

THE RECOVERY OF THE CENTRALITY OF WATER PLACES IN RIVER CITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to address the issue of the relationship between a river and its city, with the aim of re-evaluating the key role that aquatic places have in the contemporary city. Areas within the consolidated fabric, which relate to the water edge were investigated, such as port areas, industrial areas and abandoned shipyards, considered marginal areas of the city due to their inclusive and impassable nature.

In the city of Ljubljana, the river has an iconic value and is the main urban public space. Jože Plečnik drew up his reflections on the city-river relationship and his idea of living along the river, transforming a part of the Ljubljanica into a “boulevard” that actively participates in the life of the city. The bridges become not only elements of connection between parts, but squares on the water on which the city life takes place.

In Belgrade, although the banks are connected by several bridges, the city seems to break off at the confluence between its two rivers. The riverfront is composed of a series of parts, some natural, others that give rise to more industrial functions, which have shaped the river landscape. In the project proposal, three river chambers on the banks of the Danube and the Sava have been considered, not only for their particular morphology but also for the strategic position they occupy with a view to making the riverfront continuous, permeable and truly an integral part of the city. The urban strategy proposes to recover and strengthen the fluvial identity of the city as a key tool for urban recovery. The hypothesis is to create a network of places on the riverfront, so as to give back to the river its role of protagonist in the urban space and of creator of the new forms of the city.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary city, recovery, fluvial city, urban identity, disused areas

INTRODUCTION

The river, as a “dynamic” element, had a considerable influence in the development of cities, it was the means to exchange goods and between different cultures on land, a line of communication and transport. The ways of composing a spatial relationship between the river, the city and its inhabitants, such as navigating the waters, building landing places, ports and bridges, characterizing the embankments and connecting them to the squares, have given rise to very peculiar and incisive types of spaces that characterize the city. In the variegated urban scenery, the river takes on an iconic and figurative value, in addition to being considered a place of great landscape value. Re-evaluating the fluvial presence in the contemporary city, both in terms of its use and in its perception, has been possible thanks to renewal policies that have as their object the margin spaces between land and water.

The “urban boundary” on the water is, very often, not valued; sometimes the city stretches over it, other times it detaches from it. However, the potential that these spaces represent for the city is recognized, as privileged places for the placement of new collective services.

For example, the landing place is an important “gate” to the city, therefore a symbolic place and it is also a privileged place of contact and connection between the river and the city.

Redesigning those areas that relate to the water’s border, with a particular destination such as port areas, industrial areas and disused shipyards, considered marginal areas of the city with their inclusive and impassable character, is possible through a regenerative approach, with the intent to save such areas from neglect. Urban planning is therefore considered essential to resolve the downfall in these areas with the city, making them an active, usable and safe part.

To strengthen the link between the city and the river, urban transformation must look at all the different scales to relate adequately with the existing fabric and the morphology of the territory. To re-design the water’s border it is therefore necessary to start from a close study of the place and acquire critical knowledge in order to define a new urban form that is related to the existing areas and that can recompose urban fabrics and paths to restore privileged visual points and points of contact with the river. The interventions along these strips of land, therefore, concern the image of the city and aim to establish new

connections between parts of the city with the aim of creating new centralities that reflect the identity of the city.

THE CITY-RIVER RELATIONSHIP: THE CASE OF LJUBLJANA

The city-river relationship is successful if we consider Ljubljana. The city of Ljubljana lies on the small river Ljubljanica, in a flood plain. Following the earthquake of 1895, it faced the problem of reconstruction and on this occasion, several architects (including K. Sitte, CM Koch, I. Vurnik and Max Fabiani) were commissioned to create a General Plan for the city, which dealt with a series of issues, from the development of the city, to its form, to its organization and to traffic regulation. Thirty years later, architect Jože Plečnik transformed his reflections on the relationship with Ljubljanica into an Urban Plan that referred to a new idea of living the river. His plan involved the central part of the city that develops around the ancient castle and in the tract of land of which interventions were carried out to control the flow of the watercourse. In this place, the banks of the river are artificially treated and the river is like a “boulevard”, that actively participates in the city, marked by trees, with frequent points of contact between the two banks; while in the most peripheral part of the city, the river cuts itself an autonomous strip of natural landscape and it is like an irrelevant presence for the fabric that develops around it. According to the Slovenian architect, tall buildings could not prevent the view from one bank to another, so he thought of opening arched passages in the buildings so that the city could continue to live together with its river.

