
Delirious Public Space

Porto's *Marginal* as a contemporary atlas for the reconstruction of city edges.

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ABSTRACT. The article aims to focus on the urban margins as possible territories for building public space, overcoming the already tested relations "city center/suburbs", "continuous city/urban sprawl", finding in them the "materials" of an urban project: limits, borders, boundaries, marginal areas should be no more intended as obstacles to the city construction, but as the new elements of contemporary design. To better understand the issue and the current trends of transformation of these spaces, the case-study of Porto's Marginal explain how many ways a city can live its water edges. The analysis of these heterogeneous but continuous projects aim to focus on the several techniques of urban composition to build contemporary public spaces. They give form to a continuous "public figure", but they also can be considered as parts of a "atlas" of liminal places, giving form to public spaces.

KEYWORDS. Urban Composition, Margin areas, boundaries, water edges, distance, urban form

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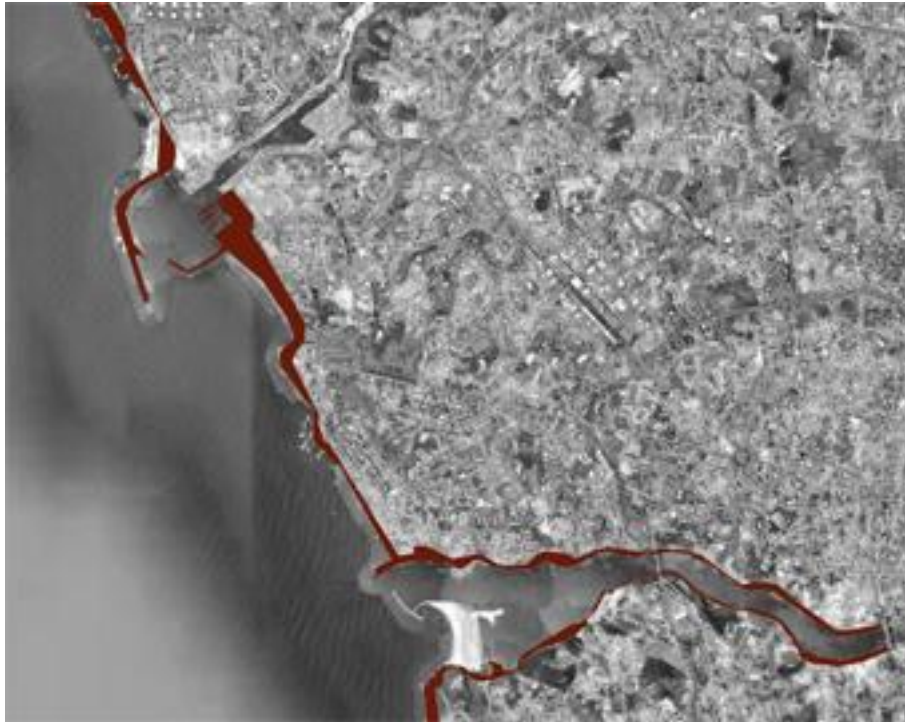


Fig.1

1. Places on the margin: new territories for public spaces.

Over the centuries, several kind of spatial organizations gave form to our cities. Nowadays we are able to call the different parts of those "*formae urbis*", recognizing their origins, transformations and the relations among them. On the contrary, we speak about contemporary city just in a "negative" way (Derrida would say that we call it by "*différance*"): it is NOT an historical city anymore, it is NOT a metropolis, sometimes it is NOT a solid city (Novak, Koolhaas), someone think it is NOT even a city (Duque, 2004). These lasts are ideas of cities where the construction of architecture is increasingly becoming an abstract conceptualization of a possible "non-city". On the other hand, we can still consider the contemporary city as "made up of things", making them the matter of the urban design's work and the contents of its proposal (M. de Solà Morales, 2008). Anyway, its characters may still be identified, revealing the possible identity of the spaces "cut out" of well-established centers and forgotten by urban expansion, those who - just outside the city limits and before its dispersion - can found in the scale of urban design attention to the physical architecture, the memory of places, the characterization of its parts.

