

RIVERS AS CULTURAL AND MEETING POINTS SOME REASONS FOR SUCCESS

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Urban river fronts are an important type of inland waterfront, at the contact between urban districts and rivers. In developed countries, most traditional activities along city river banks have disappeared, with the rise of modern economy. Exchanges of all types of goods, activities such as washing and baths, leisure, etc... have progressively vanished since the early XXth century because the role of river has been decreasing in economy. During the last 20-30 years however, these areas have been the targets of active renovation policies after decades of dereliction. Reconquest began in the late 1970's and widely expanded throughout the world, in response to social demand and to public policies aiming at improving the image of cities. Waterfronts are being rehabilitated, frequently using conventional architectural procedures and standardized zoning procedures, but without any guaranty of success concerning acceptance by people, despite heavy investments.

1. FROM FORMER RIVER ATTRACTIVITY TO DERELICTION IN DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

Rivers were remarkably attractive places during the industrial era because most transportation used waterways instead of terrestrial roads, which were unsecure and slow. City waterfronts were places of exchange, of storage, while city dwellers used the river because it provided water for human uses. For instance, in Rome, two harbours were at the outskirts of the city: the Ripetta (small bank) harbour upstream for the inland trade, and the Ripa Grande downstream for exchanges with Ostia sea harbour. Before the construction of the "muraglioni" following the 1870 flood, the Arenula beach located on the left bank of the Tevere River upstream of the Sisto Bridge, was used by people of the city. In the middle of the XIXth c., the Pope Pie IX allowed men to swim freely between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. River banks in Lyons were used by wash boats, public baths, fish boats, and of course by all kinds of storage during the late XIXth c. (stone, sand, beams, wine, etc...), the Rhône river and its tributary the Saône being major means of transportation at the time (Béthemont et Pelletier, 1990; Pelletier, 2002). In Paris, the Seine River was the heart of the city during the Late XVIIth c., with houses on the main bridge and great activity on the river

(Beaudoin, 1989). A large pier was built for economic exchange, also for pedestrians and carts, and boats for washing clothes. The landscape of the Seine River was transformed by Napoleon 1st who ousted workshops from the banks and floating mills (1807) from the river, replacing them with heavy piers in order to develop large scale trade. Then, the Seine River became a major axis for public transportation until the early XXth c.: in 1867, 60 boats were produced during the World Fair to transport 20 millions passengers. During the 1900 World Fair, 105 boats transported 42 millions passengers (Guillermé, 1990). All cities situated along large rivers experienced this kind of economic growth and maintained strong links with their waterfronts which were their economic backbones.

What then were the main causes leading to the abandon of river banks during the early XXth c., in most cities in developed countries?

- Flooding imposed the construction of high protective walls, like in Rome, Toulouse, etc... For instance, in Rome, following the 1870' flood (3300 cumecs, or a 1 in 200 years flood), an embankment was conceived by the engineer Canevani was constructed between 1876 and 1926, along with the extraction of most of the ancient stone blocks from former broken bridges.
- Pollution from factories and sewers discouraged city dwellers to use urban rivers. Instead of infiltrating into the ground, human rejections were collected and transported to rivers which were considered as natural sewers. Pollution had to be taken away from the cities, very early since the Cloaca maxima was built as early as the VIth c. BC in ancient Rome in order to drain the swamps in the lowlands where the forum was to be built, and also to clean up this district.
- The success of road transportation (bicycles...) decreased the relative interest for rivers while the quality of street and road surfaces improved and reduce travel time across cities.
- Some catastrophic events, such as the impact of the 1910 flood of the Seine River changed the usage of river banks, which were then seen as less attractive.

The former attractiveness of European rivers may be compared with the present attraction of rivers in developing countries. Indeed, most of the riverine cities in developing countries are attractive and could therefore be considered as models for developed countries. But what is this attractiveness due to, and what is its social cost for people living along banks in developing countries? In most cases, these picturesque landscapes (for tourists) are landscapes of poverty and illness. The river banks and the rivers themselves may be places of freely available land and few constraints, thus attracting the poorest fringes of the population, such as recent migrants. For instance, in Hué (Viet Nam), sampans provide cheap transportation of sand, wood and fish. Authorities try to fix sampan people inside the city, forcing them to leave the river which is traditionally their home. Although clearing the sampans from the river is part of a tourism development policy, it in fact removes a key scenic element from the landscape that westerners are seeking... while the UNESCO recognizes the cultural interest of the river life and scenery.

