing the action framework of the project, the aim was to avoid a bottom-up approach in telling the workforce, what would have been a sort of “museification” either of the workforce itself, or of its technical gestures,²⁴ and would have eventually turned into a form of “popularization.”²⁵ Instead, if we wanted, as engaged researchers, to reply to the demands that workers expressed, we had to explore port-culture as a living matter, rather than put it in danger through looking for authenticity or exclusivity. Our work, then, presupposed that port culture has the same dynamic nature that UNESCO attributes to intangible cultural heritage and should be continuously respected instead of being “crystallized”. From the first dialogue occasions with the port workers, initiated with the aim of involving them into the festival’s cultural programming, one of the main objectives of Zones Portuaires in Genoa was defined as the development of a better meeting place between the city and the port. Instead of speaking *about the port* as researchers or curators, the authors preferred to organise a public place for discourse, where workers could express themselves as the direct authors of their telling and so interact with other groups by *co-productive acts*.²⁶ Different kinds of audiences would then have been authors of this renewed relationship together with port workers, since they were qualified by the latter as “stone guests” of the feast. Of course, this exposed the telling to the risk of misunderstandings and incomprehension, but it was the only way to assume the already existing “freedom of reception”²⁷ of each proposal.

23 The role of the workers’ family and friendship networks is evident as they took, for example, part in the extensive protests for the protection of the professions that affected the city in spring 1955 and were key players in the involvement of civil society.

24 Michael Herzfeld, *The Body Impolitic: Artisans and Artifice in the Global Hierarchy of Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics and the Real Life of States, Societies and Institutions* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

25 Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, “The Ethnographic Turn - and after: A Critical Approach towards the Realignment of Art and Anthropology,” *Social Anthropology* 23, no. 4 (November 2015): 419, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12218>.

26 Joni M. Palmer, “The Resonances of Public Art: Thoughts on the Notion of Co-Productive Acts and Public Art: Resonances of Public Art,” *City & Society* 30, no. 1 (April 2018): 68–88, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ciso.12154>.

27 Sylvia Girel, “1981-2011, Les Dispositifs En Faveur de l’art Contemporain: Entre Logique de Démocratisation et Processus de “Festivisation” Accès Différentiel et Expériences Plurielles Pour Les Publics, Vers Une Reconfiguration Des Pratiques Dites “Culturelles”,” 2014, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01108853/document>.

ZP in Genoa became then the frame for the inquiry of new technologies of empowerment that could cross different worlds and develop this “city port community of interest” that cultural and urban planning now place at their horizon.²⁸ In order to do that, we decided to combine formal moments of reflection, in academic and institutional contexts, with informal meetings, in which the subjects involved would have the opportunity to test and express new narrations and interpretations through active participation in cultural events and art-based projects. This took place outside the constraints of the political²⁹ and academic discourse in the strict sense, but in a space capable of hosting confrontation talks. The aim was to initiate reconstructing cultural narratives of the port communities from a *place-based* perspective,³⁰ capable of reflecting the “internal” perception that these communities have of their own histories and places, often distinct from the “external” narrative, built to communicate the port to the outside world as a homogeneous brand. These internal narratives are capable of restoring the heterogeneity of values and meanings in which the groups that make up the port community do not necessarily recognise themselves in a homogeneous way, but which, put together in a shared narrative, can contribute to the construction of sustainable, symbolic and relational perspectives for the future.

Therefore, the most suitable tool seemed to be the *festival*: a moment that allows local communities to take a break from the routines of daily life and envisage new perspectives. In this moment, the physical and symbolic spaces of encounter and interlocution, academic research, cultural experimentation, opportunities for socialisation and participation intersect with defined cadences, interspersed with long periods of active involvement of port communities in creating content through discussions with artists and researchers. The results elaborated during the year are presented in front of the city and institutions at each edition of the festival and activate new impulses for the project development, not just in a dedicated place (a Port Center, a museum), but in the very port area (that is, *zones portuaires*). This includes, for example, the appreciation of dismissed buildings and areas, often concentrating communities’ memory, with the aim of developing a “new approach to heritage management [able to] well produce new governance and, thereby, create opportunities for new port–city coalitions that can align economic and environmental objectives with the sociocultural motives underpinning the goals of heritage preservation.”³¹ But what is peculiar of ZPGE experience is the use of the very living port:

28 See AIVP 2030 Agenda, particularly 6th goal.

29 Sara Grenni, L. G. Horlings, and K. Soini, “Linking Spatial Planning and Place Branding Strategies through Cultural Narratives in Places,” *European Planning Studies* 28, no. 7 (2020): 1355–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2019.1701292>.