The master plan of Plečnik of 1929, was able to go well beyond the simple arrangement of the embankments and the construction of bridges, he solved the problem of the removal of the river from the city, transforming it into the main urban public space. This respecting the nature of the river and the pre-existing buildings, paying attention to its morphological characteristics and building on them a new form of the city: green wedges supporting the image of the city as born on the valley but also representing functional elements of ecological view. Particular solutions concern the urban design elements scattered around the streets, the network of parks for improving the quality of life and their connections to water and adjacent areas.

Ljubljana is a city that has exploited the potential of the watercourse that flows through it, considering it as an opportunity to create a network of interconnected places. What M. Carta declaimed

“the waterfront is not just a line, but a network of places, functions, grafts and joints between the coast and the city, between the port and urban activities” (Carta M., 2006), in this case, can be transposed at the waterway. The reduction of the river in Ljubljana in a space inside the city, a space in which to look out, in which to descend, makes it an urban space in all respects. Furthermore, the “objects” that develop along the Ljubljanica are in dialogue with each other, in both a visual and functional relationship. Moreover, the city has taken on another way to relate to the river: to overhang it with bridges, which allows the city not only to cross it, but also to take possession of it, looking at it from above. The bridges, in Ljubljana, are

very frequent, they are not only the place of crossing, they are also places of being, of contemplating and sometimes they also become squares on the water on which the city life takes place (Figure 1).

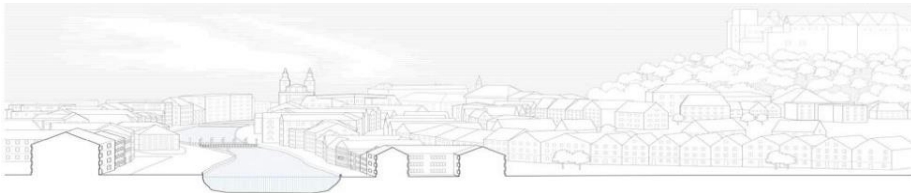


Figure 1: Section on the river in the center of Ljubljana.

Jože Plečnik made many plans for the connection of the city. The most famous consists in the arrangement of an existing bridge with the addition of two pedestrian paths, called for this the Triple Bridge, which connects the town market square, where the Robba fountain is located, with the iconic Prešernov Square, enclosed by the Franciscan Church of the Annunciation, its Monastery, an ancient pharmacy and the monument to France Prešernov. To the east, one connects to another emblematic building of the Slovenian architect: the Covered Market, positioned on the river's edge and frontally to the Cathedral of St. Nicholas. The building resumes the sinuous course of the river tracing the limit and has a curved colonnade in the inner part of the square. Following the course of the river, towards south, there is another bridge that connects the shores to the Congress Square with its park and the Church of the Holy Trinity. Continuing, noteworthy is the Shoemakers Bridge, with columns of different sizes that go towards the sky and enclose the space like a real square on the water. Then there is the Novi Square with its fountain and the National Library, again by Plečnik. Finally, I cannot fail to mention the Trnovo Bridge and the open spaces

of the former Port of Trnovo: an embankment modeled on steps that become seats for leisure time and make it possible to descend.

All the banks of the river in the center of the city are treated with trees, descents, stopping points, seats, visual goals such as those towards the ancient Castle, located at a higher altitude. These solutions create public spaces open on the water, which tend to be related both physically and visually, with existing public places and buildings and which represent new high-quality social spaces.