As the expansion is a character of the city, Cacciari (2004) states that the **city tends to "be a de-lirium"** (get out of the "*lira*", Latin word for "limit, boundary").

The article aims to focus on the **urban margins** as possible territories for building public space, overcoming the already tested relations "city centre/suburbs", "continuous city/urban sprawl", finding in them the "materials" of an urban project. Traditionally, the centre has been the most important place in the city, but we are now faced with a reality where edges within the city – the lines and the zones which separate different parts of the city – have to be brought to life, considering them as the new important spaces of contemporary cities. Limits, borders, boundaries, marginal areas should be no more intended as obstacles to the city construction, but as the new elements of contemporary design, as Richard Sennet underlines: *"the planning of the last century was hopeless at creating or promoting borderlands; when urbanists thought about the alternative to the sealed boundary, the dead edge, they could imagine only stripping away all distinctions, creating amorphous "open" public space. (...) We need, then, to re-think the morphological elements that mark an urban edge (...)"¹.*

Particularly in the case of the margins, it has dropped the idea that talking about them means talking of their perception in the territory as linear elements (Lynch, 1960). On the contrary, when the city removed the constructed boundaries (the walls) - that separated the city from the fields - this concept begins to come out, with the idea of a space that can exist between two different systems, so that margins could be detectable and distinguished as "areas" and "surfaces". May we transform this particular kind of margins in public spaces? What about the morphological elements that characterize these areas? And may we network public spaces in order to construct new landscapes?

2. The *liminal* elements as "design materials"

In the XVIII century city the spaces out of the old walls, just close to the well-established centers, were empty areas between two distinguished parts of the city, and they were considered as able to limit an unchecked growth: urban planners thought at ring public spaces as urban voids to convert in public boulevards, such as in the Vienna's Ring, or in green parks, such as in the later British idea of green-belt. Nowadays, the different character of this areas – neither an elementary void nor a defined fabric - also required a different way to deal with its urban and architectural design, particularly if intended as public space. Although the city grew and their parts were not recognizable anymore, its shapes melt in a liquid spatiality where parts are turning into *"floating objects in a continuous fluid"* (Anselmi, 1996): it is not a liquid space without physical features, but a real space where the consolidated parts of the city dissolve their edges, waiting for a new configuration. These new **liminal territories** are rich in **variety** and **differences** and are set up of several elements made of different morphologies that should be carefully read and interpreted in order to turn them in "design materials". Not all the elements that take place in the margin can be considered as margins. In the research developed during the PhD Program, the author of this article tried to identify and to classify the several elements that bound contemporary cities, trying to explain how their different meanings evolved in different projects.

In the case of the **limit**, for example, we are confronting with a linear element of a dual nature. Romans distinguished the "limes" – the separation line between two different system – from "limen", considered as a threshold or a line that hedge in a shape. If working with limits, this distinction helps architect in turning the character of barrier of a limit in a connective one, able to keep in contact different shapes that lie along the line. This is the case, for example, of the conversion of the old high line of NYC in the linear park by Diller&Scofidio. But it is also the case of the

Lauro's Town Planning by Francesco Venezia, where a limit is intentionally drawn in order to underline the difference between urban and rural areas.

Sometimes also a **boundary** – obviously a negative exasperation of a limit – can be intended as architecture: this is the case of the Berlin Wall, read as it was an architecture by Rem Koolhaas² and inspiring him for his thesis degree project: thinking about boundaries, *"It is possible to imagine a mirror image of this terrifying architecture, a force as intense and devastating but used instead in the service of positive intentions. Division, isolation, inequality, aggression, destruction, all the negative aspects of the Wall, could be the ingredients of a new phenomenon: architectural warfare against undesirable conditions"*³

When we deal with a **border**, on the other hand, we are usually faced with a state of absence of a clear limit between different systems: as the limit does not exist, we are going to think about a sort of "device" in order to create a depth, able to filter the passage from an urban system to another one. As underlined by Desvigne, a border is *"a continuous band which replaces the line and gains in variety. It expands and swells, more or less according to what it finds. It demands the invention of specific solutions with its own vocabulary"*⁴

On the contrary, we should refer to margins as **"margin areas"**, that zones that take shape from the margins of different parts but that are spaces in themselves anyway. This definition depends on their nature of surfaces, as the measure of their depth distinguishes them from the linear elements of limits and boundaries. It is an amount that exists over a reference, what comes after, a distance. It is an idea of space whose concept derives from the one of "buffer zones"; due to this, it could not be considered as a simple line of demarcation between an "inside" and an "outside" but rather as a set of elements taking different declinations depending on the specificity of the cases. Their area could be defined through elements such as limits, borders or boundaries, those elements able to characterize themselves and the same area as a new space in the contemporary city.