30 Ibid. 1359

31 José M. Pagés Sánchez and Tom A. Daamen, “Using Heritage to Develop Sustainable Port–City Relationships: Lisbon’s Shift from Object-Based to Landscape Approaches,” in *Adaptive Strategies for Water Heritage*, ed. Carola Hein (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 385, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00268-8_20.

the festival creates a long-term path that uses “artistic practices as generative and not cosmetic actions”, in which the “extended temporal presence is the prerequisite for rooting: it is a slow work of chiselling and stitching in tension between distance and proximity, between locality and exogenous imaginaries.”³² Within six years, the festival has evolved in its methods and forms, not always being publicly recognised by the involved public entities. The companies and port workers, followed by the Port Authority and the Coast Guard office, have gradually become more and more proactive in the phases of conception and realisation of the cultural projects.

The most effective way we found out for pursuing the shared objectives is the one that allows users direct knowledge of the port through physical access and meetings with port workers, also in the form of cultural events that allow a different vision of it by creating unexpected narratives and images.³³ Attempts to develop new cultural forms of expressing what is going on in the port in all its complexity were therefore articulated in a process of active listening to this world that was not limited to our research interests but defined in content and form together with the involved operators. The dichotomy between researcher and witness was transformed into a mutual relationship based on a common goal to be pursued with different ways of expressing or “practices of making”³⁴. No one of the involved parties has abandoned his point of view: we as researchers continued to develop the interpretation and the understanding while the workers continued to communicate their demands—some with marketing—others with political struggle. All together we experimented with new styles: that of collectively organised action *in situ*. In this sense, the festival was a fully realised and established “device”: in the Foucauldian sense of system, realised in connection,³⁵ but also by the process of production of subjectivity³⁶ of which each participant is invited to become the author. The aim of ZPGE cannot be defined as an achievement of an ethic dimension of cultural mediation, understood as a one-way transmitted acculturation or instrument, but rather as the intention to creatively imagine actions capable of reopening “obstructed passages” and reconnecting visible and invisible levels of reality.³⁷ Keeping this in mind, the structure of the festival has changed over the years, adapting its programming to

32 Alessandra Pioselli, “Comunità Contemporanee è un progetto per scoprire la ricerca artistica in connessione con i territori,” *cheFare* (blog), 2020, <https://www.che-fare.com/comunita-contemporanee-la-ricerca-artistica-in-connessione-con-i-territori/>.

33 In spring 2020, we conducted an audience study on the first five editions of the Zones Portuaires festival that took place in Genoa. The study shows the development of a greater interaction between the different types of participants as a result of the adaptation of performative and artistic ways of expressing, as well as being informative.

34 Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203559055>.

35 Michel Foucault et al., *Dits et écrits, 1954-1988.*, 2017.

36 Gilles Deleuze, “Qu’est-Ce Qu’un Dispositif?” (Michel Foucault. Rencontre internationale, Paris: Le Seuil, 1988).

37 Lidia Decandia, “Towards a Polyphonic Urban Score,” *City, Territory and Architecture* 1, no. 1 (December 2014): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40410-014-0012-3>.

the demands arising from the constant dialogue with the involved port communities and seeking new ways to communicate them, thus letting emerge new aspects of the Genoese port-city culture.

Opening Extraordinary Windows on Ordinary Routines

A first tool was the extraordinary opening of port spaces which are usually inaccessible to the public, through forms of access that have changed from more traditional visits to forms of self-representation and narration of port communities through the design and implementation of cultural and artistic projects over time. Hence this approach has also often revealed difficulties, disagreements and tensions. The port world is a complex and embedded world, in its economic and social dynamics as well as the physical structures of spaces, their management and permeability. The ones who work in the operating spaces are physically active for many hours throughout the day in a dimension perceived and experienced as a parallel and mechanised city that cannot afford to stop working. The adaptation to the work organisation in the port and as a consequence the flexibility in terms of ways and communication has thus become the essential characteristic of a project whose aim is to understand and help the outside world comprehend this—apparently—unrelated world. Creating something permanent between the urban fabric and the port remains exceptional, in being aware of and respecting the rhythms of the work activity. For this precise reason, it is not configured simply as an action of re-use of physical space, functional only to the events themselves, but as an opportunity to actively involve individuals and communities in the construction of highly site-specific projects, capable of catalysing the attention of the public in new ways and informally (and therefore potentially stronger) conveying knowledge of the port outside its walls. Central to the research has then become the dimension of experimentation with possibilities, as a collective poetic construction and not as a simple form of “disclosure” or “communication”.

