

**CONFÉRENCE PERMANENTE
DES VILLES HISTORIQUES DE LA MÉDITERRANÉE**

**Une stratégie de développement durable
pour les villes historiques de la Méditerranée et
leurs territoires**

Avant propos de Monsieur

Leoncio COLLADO RODRIGUEZ, Maire de Lorca

Sous la direction de

Giovanni LOBRANO, José-LUIS ANDRÉS SARASA et
Abdelkader SID AHMED

avec le concours de

Raouf HSAÏNI



ISPRM - VILLE DE LORCA - PUBLISUD

Publications de la CONFÉRENCE PERMANENTE
DES VILLES HISTORIQUES DE LA MÉDITERRANÉE :

- *La Ville élément d'identité et facteur de développement de la Méditerranée. Histoire et perspectives*, Actes du III^e Séminaire international (18-20 février 1999), Xàtiva-Valencia 1999.
- *Betlemme. Indirizzi di studio per un piano di conservazione integrata dell'area storica di Betlemme* (sous la direction de T. KIROVA), Cagliari 2001.
- *Polis, démocratie et politique*, Actes du V^e Séminaire international (Sparte, 29 mars - 1^{er} avril 2001), Athènes 2002.
- *Acteurs locaux et patrimoine immatériel : le rôle des Villes historiques de la Méditerranée*, Actes du VI^e Séminaire international (Béjaïa, 28-30 novembre 2003), Isprom-Publisud, Paris 2004.

Photo de couverture : *Excolegiata de San Patricio*, José Luis Andrés Sarasa

Tous droits de reproduction et traduction réservés

© ISPROM - VILLE DE LORCA - PUBLISUD, Sassari - Lorca - Paris 2007

ISBN 978-2-8660-0882-0

Conception graphique et réalisation : Paola SPANO

THE MAKING OF A MULTIMEDIA POLE OF MEDITERRANEAN SEASCAPES AND THE USE OF THE INTERNET FOR THE BUILDING OF A DATABASE OF HISTORIC CITIES

SIMON MERCIECA

The objective of this paper is to provide some ideas regarding the use of I.T. tools for the study of urban structures, that is, to discuss how one can relate Urban History to information technology. There is no doubt that the use of computers is becoming an indispensable tool in the study of Urban History. Geographic Information System (GIS), in particular, is an invaluable aid for architects, geographers and urban researchers in their studies. In fact, artificial intelligence offers a spectrum of opportunities for the exploration and contextualisation of past historical realities, which cannot otherwise be identified or explored through the conventional tools applied until now to the study of history. In the course of this paper, I shall also seek to show how Internet can help in the opening a new window on the history of Mediterranean towns and cities. Yet, despite these new modalities, the conventional tools are still needed and should form the backbone of any multimedia pole project. I will seek to combine the use of I.T. technology with references to those documents which in the past helped to raise the profile of the Maltese harbour cities both in the eyes of Maltese and foreigners alike. However, I do not intend to give only a historical overview of the role that printed matter and artists had in the past in creating that profile but I would like to go a step further and analyse the role that modern technology can play in enhancing awareness of the Mediterranean historic towns in general and Malta's historic cities in particular.

I shall accordingly be highlighting the need for the creation of closer networking between the historic cities of the Mediterranean. The series of meetings under the title of *Conférence Permanente des Villes Historiques de la Méditerranée* has, as one of its major priorities, the bringing of

Mediterranean cities closer to each other. The meeting at the town of Lorca in Spain is the seventh seminar following the one held in Bejaia, Algiers, intended to be another step towards the fulfilment of that objective. I am taking the opportunity of this meeting to propose the use of the Internet as an additional medium for the creation of this enhanced networking between historic cities. In other words, I will not be proposing exchanges and fora where delegates would be expected to physically meet: this is not the aim of this project. Instead I shall be discussing the creation of a virtual meeting space across cyberspace.

Before continuing any further with my discussion, I would like to state that what I am proposing has been inspired by the participation of the Mediterranean Institute, of which I am the current director, in an E.U. funded project, also falling under the MEDA Heritage II, and called Navigation du Savoir. As this latter project seeks to foster appreciation of the Mediterranean's maritime heritage, with particular emphasis on the historic docks and arsenals, a close link exists with your project which also focuses on the study of Mediterranean towns and cities, some of which host or have hosted important arsenals and drydocks.