3. Porto's Marginal: a paradigmatic case-study

Among the different kind of margin areas, the ones that border the cities on their watersides are particularly interesting. The city has always been confronting with its own end and the beginning of the water system. After the developing of ports as infrastructural and industrial system, a different morphology was attached to the city, often leaving wide spaces out of both urban fabric and port infrastructure. As many important port cities have been thinking about a new role for their port activity, they are also planning again their relationship with the sea. Thus, a lot of cities of the Mediterranean area are already working for recovering public spaces on their undefined margins, such as in the case of the Cultural Forum Area in Barcelona or in the Euromediterranée zone in back of the Marseille's Port. Furthermore, even in the case were a rigid tissue does not leave any possibility for residual spaces between the city and the sea, a need of "margining" the urban fabric in a different way seems to be a central question in the current debate (e.g. the Manhattan Grid and its relationship in continuity with its piers that is nowadays brought into question).

In this general scenario, the case-study of Porto's Marginal is almost paradigmatic for many reasons. First of all, it is really emblematic because of its name that really



Fig.2

fixed to the idea of the spaces we are talking about. In Portuguese, the word "**marginal**" literally means "the road along a water's surface" but, in common parlance, more or less agrees with the concept of a coastal road. In Porto, the word is used as a proper noun (the Marginal) and it indicates without distinctions the several stretches that lie along the coasts of three municipalities of the metropolitan city: Oporto, Matosinhos and Vila Nova de Gaia. Nowadays, although the differences of its several parts, on a large scale it is configured as a strip of **15 kilometers of public space**, whose need is related to a sort of "discovering" as Fatima Fernandes and Michele Cannatà well underlines. In their study about the shape of public spaces (Cannatà, Fernandes, 2002) they highlight the degradation of many areas of Portuguese cities due to a discrepancy between the history and the state of affairs, between the architectural and the urban design. This is due to a different way of conceiving architecture in past. While in most European cities, squares, roads, wide squares, parks and boulevards were already considered as shaped elements for designing cities, in Porto - maybe because of its peculiar geography with its significant changes of altitude - the city has been built paying attention to the individual buildings that, juxtaposed to each other, left empty spaces as remnants. Only recently, Portuguese authority has begun to think about these spaces as a **resource** to be returned to communities.

This recent "**discovering**" need a deep approach to the shape of this voids in order to interpret and design them in a contemporary way and according to the several conditions they deal with. A big distinction concerns, in this case, the numerous little voids of the historical centre and all the spaces included in the distance between the city and the water. We refer to Colin Rowe and his way of reflecting on

the **relationship figure/ground** (Rowe, Koetter, 1983): as in the Imperial Rome and in the Baroque city, even more in the contemporary city it is possible to interpret the coexistence of a double way to combine objects with ground. In the historical center of Porto, the set of these small vacuoles, these "in-between" spaces, may constitute a sort of new "background" for the city, from which come off the solids. That's not true in the case of the **Marginal**, where the empty space identifies an **autonomous figure**: it includes several areas between the city and the water but all of them united by their particular relationships with the orographical limits and by their condition of margining a part of the city. This could be also another reason why it is called it "Marginal", as it is drawn like a figure not only on the paper but also in the collective imagination.

Nevertheless, the different extent of the distance between city and water leads to reflect on the different types of relationships (and therefore projects) between the end of one side and the beginning of another. For Porto, those are not only urban parts, but also different geographical parts (sea, rivers, topography) that distance puts in relation through the design sometimes of the line, at time of the border or of a surface. So, the analysis of these **heterogeneous but continuous projects** aim to focus on the several techniques of urban composition to build contemporary public spaces. On one hand they give form to a continuous "**public figure**", on the other hand each one of the project can be considered as part of a "**atlas**" of **liminal places**, giving form to the many ways a city can live its water edges, building public spaces.