FRAGMENTATION ON THE RIVERFRONT IN BELGRADE

Belgrade is located near the confluence of the Sava River in the Danube and extends along both banks of the two rivers. Although different bridges connect the banks, pedestrian, cycle, vehicular and railway, the city seems to break off at the confluence, developing further inland.

The riverfront inside the city is composed of a series of parts, some natural, others that give rise to more industrial functions, which have shaped the river landscape. Except for the part of the riverfront that skirts the oldest city, it is made up of specialized areas, fenced and not very accessible, which hinder the contact of the city with its two rivers. Through the analysis of the Belgrade riverfront, three river chambers have been identified, not only for their particular morphology but also for the strategic position they occupy with appoint in making the riverfront continuous, permeable and truly an integral part of the city. These three areas, one identified along the banks of the Sava and two on the Danube, are come backs from a productive past and arise in positions of valuable landscape, in correspondence with the same number of docks. Their use has changed the original river landscape, modifying the natural banks of the river and occluding the soil. The areas are also characterized by the presence of a decommissioned railway track which connects them, and which represents an obstacle to the city's growth towards water. They are priority areas of renewal as they also intertwine with the landscape.

The presence of numerous rafts along the banks, with various functions, from sports centers to restaurants and entertainment venues, demonstrates the need of the inhabitants to enjoy the river more. In the current General Belgrade Urban Plan, new industrial areas located on the outskirts of the city have been identified in this regard. By relocating these productions activities close to the riverbanks, the current Plan for a chance to reclaim the unit in recomposing a unitary visual structure,

in which the elements of natural and urban, contribute to the realization of the design of the city.

The degraded areas due to economic, technological and social changes, such as the divestment in the industrial sectors and in the railway networks, can be invested by recovery projects that open up to the problem of the new relationship between these places, the city and its form. Once made available, these areas are a resource for re-establishing new connections between the parts that fence them, trying to create a dialogue among them. The re-composition of the shape of the city on the embankments of the riverside in the central part of the city represents an opportunity for its needs: from production sites to places of activity linked to urban uses, such as leisure, culture, commerce, work and residence. The goal is to create a more solid city-river connection, through a network of public spaces. The network system is set up through new routes along water courses and new connections, both physical and visual.