A Contextual Field Choice: an Artistic Approach to Interpret the Port

When we started this process we realised that the focus on the port space by cultural operators and artists is not new in Genoa. We already were aware of the existence of some examples of artistic production and creation, but many others we have discovered during the process. From a historical point of view, Genoese culture has repeatedly turned its attention to the port and its communities, and has often done so through the photographic, narrative and theatrical production of authors who have had a strong personal connection with the port city.

One of the main artistic languages that has been used for exploring the port of Genoa is photography. In 1964 the Society of Culture of Genoa asked Lisetta Carmi to realise a reportage: the outcome of the Genoese photographer's work was the travelling exhibition entitled *Genova Porto*, which documented and testified to the working conditions of the dockers. Photographer Mario Dondero, who was also a proud member of the Unique Port Company, after his shooting of Genoa from the 1990s onwards, in 2012 began a long reportage which led to the publication of a photographic book with the title as harsh as it is complete, *Il Porto*. The exhibition has been rearranged several times over the years and was also part of the fifth edition of ZPGE in 2019. It was exhibited at the Galata Museum and compared with the more recent photographic project *Refusal* by Danile Correale, which depicts the folded arms of the workers of CULMV company, in an exhibition born from the collaboration between ZAP (Zones Art Portuaires, curated by Francesca Busellato) and TEU (Twenty Foot Equivalent Unit - Martina Angelotti and Anna Daneri in collaboration with the Department of Education – Genoa University). This project thus opened the doors between the world of photography and contemporary art as well as between the festival audiences and the port workers and created a space for dialogue in a museum location, familiar to some and less so to others. Was it possible to reproduce this approach also elsewhere?

Something similar also exists in the theatre world. In 1969 Luigi Squarzina and Vico Faggi produced the play *Cinque Giorni al Porto* (Five Days at the Port), which is about the dockers' strike that took place around Christmas 1900. It was produced by the Genoese theatre, Teatro Stabile di Genova, directed by Ivo Chiesa and staged in the Sala Chiamata del Porto, the place historically designated for the call of the Genoese dockers, for the daily assignment of tasks at the docks. In 1999 and 2000, the theatre Teatro della Tosse transformed the Diga Foranea—breakwater of the Port of Genoa—into a temporary stage for two plays, respectively called *Odisseo, Ulisse o Nessuno?* and Aristofane's *Birds and other utopias*, directed by Tonino Conte with a stage design by Emanuele Luzzati.

But while photography as a documentary and journalistic medium has never stopped investigating and communicating the port's needs to the outside world, experimentation with the performing arts in the port is only carried out in sporadic episodes, until it ceases completely, partly also because of the greater difficulties introduced by the most recent safety regulations.

In 1992, Renzo Piano's urban redevelopment project for the Old Port of Genoa in occasion of "*Colombiadi*", International Exhibition Genoa '92, tied the historic centre back to the sea, in contact with the water together with a pinch of port. But if the urban waterfront became the city's privileged stage for hosting shows and events, it also relegated the operational port

to a mere, albeit fascinating, backdrop. To what extent is it possible to rethink this spatial and identity relationship today? To answer this question, we chose to experiment with the artistic and performative methods.

Artistic Installations

A few examples will be presented in order to explain how creative methods let emerge some forms of knowledge about the port we hardly would have been able to get differently, and how they can contribute to the development of a shared port-city culture.

In 2018 we decided to respond with Zones Portuaires to the invitation expressed by JR Artist in 2011 during the TED Prize,³⁸ with which he initiated Inside Out/The people's art project: a global initiative transforming messages of personal identity into large format artistic installation. The aim of the global project is to give a face to members of invisible communities, or in the most diverse ways on the margins of their societies. The suggestion seemed to be consistent with the need for greater public recognition expressed by the port workers. The photographic project *Le Facce del Porto* was then developed, in collaboration with the photographer Simone Lezzi, aimed to discover work done by the people in the port. The faces and stories of the port workers were depicted on one hundred portraits, printed in a two-by-three metre format and affixed to the inner surface of the dam that protects the port from the open sea. The immediate purpose of the port installation was the community's greeting to arriving and departing ships, with the goal of revealing the human dimension of port work and restoring public recognition to it, in an era of increasing mechanisation and the weakening of manual functions within the port [Fig. 1].