I consider that the proposal for the building of a multimedia pole should be treated with urgency and importance. Information technology mitigates worries about the longevity of monuments, ruins, and remains. It can help in the identification of hidden ailments or through detailed graphics brings out new information on historic monuments. I intend to use the computer for another purpose and that is why I am insisting that the gathering and the storing of information of images from the past has to be treated with great urgency. Today, more than before, digital technology is allowing the storage and retrieval of information with relative ease from the privacy of one's home. This message has been understood very well in the United States and at least two major companies, one of them Microsoft, are now seeking to amass a mega database, hosting all the historic images available worldwide.

Yet, private individuals can provide their own images which they could share with researchers. The internet is proving to be a fabulous tool towards achieving this aim. The storage and making of websites has ceased to be a job of highly-paid specialists. Amateurs can do this job relatively easily and straightforwardly. The required technology can be bought at an affordable price. Thanks to the advances in information technology, one can create projects which were inconceivable until recently and at the same time work towards the preservation of both our tangible and intangible heritage, for posterity.

In the early nineteen nineties, a colleague of mine at the University of Malta, Giovanni Caselli remarked that images of urban relics, monu-

ments, artefacts and buildings can be systematically gathered and stored in digital format in a way unthinkable just a few years before, at the same time permitting an easy and quick access to anyone anywhere in the world. He stressed the urgency of undertaking that task, which he wished to extend to a worldwide project. His aim was to build a Maltese National Memory, a copy of which was to be stored on CDs, which would collect all that might be broadly described as 'national heritage'. His aims were prompted by the pressing need for a national awareness in Malta resulting from the ever increasing threat posed by demographic and economic pressures upon the survival of past artefacts and buildings.

Unfortunately, Caselli's project, entitled 'The National Memory Project', never got off the ground properly. What I shall be proposing here is an initiative which follows in his footsteps even if it is perhaps much more focused and operates within a wider Mediterranean dimension. It is an initiative which can be undertaken within the restricted area of study of urban history but at the same time can be extended to all the inhabitants of the Mediterranean who possess a computer and have access to the Internet, as well as individuals who possess at least a basic knowledge of one of the simplest languages for the making of websites; the <html> language.

The reason why I would like to focus on the historic cities is very simple. Most of the Mediterranean towns and cities have passed, or are still, for better or worse, undergoing rapid changes. The Mediterranean cityscape environment is being put under pressure. Some cities are being allowed to deteriorate, others are suffering from intense demographic pressures with the result that the historic cores are suffering from what is known, in urban history, as infills. This means that these cities are still experiencing construction projects within the old core either by having their open spaces built up or by having old structures demolished to make space for new buildings. Some more fortunate cities are passing from a period of urban revival linked to restoration or rehabilitation projects.

The need to recall the past identity of the urban fabric is more pressing for those cities which are either experiencing savage development (sometimes disguised by the word restoration), which has led or is leading to the demolition of old buildings, and those whose old core is being left derelict or dilapidated. Frenetic economic activities put pressure on the urban structures which can be fatal to our Mediterranean cities. They can lead to the total change or destruction of monuments, in particular those that date back to pre-industrial times. In this context, a phrase from Italo Calvino's book, *Le Città Invisibili*, acquires greater relevance in this discussion on preservation of historic images as cities contain and at the same time hide a lot of features. (Calvino; 14) These features are sometimes at risk to be

lost for ever.

Caselli has rightly observed that 'the pressure of individualistic economic interests, continually threatens anything that cannot be financially assessed or, to put it bluntly, turned into money there and then. Most things that are difficult or impossible to turn into merchandise seem to be of little concern to present-day society.' I consider that Caselli's words are still of great relevance to the historic cities of the Mediterranean and as the imaginary city of Zora, each and every Mediterranean historic city 'ha la proprieta' di restare nella memoria punto per punto, nella successione delle vie, e delle case lungo le vie, e delle porte e delle finestre nelle case, pur non mostrando in esse bellezze o vista scorre su figure che si succedono come in una partitura musicale nella quale non si puo' cambiare o spostare nessuna nota. (Calvino: 15)

