La Ville et La Mer

The reconstruction of a broken connection between two separate parts is a defined action that can be described in different fields of our knowledge. Even if we can easily be led to think about this action merely as a restoration of the broken piece or of the missing part, the complexity of this action can be reached with a vast spectrum of operations. The short research and thesis regarding the city of Casablanca and its relationship with the sea represents a specific occasion to exemplify a different approach to a fragmented urban pattern.

The interest regarding this particular relationship between a city and its sea was triggered by the initial effort to understand the role and the value of the monumental presence of the industrial harbor in Casablanca. Instead of reading this urban fragment per se, the first step taken was to compare this harbor founded and developed under the French protectorate to the French harbor of Marseille. This action was taken in order to emphasize two completely different roles, and consequently two drastically divergent influences that these urban figures played in the conformation of the cities.

If Marseille played a strategic role as a commercial and infrastructural knot since the Roman period, Casablanca instead developed from the original city of Anfa, in less than 100 years. Timing however is not the only factor that contributes in shaping this fundamental relationship between urban tissue and harbor. The historical period in which these two urban structures develop is critical in order to clarify their attitude towards the city. In Marseille, it is impossible to read the structure of the settlements without taking in strict consideration the harbor and its shape. The city and the sea both find their main interlocutor in the harbor. This is due to the fact that the great development of maritime commerce in the south of France took place during a specific period in which these cities feared attacks from the sea and the harbor, as the most vulnerable point. These points became also the most defended. The main buildings and the institution were placed around it and the activities of the city were evolving there.

Casablanca, instead, saw its economical development happen around a specific historical event, Colonialism. This ensured a strong hegemony of the seas to few nations, which shifted the focus from the sea to the mainland. The harbor, as a piece of land ferried from France, feared more the possible inland assaults from the locals rather than a war in open sea. The harbor turned its back to the city and developed with it a strict and controlled relationship, strong enough to defend itself, but still capable of establishing an economical connection. The harbor and the city are two separates entities and the wall is their mediator. The sea is far away.

The harbor and its multiple walls are just one architectural expression of the clear detachment between the city and the sea. In fact we can name four specific moments, all referable to a distinct architectural/urban element, that describe the evolution of the gap between city and sea.

The city of Casablanca has its core in the old agglomeration of the medina, the old city of Anfa, which was walled and positioned in the proximity of the old harbor. However this urban fragment, as the landscape of the seaside, did not play a role in the shaping of the settlement, which, as an enclave, was perceived as a separate entity.

After the implosion of the city and the fast growth brought by the French protectorate, the end of colonialism recalled for a strong revaluation of the local culture and more importantly for a reconfirmation of the monarchy. The construction of the largest mosque in
Morocco, named after the former king, was not a simple magnification of the central power. This construction had a specific role in the mediation between water and city. The rise of this iconic building ratified the demolition of the most significant intervention of the French protectorate concerning the appropriation of the seaside. The Hassan II mosque was erected over the largest seawater pool in the world, built during the French domination. This infrastructure was not just a symbol of colonization, but also the only great and concrete approach to the sea as an integrated part of the city and not as a frame to urban expansion. The pool introduced in Casablanca the idea of the sea as a space of mass culture. Bathing, especially in such an infrastructure, was a typical European vision of the beach and the sea. This was replaced with an enormous structure, which showed no connection with the urban pattern and, especially, substituted a smooth connection with the water through retaining wall of 17 meters.

Nowadays, with the monarchy of Morocco looking out for Europe and America, in order to become an economical and social leader in Africa, Casablanca is becoming a full-formed metropolis. The sea is becoming of a prominent interest and also a political space of confrontation. The main free coastline of Casablanca, running from El Hank to the far end of Anfa, the new rich neighborhood, is now being privatized. New walls are now limiting the access to the sea, and the water of private pools in each club has become the new inaccessible sea.

The Enclave, the Harbor, the Mosque and the Pool are urban architectures of four historical periods that singed a strong separation between the city and the sea of Casablanca.

In Marseille, the repercussion of the synergic and coherent development of both the coastline and the harbor together with the cityscape is the presence of a varied but homogeneous evolution of a specific urban pattern.

The fragmented and fast transformation that took place in the Moroccan city is instead one of the reasons of a discontinuous and disunited series of urban tissues which aggregate by proximity but not by typology or morphology.

The same relationship of complete detachment that the analysis showed between the urban scape and the sea is easily definable within the city itself. The space of Casablanca doesn’t work by contiguity, but by a different logic, which refers to a different semantic set of actions as fragmentation, proximity, enclaving and limitation.