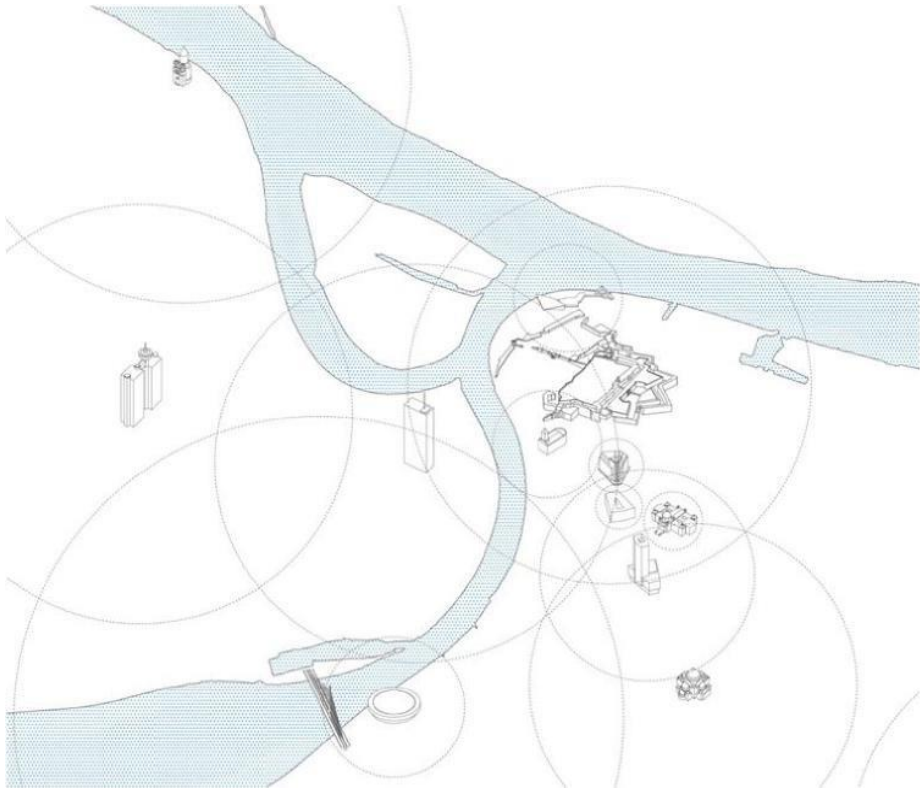


Figure 2: Landmark built of the city of Belgrade.

Parks and green areas along the river banks are a network for the city, such as the green pole of Ada Ciganlije, the park of the Republic, the park of the Memorial, the island of War, the terrace of Kalamegda; the elements that instead create a visual network between the banks of the rivers are

landmarks, such as the Usce Tower and the Museum of Contemporary Art in the west; the trade fair complex, the Avala Tower, the temple of S. Sava, the Victor with its terrace, the Sports Center 25th May to the east; also the Ada Bridge, which connects the two banks of the Sava to the south of the city, besides being an element of physical connection, constitutes one of the most important visual landmarks of the city (figure 2).

An example, currently under construction, may be the transformation of a large flat area located in a portion of the riverfront called the Amphitheater of the Sava, between the eastern bank of the Sava and the old depot of the main railway station. The project called Beograd na vodi (Belgrade on water), provides for the transformation of the area through the construction of a multi-purpose architectural complex composed of several buildings and a 168 meter tower positioned on the water boulder. But it stands as a hostile proposal for the existing urban context, completely disconnected from the nineteenth-century city behind; you can refer to the heights of the skyscrapers that hide the view of the river, the distances between the fronts of the buildings, the proportions of the new neighborhood compared to the rear, a completely new face of the city.

NEW CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PARTS OF CITIES: THE PROJECT IN BELGRADE

The topics presented start from an experience developed during the Degree Thesis in Architecture at the Polytechnic of Bari. The design model is based on the urban traces considered essential to reconfigure the areas currently unable to establish connections between the adjacent urban fabric and as Vasari wrote, it is “a work that has been measured with its pre-existing elements, trying to establish a fruitful dialogue between the existing and the new opportunities for transformation”. In this sense, the project seeks to be in continuity with the characteristics of the areas, aims to connect urban renewal and the landscape: the river has a leading role in space and aims to be the generating element of new urban forms. The goal is to equip the river bank with spaces and services for recreational functions, for collective

use; continue the green buffer already present on the banks of the rivers, in certain points, also thanks to the displacement of the railway and port ports, the transport of heavy vehicles and the railway, outside the center of Belgrade, which would favour the connection with the river.

The project aims to give back protagonism to natural elements through the rediscovery of a more direct relationship between city and river. For each of the three areas, mentioned above, located in an equal number of docks, planivolumetric solutions have been hypothesized that enhance the water's border, considering the river's finishing points, the main road axes and the most significant buildings of the city.

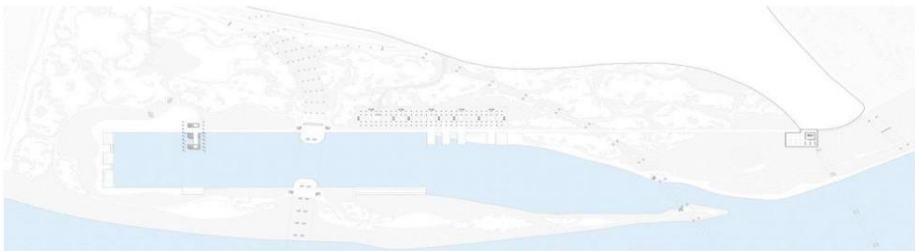


Figure 3: Ground floor plan of the project on the dock on the west bank of the Sava river.