The way the installation was conceived with the workers was itself a response to this demand of public recognition: the close-up framing of the face, the same for each subject, and the use of black and white in the prints, in line with the indications of the Inside Out project, make the uniforms and work clothes look homogeneous, while the horizontal *façade* of the seawall places everyone—visible and less visible workers—on the same level: terminal operators, dockers, pilots, moorers, boatmen, employees of the Port Authority and the Coast Guard, forwarding agents, workers, ship repair officers and shipping agents. In line not just with the objective of JR's global platform, but also with some workers' demand, the perception of roles and functions were overturned: each portrait contained a story that had the same weight as the one represented by the portrait next to it. It was the protagonists themselves who told the public first-hand about them during the boat trips, which were part of the 2018 edition of the festival in order to see the installation up close. These visits

38 JR, *My Wish: Use Art to Turn the World inside Out*, 1299202320, https://www.ted.com/talks/jr_my_wish_use_art_to_turn_the_world_inside_out.



FIG. 1 Inside Out project on the port's dam, ZPGE18 (ph. Simone Lezzi)

were the occasion for observing the self-displaying discourse port workers made in a public situation, in front of a specific audience: something they never have the opportunity to do otherwise. Moreover, their discourse was directly submitted to questioning and even negotiating, and was forced to adapt depending on the different audiences, often attracted by the artistic proposal itself and hard to be involved without it. This dialogue revealed identitarian representations from both of the sides and moulded new forms of awareness of the port within the audiences: it contributed to develop a port-city culture that a pure scientific and "distant" enquiry would have produced just in theoretical, mediated terms and would not have easily shared with a large audience, even with the best purposes of dissemination.

It took one year to create the portraits and some difficulties were involved: in some cases, the top management of the firms more accustomed to public exposure of their image, took the acceptance of their employees, who were often intimidated or distrustful, for granted. As the sensitivities of everybody were different, some workers refused, others insisted on being proudly present alongside categories which were considered "antagonistic". This showed us how port workers identify themselves in different communities and place them in a complex system of alliances and antagonisms.

Site-Specific Performances

In 2017, we also started to conceive some site-specific performances in different operational areas of the port. These were co-produced by the concessionary companies of the spaces who, in fact, have been curating since then together with the artistic direction of the festival the conception and direction of each event, which in turn actively involved the terminal workers, the Port System Authority and the Coast Guard in all

the conception and implementation phases - for example by asking collectively: which kind of port structure is more representative of your work? And why? What can we do, technically, with a tugboat (with a crane, with a silo...)? Performances exploited technical potential of port structure as imagined, indicated and definitively acted by port workers. Besides being very communicatively powerful, the message of the performance had then an important impact in a ritual perspective. It is capable of affirming new shared symbols and restructuring the relational logic between communities in a generative way.

The musical performance *Marakeb/Navi*, curated by the musician FiloQ, drew its attention to a place on the edge of the port and the city which is visible from the urban fabric but inaccessible outside the operational framework. As the owners, *Rimorchiatori Riuniti* (Reunited Tugs), proudly like to underline, it is the oldest dry dock in the Mediterranean Sea made of stone. In order to realise this performance, the basin was filled at different levels by the operators. Some of the ship sirens sampled in the port echoed within the basin, where the sound took on different tones and characters. The technical construction methods of artistic production were an integral part of the story and placed the content developed for this purpose by the specific professional category at the centre of the message, as well as the artistic form it takes.

In the same year, the eVenti Verticali company performed an acrobatic dance on the metal surfaces of the vegetable oil storage silos of the SAAR terminal, according to an agreed choreography, while the audience watched the performance from a boat. As the participants were told, the show would not have been possible, if the captain of the Tanker AS Omara which arrived that day at the terminal pier earlier than expected, had not agreed to temporarily unmoor it, and if the mooring crew, with the authorisation of the Port Authority, had not volunteered to clear the water from the lines to allow the boat carrying the audience to approach.