Place des Nations Unies is a clear example of this urban condition. Here, three different patterns, the old city (medina), the French city, and the new touristic center meet in a point that doesn’t act as an urban catalyst, but as an unresolved knot. This specific urban segment, instead of unifying the city structure, shows all its fragmentation.

This preliminary analysis guided the conclusions towards a clear research question: "How to reconnect the city of Casablanca with the sea?"

This statement arises different implications. The subject of this urban intervention should be the city in its whole size. The project should be able to heal the division between the city and its coastline, but also present a more complex approach towards the urban fragmentation, by presenting a design with three different scale of intervention: regional, urban and architectural.

Secondly, the methodology applied should learn from the spatial condition and tradition of Casablanca and structure a successful typology of intervention based on one simple
condition, reconnect within the division. This method of designing is the opposite of substituting a limit with a connection, but instead consists in acknowledging the fragmentation and establishing, within it, a new layer and a new logic to recreate the lost/missing network. This aim can be reached only through a punctual project based on a large scale of intervention. The connection is not created by the over-imposition of a complex and larger system, but by the careful and accurate selection of few fundamental elements, capable of creating a specific series of combinations, repeated over the entire site.

What this methodology essentially represents can be described by the action of populating different fields with the repetition of a module, composed by a discrete quantity of elements. The space of intervention is the public realm. Concretely, at this point, the selection of the elements, their specific combination, and their materialization become the keystones to define a logical and coherent intervention. If in the clarification of this method the experience of Tschumi and Parc de la Villete played a prominent role; in the definition of the elements and their combination the studying of Case Study Houses in California represented the main reference. Two main ideas were derived from the analysis of the different plans. These houses completely ignored the surroundings and the landscape. The interior was strong, not alterable, and ideally they could be place on any plot. The module for Casablanca had to play the opposite role, by acknowledging the outer realm and the context as the main actor. It needed to reflect the public space within its interior configuration.

Secondly these projects all rotated around a specific spatial combination, which found its equilibrium around a specific architectural element: the fireplace. The fire, as the center of the private and familiar life, was translated into the water as catalyzer of public activities and the fireplace found its correspondent in the fountain.

Together with the fountain, other three elements are identified, each of them with a specific function. The structure of the module is solved by employing a concrete construction of precast elements. The rectangular configuration of this structure allows for a shape that avoids the central figure of the square and open to a wider possibility of interactions and over-impositions offered by a vectorial space.

The second element is the surface, with three possible dimensions and three different planar configurations. This element puts in communication the module with the context. A combination of two canopies, cantilever from the structure 1.5 meters; define the relationship between the public space and the interior of the module. These four elements, combined in different sets, generate a module capable of holding different functions, but mostly adequate to develop a specific public space.

The different configurations of these elements are consequently placed in the urban tissue following two rules and adopting one tool. Firstly the module always has to clarify the space in which it's placed without interfering structurally with the context. The settlement of the module is guided by a set of surfaces, which create an urban carpet that defines a place for action. The public space has its generator, the module; and its stage, the surface.
If the module acts at an architectural scale and its placement generates an urban methodology, the regional strategy puts the design in direct relation with the site’s logics.

During the analysis three sites were taken in consideration and one was chosen for further development.

The site of El Hank, as described in the research, is a point of strong interest, since it represents the only free and un-planned piece of coastline along the entire shore of Casablanca. Socially, it frames a defined political picture. The historical presence of a military camp, transformed into a walled bidonville, clashes with modernist slabs of apartments on one side and with the pressing presence of large villas’ plots on the other. The site hosts also the first part of the Corniche, the most touristic and rich part of the city, which faces directly a large plot of un-built land. These preconditions create a perfect field to implement the possibilities of the module and reestablish a strong connection both between the city and sea, and between the different urban fragments.

The logic derived from the site highlights two historical axes, both deducible from the morphology of the bidonville. These two lines become the backbones of the entire project and reveal the main directions of the elements, modules, and surfaces arranged on the plots.

The repetition of an element along a given direction generates a specific urban pattern. This is able to configure a direct physical and visual connection between separate parts of the site and to establish a specific relation with the context, acknowledging its nature and spatiality.

The end of each axis generates a connection with the sea.

The political statement of the public access to the beach, the recreational intervention of the pier reaching out for deep water and the poetic lighthouse, which will always ensure a view of the ocean, represent the strong materialization of a complex intervention on the full picture of a city struggling to define its nature and history of maritime settlement.

This project acts with a multilayered approach in order to unify the scales and present an intervention capable of turning the back of Casablanca, and, through the public space, redesigns a complete relation between the city and the sea.