

The Mental Island

A Reflection of Master Thesis

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Genoa, as an old and traditional Italian harbour city which was redeveloped by the rules of contemporary urbanism, is featured by grids and plots conditions. While the cells in the grids reveal a hybridity which works against the contemporary rules. The research of the thesis uncover the hybridisation and the conflicts within it. By digging into the specific language of hybridity, the project called The Mental Island is proposed as a co-existing system to embrace the contradictions of the contemporary city.



The Hybridity

Research

Infrastructure was chosen as an object to look into the city of Genoa. It is, in most cases, functionally, economically and efficiently designed and constructed by engineers, which has a strong power to facilitate the city. Conventionally, due to their single functional need like road or bridge, the form converge to standard so that they would be easy to operate. But in Genoa, due to exceptional geographical and topographical condition, the infrastructure become fragmentary and discontinuous, and generate many undefinable exceptions. They become hybrids which are intertwined and woven with architecture and landscape. Some old infrastructure even lose either the functional value or the historical value and convert to host of parasitic buildings or fields. In case of the harbour, a pure artificial land, all the facilities are completely based on infrastructure like embankment and breakwater, where the land is only the filler.

Infrastructure, like highway and retaining wall, as well as the residential buildings and shops, are together with the landscape seen as one system. They are sediments of one and the same geology. These hybrids reveal the interdependent relation between infrastructure, landscape and architecture. In the system of contemporary city, the pre-defined plot condition is disrespected by the underlying condition of hybrids. The site is not simply the physical ground. Considering time, there is not absolute condition, the infrastructure and the architecture are also integrated into the site. They respond to the metropolitan pressures of escalating land values and the constraint of the urban grid. There is no pure order or harmony here in the city. To realise the ever-existing contradictions is to admit the hybridity and embrace its great potential for the ever-accelerated changing city. And the key for the coexist elements in hybrids is a fluid system in

contemporary cities, in which infrastructure, architecture and landscape are kept being renegotiated with and redefined by each other.

In the hybrid system, none of the objects is fully obedient or autonomous, different forces make the objects to interact with each other, claiming their own position and repositioning themselves. None of the objects are fixed. The contemporary city is a system in motion, which is full of fluid conditions. Unlike the traditional city which demarcates a figure against the ground of its surrounding landscape, in the contemporary city figure-ground distinctions are revoked.¹

The city is not a static entity but a mutable organisation made of different components, adaptable to varying circumstances. The contradictory conditions of urban contexts are marked by irregularities. In a differentiated play of dense and empty spaces, of infra-structures and housing-structure, of natural and artificial natures, a continuous urban landscape is formed. Through the superimposition of systems a field is generated promoting spaces of fluid quality. The imposed external order does not make the city evolve, but the internal interdependencies. The fluid condition mirrors the material and cultural changes. Urban space is created, less by the implementation of predetermined type forms than by the tension resulting from a field of interactive forces. In that, architecture eludes the domain of bounded compositions to favour the dynamic, unceasingly fluid condition of the urban landscape.

The imposed order and grids of traditional city miss their target in the fluid system as there is no necessity for external order. Still, their unconscious conflicts with the fluid condition reveal the reality of the system. A system in motion is formed inside the city, within which infrastructure, architecture and landscape lost their autonomy, open to new interpretations and embrace new relations between different, sometimes contradictory forces. The city forms a territory of strategic possibilities in which the relation between different parts is unceasingly renegotiated and redefined. There will be no predefined plots condition awaiting for crystallised architectural intervention. The weakened authority of architects does not mean to wipe out their position, instead it calls for the new identity of architects, an identity to conceive an open structure which incorporates the autonomous and interdependent objects in the fluid system.

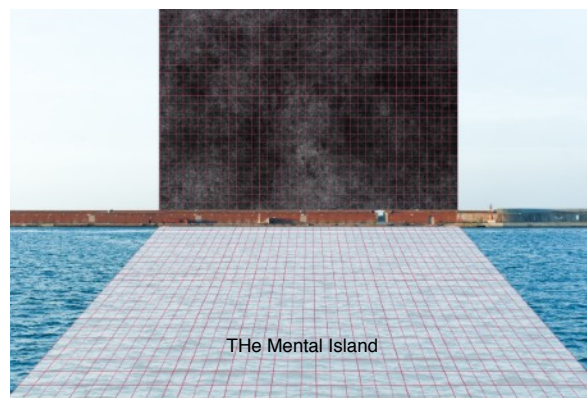


The Boundary between the Sea and the Land

¹ "Design versus Non-Design" Paper presented at the First International Congress of Semiotic Studies, Milan, July 1974; published in *Oppositions* 6 (Fall 1976), 67.