As for a dock, located on the left bank of the Sava, taken as a sample, the fences of the former factory currently create a physical barrier between the city and the shipyard and prevent travel along the quay. The demolition of the plant, which began last year, will offer the city the extraordinary opportunity to regain its relationship with the river and rethink the shape of the entire riverfront, relying on the availability of this large area. The project embraces this principle and tries to complete the urban sequence of “places” and docks. The proposal is to create a network of places (or a visual network when it is not possible to create a physical network) with existing landmarks, and this is what our project did, with a paratactic composition of three elements in tension between them, to be placed in the three docks of the city, creating new public spaces that connect the city to the river. Each of the three elements changes measures and proportions according to the context and, their size, shape and position is such as to guarantee a continuous physical and visual tension. Through these three elements the dialogue with the city is established: there is a “tower-building”, which forms a network with the other landmarks; a “blade-building”, which stands as a limit element between city and water; a “slab-building”, whose position determines the new distance on the water in

the dock. The three buildings reflect the new lifestyle and the new relationships in land use and spatial mobility, work, life, recreation and transport are interconnected. Moreover, by enhancing the use of existing bridges, the connection also becomes physical: for example, in the dock located on the Sava, the former railway bridge is converted into a pedestrian cycle.

The other objective of the project is to bring the natural condition of the river landscape back into the city and its port basin. For this purpose, we decided not to saturate the abandoned areas, but rather to transform them into green areas, creating a large park in which to immerse the three buildings. The green from the park continues vertically on the terraces of the urban condenser buildings.

In the plan of the project of one of the three project areas, shown in figure 3, the connection between the spaces and the usability of the area on the ground floor was highlighted by placing the buildings on pilotis. While the external bank of the river is protected and maintained in its natural condition, the artificial margin of the dock is modeled with overhangs to sight and recreate privileged situations, from which to admire the city in symbiosis with the landscape, but also in the form of squares at a lower altitude and descents that make bathing possible (figure 4). This “adding to the beauty of the first nature, the beauty of an art and a landscape that has become a true second nature”, as Goethe wrote, in *Travel in Italy*.

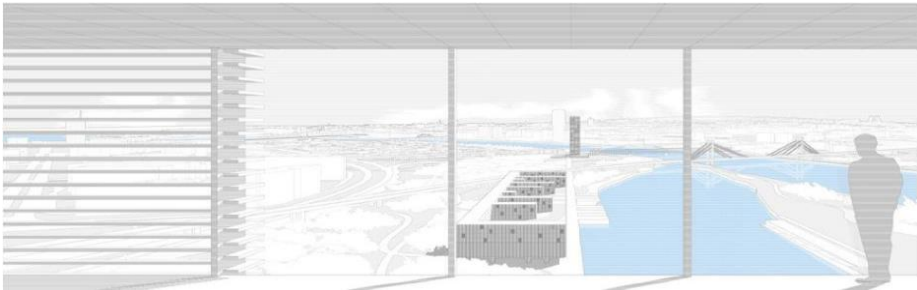


Figure 4: View of the project area from the designed “blade” building.

Through the project we try to provide a further interpretative key to sustainability, considered at the architectural level. All the precautions for the sustainability of the intervention and to favour energy saving (ventilation, exposure) were examined. The link of continuity between the architecture of the place and its identity is also expressed through the use of brickwork, visually in continuity with the

past, but reinterpreted by replacing its primitive supporting function with one of a covering cases.

CONCLUSION

The study aims to provide a methodological contribution to urban and architectural design in the uneven areas along the water courses, according to an approach that considers the project as a critical interpretation of the characteristics of the urban place and the landscape component.

The reflections related to the urban marginality of the water places and the consequent need to recover a unitary landscape vision, have led to the development of a project that aims to “re-weave” the interrupted urban fabric capable of giving physical and perceptive organicity to the areas.

It follows the hypothesis of a river park as a response to the question of the division between city and landscape, to be accomplished with the arrangement of the urban banks and with the establishment of an articulated and concatenated public space on the banks, capable of virtuously composing the urban riverfront thus becoming new centrality for the city.

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