2. SOME REASONS FOR SUCCESSFUL POLICIES OF RECONQUEST IN EUROPE

Given that public policies are more or less standardized, often costly, and sometimes unsuccessful in redeveloping city waterfronts, a challenging question would be to identify what factors may explain the present attractiveness of some urban rivers in industrialized countries. In response, we will briefly consider four successive topics:

- 1 - City riverfronts as testimony of prestigious history
- 2 - The river itself as a scenic attraction
- 3 - Some places of nature in the heart of cities
- 4 - The river bank as a new attractive place for city dwellers

2.1. City river fronts as testimony of prestigious history

Historic cities of Europe house monuments and prestigious buildings often dating back to the Middle Ages, that are frequently located near the riverfronts of these cities. More generally, European countries have built up magnificent waterfronts through the centuries. For instance, the city of Verona on the banks of the Adige River, Italy, displays its prestigious Roman bridge and its medieval castle. Great achievements can be admired in rich cities built along canals, like Brugge and Venice. In some cases, authorities planned the scenery as a demonstration of glory, like in London and Budapest (the parliament), or Saragossa with the famous Virgin del Pilar reflecting in the Ebro river (Adiego Adiego, 2002) or the “Puente de piedra” with its urbanistic significance during the Late Middle Ages (Iranzo Munio, 2000), etc...

In these cities, the waterfront itself is a show, an impressive, living landscape to be admired while boating the river or walking the banks on either side of the river. Boating the river is a way to contemplate prestigious banks, to summarize the history of a city, to dive into glorious past epochs... The focus is not on the river itself but on its banks. The river is the stage, an open avenue allowing the show to be performed. The English writer John Russell stated about Paris : it is « The only city... in which a great river has been used for mile after mile, on right bank and left, as the natural center of a work of art » (*Paris*, 1960). A river is an avenue summarizing the past of a city. In Sevilla, the most evocative stretch is located between Isabel II Bridge and San Telmo Bridge, with its granite stone paving and the golden walls made of limestone blocks recalling Cristobal Colon’s ships. On the opposite bank, the suburb of Triana reminds the prestigious history of discoveries and sea trade since Magellan left this bank in 1519. The magnificent and quiet waterfront displays two storied houses decorated with adorned balconies. One of them was once the “Universidad de los Mareantes” where captains trained from the XVIth to the XVIIIth c. Many of them bring to memory celebrated toreros. The former pier of Triana is a major “place of memory” in Europe whereas the development of modern buildings along its downstream stretch can be regretted.

2.2. The river or the necessary scenery

In some cities, the river itself is the scenic attraction, whatever the quality of the waterfront may be. Because of the *genius loci* of particular places, made of subtle kinds of preserved natural conditions, of exceptional design, of respect of the past,

- water may be an invitation to travel, exotic
- water may be released from social constraints
- water may be dream, erotic for some authors
- water may be aesthetic, along with natural components (trees, weeds) and specific fragrances.

Here the river is contemplated for itself, for its own significance in the cityscape. « Why do people like or hate such and such urban project? I believe that, in all times, riverine developments must offer the feeling of a tight, direct and continuous linkage between individuals and the water as travel, water as exotism, and water as a dream » (H. Morrisette, 1995)

For instance along the Akagawa River in Kyoto (Japan), the former navigation canal (1601) no longer carries any boats, but forms a key scenic element of fast flowing water running close to the main river, with its mirror-like reaches sustained by weirs that can be crossed by pedestrians. At Suzhou, in the delta of the Yangzi River (China), people of all ages look on as boys fish for gold fish below a bridge... People also need freely available spaces for leisure activities such as fishing or just dreaming, as exemplified by river banks along the Rhône River in Lyons...

During the Edo period, the Sumida River in Tokyo was the « floating world » (the Buddhist metaphor for life in the city), with:

- sacred places (temples) and relegated areas (prostitution and pollution)
- places for work and places for rest and entertainment
- a place associating constraints and freedom (Waley, 1990)

As the Sumida became heavily industrialized, this traditional life progressively disappeared during the Meiji era and through the 1950-70's. In 1985, Tokyo city decided to rehabilitate the Sumida River, choosing Paris as a model for partnership. The key-words of the project were :

- Animation
- History and culture
- Beauty
- Familiarity
- Security

2.3. Some places of nature in the heart of cities

Also, developed waterfronts may preserve sites of ecological interest. In Lyon, sand deposited during floods builds some nature patches into the landscape, providing narrow beaches attractive for people, and some woody lateral bars in the widest reaches. Beavers have built huts downtown, while ducks and swans are now common along the river stretches. In Rome, the old river walls and the piers are considered as « urban cliffs » of major interest by environmentalists. A sea gull nests in the walls, while 30 plant species can grow in the cracks thanks to the German wasp which ensures the dissemination of seeds. Upstream of the city, from Matteoti Bridge to Renascimento Bridge, the Italian World Wildlife Fund has designated a « nature sanctuary » were palm trees, white willows, and a variety of species growing on thick deposits of loam where kingfishers and blackbirds dwell.