This statement by Calvino is in rhythm with Caselli's words, as both are saying in different words that the slight change in the urban fabric of historic towns can damage the cityscape for ever. Caselli warns about the need that the Mediterranean inhabitants in general and the Maltese people in particular take up the preservation of our Mediterranean towns very seriously when he asserts that 'if one is not aware, all that our ancestors have left behind, will be voluntarily or involuntarily destroyed by a society whose economy performance rules all morals... Scholars, politicians and socially responsible individuals are today confronted with masses of people whose sole interest seems the accumulation of personal wealth, prestige and superfluous consumer goods. They are confronted by an over privileged society that is continuously concerned with its own individual rights and not in the least in the right of the underprivileged or in its own individual and social duties'.

I think that the time has arrived to react to this situation by devising means to make the people of the Mediterranean conscious of the richness of their urban heritage. Valid attempts have been made in the past, and are still being made. Your conference is a good example of present efforts, but I feel that more needs to be done so that all Mediterranean citizens are conscious or convinced of the beauty of their old cities. Moreover, urgent measures need to be taken to make governments or people in authority cognisant of the right restoration projects for their city centres. I strongly consider that the use of the Internet is an ideal instrument for achieving this aim. It does not require excessive financial support or teamwork structures. An individual can start the ball rolling – and in fact many are already doing so - but there seems to be no coordination, and that coordination could well be available through the Internet. It only needs a dedicated body to commit itself to the job and this assembly of Mediterranean cities or *Conférence Permanante des Villes Historiques de la*

Méditerranée is an ideal agency for such an enterprise. The organisation and networking of such a project falls within its portfolio. The study of a city's past is, in fact, one of the mediums by which historic cities are being brought closer together.

The study of urban cities falls within the domain of cultural management studies, and any attempt to relate them to the Internet needs to follow a theoretical framework that is inspired by the former. In America, new innovative concepts are being introduced to help planners specialising in cultural programmes build up management strategies. To make these programmes more effective, activities are also being introduced where the stakeholders involved are asked to sit around a table or in a conference room, and through a series of coordinated workshops, a collegial atmosphere is created where the stakeholders process strategic planning so that at the end, and after each one had shared his or her views, what is termed as a 'whole system' approach becomes more feasible. In other words, the knowledge that already exists, but which at a point in time can be compared to sparse pieces of a puzzle, are gathered, structured and brought into the system. This can lead to the exploration of new alliances. Thus a general picture is being created which will eventually lead to the establishment of new foundations for more specific and focused work. This model of research can be pursued further and the Internet exploited, especially through chat forums on the net, wherein concepts related to the strategies on how a website of Mediterranean Urban cities can be built, can be openly discussed. These discussions should take in the most diverse ideas that such a project can stir up.

Therefore, what would follow is a framework which later on can be elaborated to comprehend as much as possible the existing differences in outlook on how a database on Mediterranean Cities should look. I think that everyone agrees that for such a database to be a success, it would be necessary to follow certain prescribed criteria. Each historic town or city should have a website, hosting information and, most importantly, old and new images of the urban centre concerned. This database should serve as a small reference library which needs to be accessible to both scholars and lay people alike. In other words, anyone wanting to study or have a simple look at how any particular area looked in the past could find the required information. Yet, this database should not end up to be a source of cheap tourist information. There are many sites on the internet aiming at this niche. On the contrary what I am proposing is a form of GIS, which can be compiled by amateurs and at the same time can help the viewer or any browser to better understand the history of a particular Mediterranean city. This is why a sort of 'manager' is needed for the coordination and connection of all the relevant sites together, perhaps by the creation a new

site which would act as a sort of index for all the relevant sites having information on any one of the Mediterranean historic cities.

One can even go a step further and seek the creation of databases which can also be built on a prepared template. In this latter case, I shall not be proposing a specific, strict ownership of these databases. Another method is for private individuals and local councils to set up their respective site, following certain criteria which I shall be proposing. Many already try to include historical knowledge but more often than not, the data does not follow a well-structured pattern. What I want to suggest is that the contents of information in these sites should have some form of coordination and finally, with the approval of each owner of the sites, and following collegial principles, the respective owners would accept links between the different sites, so that browsers can move with ease from one site to the other, already knowing what type of content they would encounter in their forthcoming visit.