4. The several shapes of Marginal public spaces

According to circumstances and to historical and geographical conditions, all the projects we are going to describe do not take into account only the coast but they also assume that this line may be increased in thickness, becoming a surface for the connection between the sea and the city. These characters are not established by precise strategic planning, but by the desire to give back to the community as much public space as possible. Even continuity between projects it is the result of a spontaneous spatial proximity, rather than an action program. The study clearly shows that not all that "marginalize" the city to the sea, can be understood as "margin", showing us projects that works with limit as material design, others with edges, others with margin areas specifically.

4.1 LIMIT/LINE: Marginal do Douro between Alfandega and Passeio Alegre

Before the Marginal, we find a little stretch of public space called "**Ribeira**", the riverbank. The architectural element of the wall "Muro dos Bacalhoeiros" clarify the relationship between the city and the river. It is an evidence of the transformation from "limes" (when the old walls separated the city from what was outside it) to "limen", later when the wall became a passage for goods and then an inhabited threshold between the built fabric and its public space. The project by Manuel Fernandes de Sa gives a greater value to the wall, linking it both to the river and to Dom Luis bridge through new descents and ramp systems. On the one side it reconfigures at the urban level the theme of crossing - and the attack on the ground, creating a sort of new basement for the Ribeira area; on the other hand, the distance between the wall and the water is no longer perceived as "outside" the

city, but thanks to a similar operation on the opposite riverfront of Vila Nova de Gaia, it become part of one large public space that include the river.

From Alfandega to Rua da Ouro, the project for the Marginal exclusively focus on the road section, that includes the driveway, the tram and the pedestrian promenade. Here the buildings, advancing or retreating from the river, allow the Marginal "line" article itself, bypassing some elements and in some cases even "doubling" itself: so it also happens that where the houses are too near the water, the pedestrian and tram lines continue to run along the town, while the driveway separates from them, taking place on the water.

From the observatory to the river outfall, instead, the road follows a series of parks and gardens. It should be considered as a line that attaches to itself the various systems of contact with the river in different ways. The road loses a direct contact with water, distinguishing the faster crossing areas from the ones of the standing.

Despite the different character of the riverfront stretches, in each one of these cases the limit is always considered in relation to the road, this last becoming a connection between the several elements of the river system. We are not even in situations of border or margin, but we are dealing with a limit which is redesigned as a line that link together elements of different nature.



Fig. 3

4.2 EDGE/STRIP: the redevelopment of the Marginal of Matosinhos Sul and Leça da Palmeira

If the previous cases deal with the form of Marginal as a line, the cases involving the Faixa Marginal of Matosinhos Soul and the one of Leça de Palmeira aim to clarify why they are titled as "marginal strip" rather than simple "marginal". Compared to previous designs, the main difference is that it is no longer the line which combines the element that delimits with an additive process, but it is more the creation of a sort of "lisier ideal" to mediate the relationship between two

systems. It identifies a "device" and a another kind of "figure", a first and primary "form of the distance", which perhaps the margin is a more complex derivative of.

In the case of **Leça da Palmeira**, the design by Alvaro Siza proposes the redevelopment of the Avenida da Liberdade with a plan that provides a range of green and a pedestrian path that runs parallel to the coastline, and that overlap each other in some areas to allow the crossing of green areas and the connection with two relevant elements, previous works by the same architect: the natural pools of 1966 and the Casa de Chà da Boa Nova of 1963.

In the case of **Matosinhos**, the project of Souto De Moura provides for the creation of what is defined as "*a marginal new platform next to the beach*"⁵, which includes the functions of underground parking and a monitoring and interpretation center of the environment. In addition to the wider measure of the design section, what causes a change in this case, giving it a meaning of "strip" is its perimeter: in fact, the project could have been solved with the redesign of the coastal road, while its cross section is incorporated into the wider one of the project, being part of a device that allows the passage from the end of the urban system to the beach.