2.4. The river bank, an attractive place for modern city dwellers

It is remarkable that some cities have successfully maintained the frequentation of their river fronts. Corrientes, Argentina, has built a waterfront along the Parana River during the XXth c., not outstanding in itself, but most popular. Thousands of people gather along this « paseo » each Saturday evening, drinking maté and chatting. What are the reasons behind this success?

- The beauty of this wide river (11 000 cumecs), the river front avenue being almost a sea shore
- An historical memorial devoted to the glory of the country facing a kind of inner former frontier
- More probably, just the pleasure of sharing something with other people, without much respect to the place itself, but the river provides the scenery and the show could not perform elsewhere in Corrientes

To attract people to waterfronts, most cities develop river banks with amenities for pedestrians and cyclists. The bank is a free-access space for leisure, an open corridor connecting river districts, sometimes a place of culture (a kind of « cultural release valve »). In Paris, a garden of sculptures was created, but did not have much success. In Montreal, the banks of Lachine canal have been redeveloped as a new corridor for this kind of sportive leisure. Lyon did the same on the left bank of the Rhône River for daytime use. In the early 1990's, this bank used to welcome the Rhône river feasts organized by the CNR (National Rhone River C°). The so-called: « Lyon-Rive gauche » project should clear the lower pier of car parks and attract more people (with lanes for different types of use), when completed in 2006.

River banks may be a good place to organize shows. For instance, in the upstream suburb of Lyons, a high block-made weir was built in 1995 across the Rhône River to facilitate the crossing of the river by a new motorway. Suddenly, in 2003, this white water site was

designated as a new « urban spot » for free style kayakers: the so-called « Lyon River Festival » was launched with some success.

Imitating Berlin, summer beaches experience increasing success in France. In 1996, Saint-Quentin was the first city to propose an artificial summer beach and frequentation rose to 420,000 p. in 2003 (for a cost of 60,000 euros). In 2002, downtown Paris launched its beach along the right bank of the Seine, attracting 3,000 000 p. at a cost of 2,000 000 euros. Lyons began in 2003 with 250 000 p., along with Tourcoing (close to the city of Lille), with its 100,000 p... So far, twenty French cities have adopted the concept of summer beaches. Indeed, summer beaches enable new social contacts, offer an alternative to remote travel for people who must work in summertime or who cannot afford holidays. These developments are also expected to decrease social problems in suburbs (- 20% in St Quentin in July 2004).

Another interesting point is whether river banks are just designated to become attractive places for city dwellers, or whether they are seen by city planners as part of wider operations of urban marketing. In many cases, these costly development works aim at improving the image of the city as a whole (Gérardot, 2004). Sometimes they are conceived in parallel with private initiatives for housing projects, or in the perspective of speculating on the increased value of land and flats along these rehabilitated shores. Cleaned up arroyos in Saigon, skylines along the Yangzi River at Yibin (Sichuan) or Shanghai display interesting examples of spontaneous adaptation of investors to emerging situations, even in developing countries.

3. CONCLUSION

It is likely that there is no universal recipe for success in waterfront redevelopment. The very nature of the river and the richness of historical heritage play major roles indeed, as well as the quality of rehabilitation procedures, but there remains something improbable or unpredictable that pertains to peoples choices, to imaginative initiatives, to emerging situations. Hence the future should be left open in riverfront development projects. It is better to be prudent and modest to avoid impeding on the expression of new possibilities in the future.

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5. LISTE DES FIGURES



Figure 1. Lyonriverfestival. A new spot for free style kayaking on the Rhône in Lyon



Figure 2. Marché flottant-Arroyo Ch. A floating market on an arroyo at high tide, Saïgon. An intense activity of exchange



Figure 3. Arroyo Kin Trin. Poor dwellings along Kin Trin arroyo, at low tide, Saïgon



Figure 4. Yibin-front d'eau. A newly developed waterfront along the attractive Yangzi River in Yibin, Sichuan.

