

PRACTICES

Harbouring Creativity from the Channel to the Black Sea

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ABSTRACT

The article tells the story of three Port-Cities: Le Havre (France), Taranto (Italy) and Turku (Finland). Creative development strategies turn the cities' port into a key element for a new urban identity, one that is more connected to creative heritage and culture and less with industrial exploitation. Through interviews with local actors, the narration of such strategies acquires a privileged point of view that embraces creativity, innovation, as regenerative forces for these strategic assets.

KEYWORDS

Creative Practices; City-Sea Relationship; Port Culture; Cultural Heritage

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Creation and Existence - Le Havre

“A man is always a teller of tales, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story. But you have to choose: live or tell.”¹ So opined the protagonist of Sartre’s novel *Nausea*, written when the philosopher lived and lectured in Le Havre, a French port city on the English Channel. The city itself, according to Le Havre’s Executive Director Cornélia Feindeisen, has chosen to live, and it’s happy to save the story until afterwards.

That’s part of the industrial culture that comes with a major port, Feindeisen says: “If it hasn’t been created yet, then it doesn’t exist.”² For that reason, Le Havre opts to concentrate less on visions of its future and the achievements and accolades it will collect, and more on its experimental approach to improving local wellbeing and planetary health. “It’s like the adventurers in the previous century who were discovering the world. When you go out to the sea, you never really know where you are going to end up.”

History and Future - Turku

Turku, Finland’s oldest city and its one-time capital, also sees the sea as a metaphor through which to engage with its future. The city’s planned transformation of its port, specifically the Linnanniemi area, is to include a Museum of History and the Future, slated to open in 2029, “when Turku reaches the age of 800,”³ explains Mervi Lehto, Programme Manager of the Waterfront Department of Turku.

In Turku, too, the local authority was not looking to dominate the story of its own future. Instead, the city launched a competition asking for ideas from locals and others around the world. “The starting point,” Lehto explains, “was the planned new joint terminal building for the two shipping companies, which would significantly free up space for the development of the whole area.”

With the two companies using a single terminal building, the future would see extra space that could be transformed into ‘place’.

Sea and Space - Taranto

In Taranto, the local authority has waged a battle for more port space against an unlikely contender – the Italian army. “We have great plans to redevelop the entire area,”⁴ explains Valeria Villani, Personal Assistant to

1 Jean Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions Paperbook, 1964).

2 Interview with the author, 17 June 2021

3 Interview with the author, 3 June 2021

4 Interview with the author, 23 June 2021

the Mayor of Taranto. Happily for the city, the contest for space did not have to come to blows but rather is the subject of negotiation with the very obliging captain of the local division of the navy.

“Taranto has more or less 24 km of coast,” Villani explains, “A lot of this space is now occupied by the navy. We have a huge arsenal.” The city has requested that the navy move along the coast a little so that it can develop the big plans it has for the blue economy, including through tourism and water sports. “We want to mend the relationship between the citizens and the sea, which is our best asset and our best resource,” declares Villani.

In 2026, Taranto will host the Mediterranean Games, so the city is putting in a lot of work to create a local team that will launch a slew of regeneration projects throughout its territory, particularly revamping, building and expanding sports facilities and infrastructure. The effort to reach a new harmony with the sea has even led the city into collaborating with local universities to develop a new local sanctuary for dolphins.

Art and Encounter - Le Havre

Like Turku, Le Havre is hovering around a big birthday. In 2017, the city celebrated its 500th anniversary with a new festival that has been held annually since then – ‘Anne Terroir.’ “We imagined a spectacular anniversary ceremony lasting several months,” Feindeisen recalls. Only because of the great popularity of the first iteration did the event take hold as an annual affair.

During this festival, the local administration works with a creative director to fill the city with contemporary art. This art stands in its own right, but it also has the function of activating the existing culture and heritage of the port and its surroundings. In what Feindeisen describes as a series of planned encounters, “the whole city becomes a free contemporary art exhibition.” Art from previous years builds up into a permanent collection, while every year new local and international artists are recruited to enrich the city with their work.