Since then, the management of the SAAR terminal has often granted its spaces for unprecedented use.³⁹ Following the same principle, Boosta, keyboardist of the Italian group Subsonica, reopened for one night the Stazioni Marittime urban promenade,⁴⁰ with his *Ode to the Moon* which he performed on the piano in 2019.

These experiences show how the operators, in their goal of bypassing the port-city break they felt and expressed, appropriated the ZP device and found in it a form of public legitimisation of their work and routines, respectful of the unpredictability of time in the port - the primary reason why flexibility is a fundamental feature of its relationship with the city. In

39 In 2018 Gnu Quartet and FiloQ performed the show *Nautofonie* and in 2019 *Open Ports* was a sound interpretation with which the Neapolitan group *Almamegretta* ideally linked the ports of Genoa and Naples.

40 Designed for the city in 2017 and closed since 2013 for security reasons following the enactment of increasingly stringent anti-terrorism regulations.

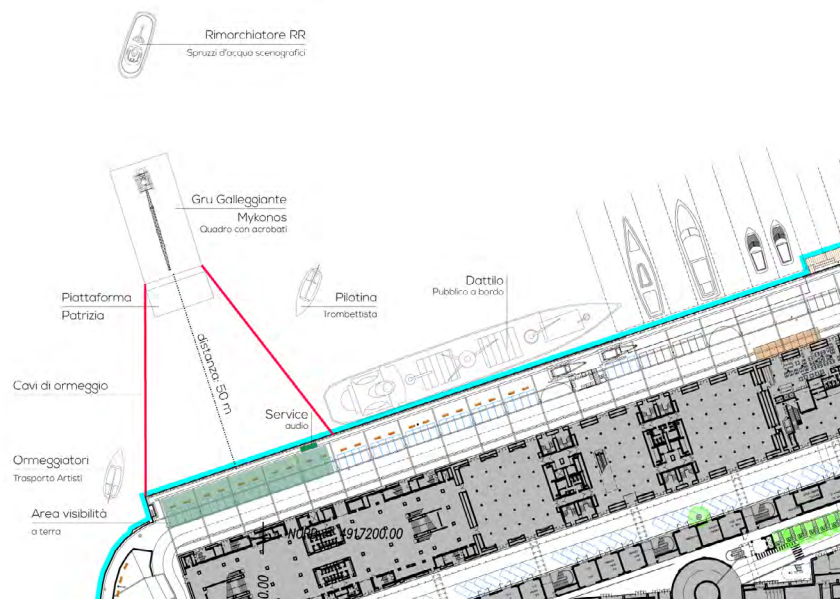


FIG. 2 Scheme of the involvement of port operators in the performance *Orizzonti*, ZPGE19

the organisation of artistic and performing actions, technical and authorisation restrictions that initially appeared insurmountable were resolved thanks to the will and skills of the workers themselves, who were motivated in their efforts because they were the authors of the process and no longer merely the subjects of an investigation and a story to be told by others. Innovative forms of governance and community empowerment were then experimented through performative acts: the show *Orizzonti*, produced in 2019 on the occasion of the simultaneous opening with Genoa Shipping Week, allowed this active involvement of port operators in the creation, in all its phases, of a performance addressed to both citizens and to other port operators and communities, with no distinction of target.

Coordinated by the authors, the team consisted of an artistic director, a director and several acrobats working side by side with pilots, moorers, tugboats, the Port Authority and the Coast Guard in order to realise the project collectively, from the conception to the realisation. The show involved a series of acrobatic evolutions on a suspended metal structure which the artistic direction of the festival proposed to hook up to a floating crane pontoon. The comparative assessment of the possibilities has led to knowledge of the history and conditions of various structures of this kind: some have been discarded because of technical requirements, others because of unavoidable difficulties in involving the reference companies, others because of legal-administrative constraints. The final choice was the *Mykonos*, a floating pontoon with a white crane, the tallest in the port. The company owning the crane, like others, initially resisted the proposal, but with the mediation of the involved shipping agents, finally agreed to lend the monumental equipment for this purpose. Moving and positioning the pontoon required the presence of a tugboat and a mooring company, while the acrobats and the musician would have to be ferried to the scene on board by a pilot boat. It was decided that each operational



FIG. 3 Preparing the Orizzonti show: the Guard Coast on the Dattilo ship, the Mykonos crane with the acrobats, a tugboat, a mooring boat (ph: MEB), ZPGE19.

movement would contribute, highlighted by sound and light, to the creation of the choreography: pilots, moorers, tugs will be co-protagonists of the show [Fig. 2].