I strongly believe that the dissemination of knowledge about historic Mediterranean towns and cities merits special attention, and European projects, whose aim concerns the preservation of the memory of activities associated with tangible and intangible culture of the Mediterranean, should, as the *Conférence Permanente des Villes Historiques de la Méditerranée* is rightly doing, be given special attention.

Obviously, I do not want to give the false impression that I am excluding the involvement of professional technicians in the design of sites. The use of research teams by non government organisations, in particular those specialising in the areas of cultural and physical heritage, terrestrial and urban history, as this association, can help towards the production of sophisticated websites with a three-dimensional presentation, and a highly professional academic content. Yet, I do not want to create situations where an inexperienced user of the internet is disheartened from attempting the experiment as he or she would be influenced by the high contents and excellent presentation of professional websites. Finally, what I am proposing is a work that does not involve excessive financial resources – the production of a professional website does – which are the result of private initiative often resulting from altruistic principles to show to the outside world the beauty of their native home town or city.

Most importantly, the gathering of information on these towns should serve as a form of “compulsory ecumenism” so to speak, the dissemination of knowledge on different architectural idioms, some of which have been influenced by a particular religious creed or the philosophy of a particular political grouping. Incidentally, architects have proved to be one of the few individuals in history – they fared better than painters – to have succeeded in developing their artistic metaphors more easily with dicta-

tors (religious, aristocratic or political) and some scholars would even tempt to say that these works were more respected, in terms of artistic content, amongst the latter milieu than in democratic environments. Different religions have tried to borrow architectural metaphors and incorporate them in their respective religious heritage. In other words, this database, or the creation of multiple databases should eventually become instruments of dialogue among Mediterranean civilisations and possibly of peace through bringing into evidence the cultural heritage common to both coasts. The creation of such a database can possibly play an important role in the framework of a policy, which most of the MEDA projects under the Heritage II and Heritage III programmes are trying to achieve. It goes without saying that these projects are trying to foster openness, tolerance, peace and stability in the region, through supporting awareness of a common heritage which is both natural and architectural. As most of the Mediterranean Cities were also harbour cities, they can further help in bringing awareness to the people of this region who in fact share a tangible common heritage.

The principal activities that I would like to suggest at this stage are the following: ongoing exchanges among different town councils but also individuals towards the creation of a network of multimedia centres on historic towns. This can lead to the creation of simulated or virtual cultural itineraries featuring both the cultural and physical heritage of the Mediterranean historic towns and cities.

Today, many of the Mediterranean historic cities share a common predicament. Their urgent problems relate to problems of underdevelopment. In other words, some of these areas are in need of redevelopment, a factor that can be achieved through tourism, environmental awareness, rehabilitation and restoration programmes. As some of the cities are located on the coast, their redevelopment has to take into consideration all existing structures, besides a plethora of interests which can arise from real estate promoters, hotel chains, tourist firms with little awareness of the pre-eminent historical interest and cultural value of these "places of memory" of our heritage. The access to this database by agents and individuals working in tourism can help to better the understanding of the historic values of these historic towns, which eventually, will lead to the creation of optimal conditions and the elevation of the heritage in question in the eyes of all the citizens. One seriously wishes that these Mediterranean cities exploit the idea of sustainable development, in particular by having training courses in urban history, good cultural tourism, and cultural managers. These databases can help towards the reaching of such an ideal. Even if the work (or some of it) would be of an amateurish nature, it can still directly help towards the reaching of these aims.

The study of the different Mediterranean towns and cityscapes is revealing a marked distinction between urban areas of the Northern part of the Mediterranean and those on the Southern flank of the same sea. The Northern European towns understood much earlier the need for restoration of their historic centres. Some of the historic centres were threatened, until a decade ago, by abandonment and eventual demolition to make place for modern concrete blocks of building. The historical consciousness of the importance of these urban centres is now gaining ground and reaching the southern cities, and despite the existing financial difficulties that many countries, in the south are facing due to their structural deficit, countries such as Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia are more prepared than before to implement restoration projects to their historic town centres. Agencies in these countries have been formed to look after restoration projects. The City of Algiers, for example, as has been shown in the previous conference held in Algeria, is currently undergoing restoration, and the colonial section of the town, is being restored to its past grandeur, where white dominates all over the place. The title of Algiers as the 'white city' is, rightly so, being given back to this city. Much more difficult is the restoration of the Algerian 'qasba'. Due to political and religious factors, the restoration of this area is proving to be much more difficult.