Much of the artwork is saturated with the rich metaphors provided by the city’s port status. Feindeisen remembers a huge statue on the cliff, gazing out over the sea, and a sculpture of a seagull perched behind the museum. For the duration of the festival, one artwork appears every week to reside temporarily at a previously undisclosed location in the city. “It’s like a game for the inhabitants to find it,” says Feindeisen, “Sometimes they discover places they don’t know or remember thanks to the exhibition.”

Some artists also create their works through participatory engagement with the local people, with one artist’s intervention bringing people together to re-think a harbour landmark by constructing an enormous castle out of cardboard.

Competition and Castles - Turku

The castle in Turku was a focal point for many of the 127 entries into its competition for a reimagining of the port area. The winning submission came from the Lithuanian-led team 'After Party' with the work Kolme Palaa. This entry held to the tradition of the port by offering a landscape that would facilitate locals and visitors, and one that would strengthen links both with hundreds of surrounding islands and with the deeper mainland of the country, making the city a vector for engagement.

The through-line of sustainability in this and many of the other proposals recognised that the low-lying area is very vulnerable to the effects of climate change and included mitigation measures like storm-water protection and longer-term ideas for reducing local emissions.

"The proposals showed that urban development is much more than just architecture," says Lehto, "it is also, for example, the creation of possibilities for people to watch the sunset." In the video of the award ceremony below, you can enjoy not only an explanation and visualisation of the winning design, but also a very in-depth treatment of the area, the concerns and considerations of the judging panel, and an overview of the best ideas, the different visions, and what united and divided them.

Lehto notes that many of the ideas that were entered into Turku's competition saw a similar tripartite division: The Forum Marinum, the local maritime museum packed with old vessels and knowledge about ship-building techniques and engine-smithing; the waterfront surrounding the castle, almost as old as the city, which has been occupied, sieged, burned and bombed yet still stands proud; and the headland which contains the port itself.

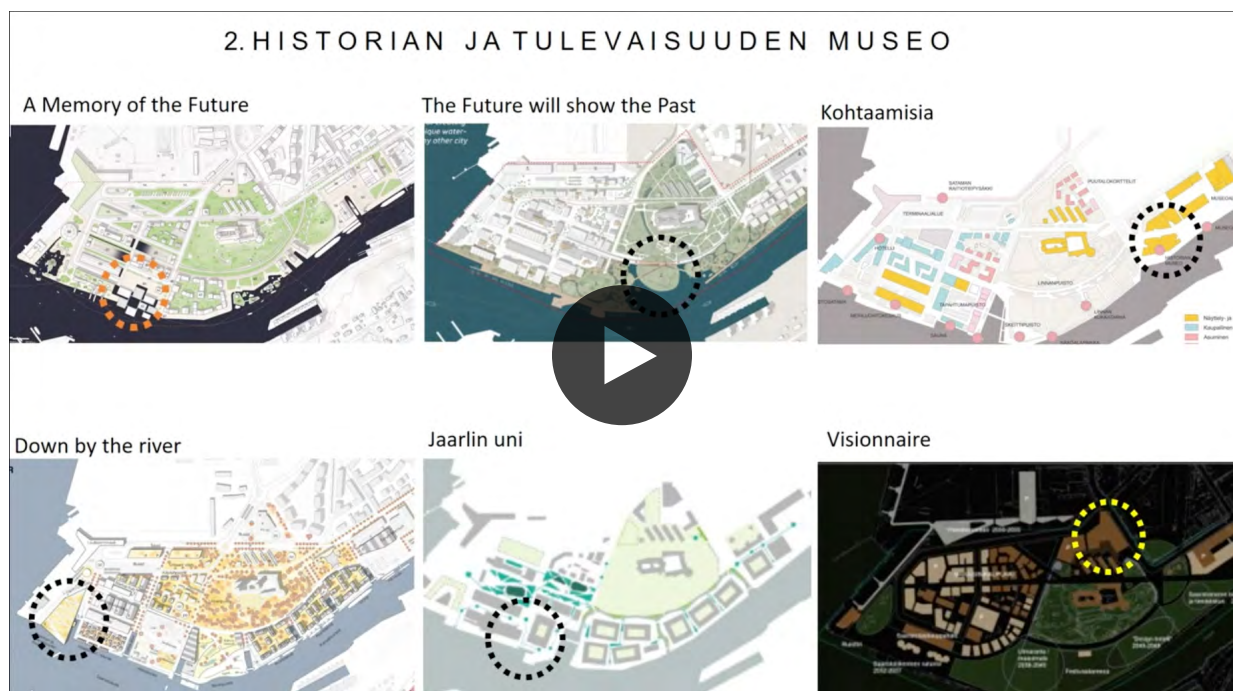


FIG. 1 video of the award ceremony of the competition for a reimagining of the port area in Turku.