Fig. 4

4.3 MARGIN/SURFACE: The Passeio Atlantico

The urban space that stretches between the beach of Molhe, at the south point of the Avenida Montevideu, and the beginning, to the north, of the Marginal of Matosinhos, is a very complex and diversified area. This area, due to its nature of being among different systems, was in time the scene to various activities and

today constitutes a parterre of diversity, "**margin**" of several things: the end of the **Foz district**, that overlooks the rocky coast, the **Parque da Cidade**, which acts as a "mouth" to de Galhineiras valley trough the ocean, the beginning of the **settlement system of Matosinhos Sul** that arises as a fifth on the sandy beach. To these places, the strategy of the project by Manuel de Sola Morales overlaps, proposing to "*break the interpretation of unitary and monolithic local road, introducing another scale in order to experience the city and the coast. It is the scale that looks for the recognition of minor forms of the land, those who recognize and discover themselves along the separate episodes*". So, the project solves the specific combination of "*civilized public spaces, product of development and of human activity, real cultural products of our time*"⁶

The project proposes a first portion of a still linear trend that descends through paths over the rocky cliff (Passeio Geologico of Foz), while in a second stretch it enlarges the thickness of the coastline to the point of create a composition made of different surfaces, able to hold together the margin of the different systems. The redefinition of the area starts with the construction of a viaduct that connects the entering area of the City Park with the Atlantic beach. So, the road overtops, allowing the boundary that used to divide these two areas to combine the two surfaces: the one made of sand, the other of green. On these lasts, stand some objects at different scale: the existing Castle of Queso, focal point for the connection of the area with the walk coming from the south, the former building of the French College that - even ruin - plays a central role within the perspective as an escape from various points of the walk; the crossings of the park; the platform upon the sea; the seats; the "transparent building" which connects with the street level and the walk through the North, toward Matosinhos . In some places the natural surface is mixed with the designed artificial one, creating some elevations that allow a complete pedestrian use of space without invading the almost untouched site.



Fig. 5

Notes

¹ Sennet R., "*Boundaries and borders*" in Burdett R., Sudjic D. (edited by), "Living in the endless city", Phaidon Press Ltd, London, 2011, p.324

² cf. "*Field Trip*" in Koolhaas R., Mau B., "S, M, L, XL", The Monacelli Press, New York, 1995

³ Koolhaas R., Mau B., "S, M, L, XL", The Monacelli Press, New York, 1995, p.5

⁴ M. Desvigne, "*épaissir les lisières*" in AJN – JEAN NOUVEL AREP – JEAN-MARIE DUTHILLEUL MICHEL CANTAL-DUPART "NAISSANCES ET RENAISSANCES DE MILLE ET UN BONHEURS PARISIENS", available on the website: http://www.legrandparis.culture.gouv.fr/documents/NOUVEL-AREP-MCD_Livret_chantier_2.pdf

⁵ Guedes Marques, "*Intervenção em Matosinhos*" in AA.VV. "Intervenção do Programa Polis em Matosinhos", Edição POLISMATOSINHOS, SA, matosinhos 2004.

⁶ M. De Solà Morales, "*Oporto, Passeio Atlantico: Topografia maritima como estrutura civica*" in M. De Solà Morales, "De cosas urbanas", Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2008, pag. 46.

Legends

Fig.1 The "Marginal" of the city of Porto on a large scale.

Fig.2 The relationship figure/ground in the area of Marginal compared to the historical centre.

Fig.3 Limit/Line: the Ribeira.

Fig.4 Edge/Strip: Matosinhos Sul.

Fig.5 Margin/Surface: the area of Passeio Atlantico.

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Biography

Giuseppe Parità (Naples, 1983) architect, PhD. He graduated in architecture in 2008 at the University of Naples “Federico II”, in 2009 he awarded the competition for Ph.D. in Urban Design of the same Faculty. After following a Programme of research in Madrid at the ETSA, in 2012 he held the title of Doctor Europaeus defending a thesis titled “Places on the margins. Urban Delirious in contemporary cities.” Currently engaged in scientific research, he is teaching assistant for the

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