The Maltese historic towns are much more likely to be associated with the southern flank of the Mediterranean. For decades, they were considered as derelict places of little or no artistic value. The only ascribed value was historic but housing units were for a long period of time associated with social problems and lower class inhabitants. As a consequence, the restoration of these places was not given any priority by the different governments of the day. An objective of this association is to set the criteria on how these cities are to be approached. As a way of study, I would like to propose to the association to consider a new criterion of study, that is the preservation and guardianship of historic cities past images through the creation of a virtual historic library. The documentation of historic images should be given priority in this study. Visual representation can be more effective and helps to a better understanding of the place's historical value as well as showing the right direction for the restoration of this place.

Before proceeding to list the main divisions or sections of the database that I shall be proposing, one has to keep in mind regarding the diverse meanings that the term 'record' has been given. The historians or better still archivists do not agree on the type of 'record', and here by the word 'record', I am understanding anything that comes from the past, and is to be preserved for posterity against all other material that for the sake of space, an archivist thinks that it should not be preserved and therefore

destroyed. In this specific exercise, by a record, I mean foremost any image of the city besides any description that may have been left of the city concerned, either resulting from literature, private diaries or travellers' accounts, journalistic evidence etc. In my case, I can now turn to the taxonomical classification of the database. What I am suggesting is a four- phase database, focusing mostly on the preservation and enhanced visibility of historic images of the Mediterranean historic towns.

The first part of the project is the cataloguing of the oldest pictorial representations of the town. The most important images dating from this period are either paintings usually using the oil medium or pastel. Yet these were very expensive and were only executed on commission by prosperous individuals. The second are hand drawings which were a very popular medium with Grand Tour travellers. Linked to this medium, one can also include the lithographs, more often than not, the work of craftsmen who copied in their studios designs executed by others – often pencil drawings, which they chiselled on an iron plate. This form of media was predominant from the seventeenth until the early nineteenth century. Obviously, the medium of painting continued after the nineteenth century, but they were not the exclusive medium to record pictorial views.

By the late nineteenth century, a new medium of pictorial documentation came into being. Here I am referring to photography. Photographs and related images, such as postcards, published photo albums and cards constitute the third category of documentation to be included in the database. At first, the photographers were few and they were also called on commission. Malta was fortunate enough, due to its links with the British Empire, to have had photographers working for the services taking photos of Malta as early as the 1880s. The result is a pictorial album which included the harbour cities. Moreover, the introduction of photography helped in the diffusion of knowledge on the existence of the Maltese harbour cities abroad. The point of focus of these images prior to the war was aimed, to a certain extent, at showing the actual life of the cities but at the same time, they were still propagating an image of grandeur for the Maltese historic towns.

Photography paved the way for a new medium, that of the postcard. Malta already had its postcards as early as the twentieth century. Views of Malta began to be distributed all over Europe and beyond. As was the case with photography, the postcard images often represented idyllic images of the harbour towns. Photography helped to place the images of Malta also in publicity formats. For example, in the 1930s, the images of the Three Cities, that is the harbour towns of Bormla, Birgu and L-Isla, were also printed on match boxes.

The 1930s witnessed a new format of publicity which needs to be doc-

umented. The album books began to be published. Malta was very lucky to have, despite its small size, publications which collected photographs of Malta. Historical sites were given preference. *Camera Pictures of Malta* by F. and W. Weston was the book to launch Malta in this new sphere offering a vision of the historic cities but also a documentary medium of various architectural aspects which would be largely lost, eventually, in the heavy bombardment that occurred in the Second World War and the pulling down of various edifices to make place for the reconstruction afterwards.

Despite the extensive destruction provoked by the war, the Maltese harbour cities still remained an attractive focal point for artists to immortalise in their work. Photographers, lithographers and painters began to take a different view of the port cities, beginning to depict them in a more factual way and their interest was more in the cities decadence rather than in their past grandeur.