Diversification and Division - Taranto

“You have to imagine Taranto as divided in three parts,” Villani elucidates, “We have the sea, then we have this big steel factory, and then we have these huge parts of the coast occupied by the navy.” While negotiations are underway with the navy, the factory represents a tricky point in the city’s self-image, and in its future. This is not just any factory, but the largest steel processing plant in Europe.

“For the Italian nation Taranto can be a paradigm,” Villani insists, “for that a city that is completely based on a factory can change its future.” Nevertheless, this shift will not be one that is easy to occasion. As for many port cities, the presence of heavy, pollution-intensive industries is a heritage that is difficult to recon with. Such industries are often directly controlled by, or represent major sources of revenue or much-needed materials for the state. Further, they are often major employers in the area. “It’s not simple,” Villani confesses, “a lot of people want to shut down the factory because in Taranto we have a huge range of cancers. But on the other hand, our steel factory is the biggest one in Europe and 20,000 inhabitants of our city work there. So, we need to have a plan B in place. We can imagine a future with a factory that uses hydrogen, or electric energy, but definitely not any more fossil or old minerals.”

The city hopes to use the spirit of creativity to kill two birds with one stone: diversifying local employment opportunities by becoming the site of a technology hub for start-ups looking to produce alternative materials that could replace emissions-heavy titans like steel and cement.

State and Cement - Le Havre

As a port city, Le Havre’s local administration also has to deal with enormous organisational edifices in its effort to modernise. “We are very industrial,” Feindeisen explains. “There is still a culture and a heritage that is quite top-down – there are big companies and huge planning projects from the state.” Because the port is run by the state, the city’s interventions are beholden to national-level decisions.

Managing this requires a constant dialogue, a dialogue which also opens the way for the city to make room for burgeoning bottom-up projects. Likewise, the port’s work on competitiveness, resilience and becoming a ‘smart port’ have been avenues for the city to enhance its own agility and participatory practices. For example, a local entrepreneurship programme run by the city seeks to encourage entrepreneurs working on ecological resilience and connecting big industries with local actors in agriculture and ecology. As the port-driven industries are often quite polluting, the city needs to be extra innovative to balance out their carbon footprints to keep its totals down and guard the air and water quality for locals.

“The big industries need innovation,” Feindeisen says, “and it’s very hard for them to innovate by themselves, because they are not agile, so they are more and more depending on start-ups.” For example, the city is pushing a project on low-carbon cargo sailing which delved into sailing heritage to make new use of an old idea: sails. “The company has constructed huge cargo ships which are also driven by sails, not only motors, which significantly reduces the carbon.”

Another local company is working on a proof of concept to make cement with a 90% lower carbon footprint than the standard, and an even lower cost. Because innovations like this have the potential to negatively affect the use and price of existing cement stocks and industries, there would normally be a risk of one such mammoth company buying out this start-up and discontinuing it – as famously happened with oil giants and the electric car. For this reason, the city sees it as very important to nurture and encourage projects like this and give them explicit political support. The port provides the perfect spot for this start-up, not only because of the encouragement from the local administration, but also because of its need for shipments of sand to produce its product.

According to Feindeisen, Le Havre’s mayor sees it as “a duty for us to experiment, to say what is the port city of tomorrow. Because we are not perfect. We will not succeed in everything. But if we can show the way in certain sectors we can maybe do it for our city and for other cities too. We are very conscious that we are not pioneers, we are very far from where we would like to be but there is lots of work to do so that makes it interesting.”