Not even the Coast Guard was entirely convinced: the area where the performance should take place is the stretch of water in the Old Port of Genoa, from where a large number of regular and cruise ships set sail from 6 p.m. onwards. The movement of the waves would not have made it possible to guarantee the safety of the artists suspended from the sixty-metre-high chariot. A reduced time frame was therefore chosen, within which, barring delays and unforeseen events, all ships should have left. This was not enough to guarantee safety for the Port Authority, which therefore opted for a temporary blockade of maritime traffic in the entire port of Genoa. The staff therefore dictated the timing of the performance, suspending movements in the port from sunset until the end of the show. The result would have been unimaginable in 2015: the audience watched the performance from the dock and on board of the Coast Guard ship Dattilo, which was moored next to the *Magazzini del Cotone*, the old cotton warehouse; at the end of the show, the sirens of pilot boats, tugboats, cranes and ships sounded in unison. The company owning the Mikonos ship offered its availability for future productions [Fig. 3].

A similar result, in terms of involvement, was achieved in 2020. In order not to resign to the impossibility of maintaining a continuity of action and an appointment that has become regular and eagerly awaited over the years, to deal with the particular situation caused by the Covid-19 health emergency a performance for the whole city was conceived in agreement with the Genoa Harbour Master's Office: the shipping companies welcomed musicians on board of their ships who sampled the frequency of

the ships' sirens beforehand and use them to create a musical score that was performed by the same ships on 9th October 2020, for the opening of Zones Portuaires. It was then up to the entire city of Genoa to resound at the port's voice.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the official discourse on the port-city culture in Genoa stresses the commercial more than the cultural and human dimension: everyday, every month, and every year, it celebrates in numbers successful results by displaying new records in terms of goods and passengers stream. Besides a vague form of pride it may generate in port workers, it comes out as the ultimate reason for the port-city break some workers used to speak about. Still this official discourse is a unilateral representation of a very complex world, which does not account for everyone. As anthropologist Brian Larkin says, "The act of defining an infrastructure is a categorizing moment. Taken thoughtfully, it comprises a cultural analytic that highlights the epistemological and political commitments involved in selecting what one sees as infrastructural (and thus causal) and what one leaves out."⁴¹ By considering ports as infrastructures, the same could be said about them. The way we speak about the port, and specifically about the port as a central item of the Genoese identity and culture, has a direct influence on the local sense of belonging and to the shape communities assume in a dynamic and relational system. The analytic approach developed through the experience of ZP project leads us to affirm that there is no pre-existing port-city culture to be "revealed" as a mysterious or hidden material object, there is instead a discourse to let emerge.

This paper had the goal of focusing on the use of artistic practice as a research technology, which is therefore configured not so much as a process of creating a work of art in itself, but rather as the realisation of context-specific art projects aimed at bringing out new heritage and contents about the port-city culture. If port-city culture is not abstractly assumed as an *a priori* concept, but understood as a particular, site- and time-specific creation, it can not be defined without the active involvement of the participants,⁴² who are urged to become authors of the process of reading and interpreting places in their physical dimension and social relations.

The art-based research processes have the capacity to open up spaces for imagination, to explore existing narratives and to generate new ones⁴³ which, because they are developed outside of institutional venues, can be freely and constructively critical of the development and transformation

41 Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (October 21, 2013): 330, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522>.

42 Knowles Gary J. & Ardra L. Cole, Arts-informed Research. In L.M.Given (ed) , *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, Sage (2008): 32-35.

43 cf footnote 28

plans they establish. Besides museum experiences, the attempt of ZPGE working as a “combined and connective” action⁴⁴ with inhabitants, industrialists and workers in the port, public and private institutions, is to ensure that these practices succeed in impacting on the reflections of public institutional policies in the elaboration of shared planning strategies for the transformation of the territory.

44 Alessandra Pioselli, “Comunità Contemporanee è un progetto per scoprire la ricerca artistica in connessione con i territori,” *cheFare* (blog), 2020, <https://www.che-fare.com/comunita-contemporanee-la-ricerca-artistica-in-connessione-con-i-territori/>.

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