The post-war period was a boom for Malta. Photography ceased to be an exclusivity. The camera began slowly to become a household item. The role of the photographer began to lose its past importance. His role became more ceremonial, memorising unforgettable events such as marriages or the arrival of a newborn in the family. Photos of day to day images and landscape views began slowly to be captured by amateurs who had in the meantime come into the possession of a camera. Yet, Maltese Cities still remained in the eye of professional photographers. They were immortalised by Tony Armstrong Jones, who published his experiences in a book entitled Malta. The book was divided into two; the historical and descriptive part written by Sacheverell Sitwell and the photographic part, taken by Tony Armstrong Jones, who achieved tabloid immortality when he became the husband of the Queen of England's sister. Yet, the image was now different. The photographer was more interested in capturing the derelict environment existing in the area rather than having pictures of grandeur.

This brings me to the fourth and last category of images to be stored in this database; these images are derived from modern and contemporary art. While towns' images, thanks to photography, have become numerous, there is a section which due to its nature still makes the produced image a rarity. These are modern artistic representations of Mediterranean towns. Modern art tends to capture this aspect of suffocation and the idea of a bygone age, of a past grandeur that is no more. These are also important features which need to be recorded and preserved. They are very useful in the study urban complexes and in my opinion needs to be preserved separately from the above described, more traditional images.

This paper has sought to propose mediums for the preservation of past

images of the Mediterranean historic towns which can be used in turn by scholars for the analysis of the different phases of a town's history. It is the turn of the modern reader to find ways on how to translate these records for a better future. The creation of a database of pictorial images can provide a visual analysis of a town's past grandeur, which can be easily understood by any lay reader. The use of modern technology, in particular digital data and internet, can speed up the propagation of information and in the process help towards the building of a new consciousness which would eventually give rise, wherever it is missing, to a new renaissance of appreciation of some of our Mediterranean cities.

Wolfgang Iser has shown that the success of a story lies on three factors. It has to please the model reader, the implied reader and the actual reader. Translating this concept into digital language, the website should follow this model to be successful. It has to please the model internet user, the implied user and the actual user. To achieve such an aim, the proposed database has to be an inclusive project and should facilitate, as I said before, private initiative. It should be open to any individual who voluntarily decides to join or contribute to this set up. The most important is that this database and website should have a pedagogical aspect. One would hope that one day the site which I am proposing would serve as a pilot project for the harmonisation of the different websites on the historic towns of the Mediterranean. I cannot close this short reflection without soliciting public organisations, both at governmental and local level to support materially and psychologically all the initiatives that individuals might take out of civic pride in favour of their native towns, cities or villages.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

CALVINO, I., *Le Città Invisibili*, (Mondadori-Milano, 2002).

CASELLI, G., 'The National Memory Project and Mediterranean Multimedia', an unpublished paper read at the international conference held in Malta on "Multimedia Technologies, Infrastruce and Expertise towards a Euro-Mediterranean Multimedia Industry", on 29-31 May 1998.

FREUND, G., *Photography and Society*, (David R. Godine Pub, 1979).

HALL, P., *Cities in Civilisation Culture, Innovation and Urban Order*, (Great Britain, 1999).

HARVEY, C., and Press, J., *Databases in Historical Research, Theory, Methods and Applications*, (Macmillan Press, 1996).

HOLDEN, P., and Purcell, N., *The Corrupting Sea. A Study of Mediterranean History*, (Blackwell, 2002).

LACKERBAUER, I., *In No Time Internet Basics*, (Germany, 1999).

MERCIECA, S., 'Les Ports Maltais et Leur Héritage Maritime', *Acteurs Locaux et Patrimoine Immatériel : Le Rôle des Villes Historiques de la Méditerranée*, (Publisud, 2004).

ID., 'An Historically Unaccounted for Maritime Heritage? Towards another Interpretation of the Maltese Place-name L-Isla', *De Triremibus Festschrift in honour of Joseph Muscat*, ed. T. Cortis and T. Gambin, (Malta, 2005) 721-746.

NICOLET, C., Ilbert, R., and Depaule, J-P., *Mégapoles Méditerranéennes, Géographie Urbaine Rétrospective*, (Paris, 2000).

SITWELL, S., and Amstrong Jones, T., *Malta*, (London, 1958).

Weston, F. and M., *Camera Pictures of Malta*, (England)