Gateway and Memory - Turku

Turku is also employing experimentation to further its carbon goals and strengthen local culture and heritage. Through the Interreg-funded project Hupmobile, the city is working with partners from Finland, Germany, Estonia and Latvia to develop a more holistic approach to the planning, implementation, optimisation and management of integrated sustainable mobility in Baltic Sea port cities. In collaboration with other cities, Turku has come up with a plan for a new railway that will create better links with the passenger harbour in Castle Town, and a joint cooperation and development model for the Turku port area, a master plan and mobility plan, all informed by data from traffic studies the city has carried out.

Through better and more sustainable connections, the city aims to make the Linnanniemi area, “a hub of year-round urban culture, where you can simultaneously experience history, the sea and the archipelago,” says Lehto. To develop this ecosystem, Turku is programming temporary cultural events and pop ups throughout the area.

“The port is a gateway to the city and gives a first impression of it,” says Lehto, “It’s not just goods that come through there, but also passenger

traffic.” Turku wants to use culture and heritage to develop co-operation between both existing and future cultural institutions as well as the port’s shipping companies – and with locals and visitors to the area.

One of the ways that the city engages locals is through soliciting online feedback. This is done both in regard to local plans like the mobility masterplan, and also to capture intangible heritage. “We encourage people to share their memories regarding the Linnanniemi area on Turku Museum Centre’s contemporary documentation website,” Lehto explains. “If you have visited our beautiful city,” he beseeches the reader, “please add your personal memories of Turku on the museum’s website at <https://nykydoku.prikka.fi>.”

Lehto fondly recalls how the collection of intangible heritage for this site enriched his own experience of the city he loves: “Meeting the harbour master Kari Riutta and interviewing him for the contemporary documentation project is a memory that really stands out. His office in the passenger pavilion was beautifully old-fashioned and Riutta seemed to really appreciate it and the history of the port. Unfortunately, he passed away just months after the interview. It was a great loss – he was a true gentleman.”

Childhood and Horizon - Taranto

In *Nausea*, Sartre’s protagonist more than once contrasts his protagonist’s mire of apathy with the gaiety and wellspring of hope presented by children at play on the cusp of the sea in the fictional city that stands in for Le Havre. In Taranto, too, the city is embracing a parallel with its own ambitions for enhanced creativity, possibility and hope with the simple joy and experimentation of childhood.

Villani remembers one thing that struck her when she first arrived in Taranto: “I thought, okay, there are no spaces for young people.” Now, she says, the mayor is working to create new spaces for youth, from skateparks to football fields. “This year we inaugurated the first playground in Taranto, where the kids can have their space,” she says proudly. Villani confesses that the playground is not just a gift to the children, but to all the people of the city. “For us,” she confesses, “the fact that now you can really see these children, playing in a safe space every time of the day.”

The playground project met some resistance from those that felt that, with the Covid pandemic, the budget should be allocated elsewhere. However, the mayor stood firm and stressed the need to see into the future – and what better way to do that than to see its protagonists at play?

The city is also investing a lot in local artists, musicians, actors and other creatives to enliven local culture and creativity. “If you want to change your career,” Villani says, “now is the time to use your passions, your talent. Now the municipality is really trying to give things to everyone, also to include the entire society.”

The city, which has recently joined the Eurocities network, stresses the importance of looking outside for inspiration too. "I think that it will really work and people will see how Europe will be in the future and how with Europe we really are going to build something up," Villani concludes.

Whether in Le Havre, Taranto, Turku, or in between, creativity is dropping anchor in Europe's port cities. The currents of youth, of culture and heritage, of creativity and creative industries are tossing about the hulls of the once immobile legacy industries, making cracks through which new waters can rush. The beckoning horizon remains a real and figurative seam that binds the lofty ambitions of these cities, their administrations and local people to the practical principles of urban planning, city-craft and innovation, calling them to adventure just as it has to countless voyagers to and from these port cities since ancient times.

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Anthony Colclough holds an MA in creative writing from Sarah Lawrence College (NY) which he has been putting to good use unlocking the stories that lie beneath innovative policy and practice for the last 10 years. He works at EUROCLITES on projects in the fields of mobility, smart cities, culture, environment and social affairs. This cross-cutting role allows him to create the hooks and see the links that open cities' stories to the world.