The Translation of Hybrid Condition

To translation the hybrid condition, the city is seen as an engraved artificial land by different forces. Especially the harbour of Genoa, where there is even no pre-determined topographical condition, the driven forces there are completely artificial. Starting from the construction of lighthouse, as a symbolic object, which informs people from the sea that the land is close, more thresholds were brought to condition the artificial land, for instance, the new docks of the harbour, the original waterfront, the line between the municipality of the city and the municipality of the harbour, the breakwater that prevent the wave, etc. They together become a complex threshold that filters the thing from the sea to the land. Also these thresholds make each other discontinuous. For example, being blocked by the new mega structure, machines, buildings, the lighthouse is not visible from every corner of the sea. They intertwined with each other and give the two sides fragmentary informations. And the sea is impossible to be directly perceived from the land. By mapping the fragmentary information of the thresholds, the condition of the artificial land is revealed as a clue for the design part.



The Mental Island

The breakwater, as the ultimate boundary between the sea and the land, becomes a new potential territory for the city. As an infrastructure, it prevents the wave from attacking the harbour. But as a wall, it blocks the citizens from seeing the horizon. The conflict within it is an epitome of the hybridity of the city. This ultimate boundary is also an island which is parallel and physically disconnected to the city. The breakwater is proposed to be The Mental Island for citizens to escape from the artificial land. They become two sides of the city. The conditions are opposite. On the artificial land, the life comes to a convergence. none of the objects is fully obedient or autonomous, they all flow in a fluid condition. They exist, in a way, not to be independent objects, but through the struggle of compromising and intransigence. They all lost in the hybrid system. While the mental island offers a new public realm for mental isolation. By doing collective activities, the citizens think individually. The physical disconnection is kept. No road to the breakwater will be built. As a completion of escaping, a boat is necessary to be taken to reach the island. Either the physical and the mental distance is kept in this way. Due to the typographical condition, the visibility of the island reached most part of the city, which seduce the citizens into wondering about it.

The idea recalls the traditional monastery. It proposed a physically simple way of living in order to touch the mental dimension of people. The site of a monastery has to be far away from cities or towns. Only basic physical needs like water, food, energy, sleeping are required. The rest of daily life in monastery are ritually done. Striping the religious part of monastery, the rest can be a prototype for the mental island, which are defined as entry, departure, water collection, farm land, energy collection, dormitory, cloister, ritual hall, reading hall, refectory, etc.

On this linear island, repetitive matrices are introduced to incorporate these activities. As the breakwater is paralleled to the city, each matrix reflects the corresponding part of the artificial land. To show the hybridisation of the land, the fragmentary information is incorporated in the spacial organisation. The matrix are cut into public space and service zone. The points where the thresholds are interrupted become the gaps of the island. These gaps work as transitional zone to connect other matrices, the public space become a continuous experience on this island. By organising the openings of the walls, the natural light becomes a passive clue which guides people walking in the continuous space. The view of the public space is always shifting between the artificial land and the horizon. One side is the reality of life, the other side is the idealism of escaping. Within the thickness of the boundary between the sea and the land, the experience remind speople the idea of besieged city. On the one hand, people want to escape from the daily routine, one the other hand, the idealism is just a beauty of temporality.

Three Matrices

Even though the breakwater is a linear repetitive infrastructure, there are still some slight change and joints between the old and the new. Three matrices are chosen at a crucial and exceptional joint to experiment the architectural dimension of the mental island. They are composed of entry, departure, ritual hall, refectory, reading hall and dormitories. The ground level are ritual space relating to the changing tide and horizontal connection with the other matrices. The mid level is the main public realm where people do collective activities. The top level are the cells for people to stay temporarily. As the buildings block the two sides of the breakwater, the entry immediately bring people into the continuous experience within the thickness. The end of the project is not the building itself, while by going back to the artificial land, the departure of the mental island complete the meaning of the new territory.