



Le sublimi Banalita' di Euroméditerranée

Heidi Bergsli¹

by *Planum*, June 2012
I Semester 2012, ISSN 1723-0993

¹ **Heidi Bergsli**, research fellow in human geography at the Urban Research Program at Oslo University College (2007-2010). Her research concerns the role of social rights in new urban policies in a European, comparative perspective.
E-mail: Heidi.bergsli@est.hio.no



The port of Marseille is now at the heart of the redevelopment project Euroméditerranée, which provides new and renewed neighbourhoods in central Marseille. Euroméditerranée was envisioned as an important means by which Marseille could counteract the ills of a declining economy, a bad image, high unemployment rates and a run-down city centre abandoned by companies and the middle classes.² The port of Marseille had relocated industrial activities to the north in the 1960s, thus allowing restructuring of Marseille's central spaces. Euroméditerranée was consequently initiated to assist Marseille in the transition to a post-industrial economy. This article discusses geographical and socio-cultural aspects of the visions guiding Marseille's redevelopment project. The visions are connected to competitive strategies in new urban policies.

Marseille has been historically, and still is, segregated between the poorer north and the richer south of the main street of Marseille, la Canebière. Euroméditerranée is developed in the 1st- 3rd arrondissements (districts) to the north-west of la Canebière, which have represented an inner-city concentration of Marseille's socio-economic problems and challenges. Unemployment reached almost 24% in all three arrondissements in 2004, whereas the city average was at 14, 2% (compared to a national average of 8.6%).³

Euroméditerranée was initiated in 1995 with a perimeter of 310 hectares. An additional extension of the perimeter was decided upon in 2007 (180 hectares), today mainly furnished by store and factory buildings.

The initial perimeter is divided into five zones: the proper waterfront and flagship zone *Cité de la Méditerranée*; the new business district and neighbourhood *Joliette*; the *Cultural pole of Belle de Mai*, consisting of industrial buildings reconverted to cultural and media production; *Saint Charles*, which includes the train station and its surroundings; and finally *Rue de la République*, the noble street connecting Place de la Joliette with the old port and la Canebière. Buildings are also being renovated and constructed in the neighbourhoods between these zones. According to the public development agency EPAEM, Euroméditerranée has contributed to improvement and diversification of the urban economic and employment base.⁴ Sharp increase in property prices in the city centre and in the perimeter is another signal that social and economic changes are made through Euroméditerranée.

² EPAEM 1998. Schéma de Référence d'urbanisme d'Euroméditerranée, Marseille; MOREL, B. 2005. Marseille, d'une économie à l'autre. *Faire Savoir*, Décembre 5-12; BERTONCELLO, B. & RODRIGUES-MALTA, R. 2001.

Euroméditerranée: les échelles d'un grand projet de régénération urbaine. In: DONZEL, A. (ed.) *Métropolisation, gouvernance et citoyenneté dans la région urbaine marseillaise*. Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose.

³ INSEE 2004. De forts contrastes de revenus entre les quartiers de Marseille. In: INSEE, *l'essentiel n°76*.

⁴ <http://www.euromediterranee.fr/themes/economie/le-nouveau-pole-economique-de-leurope-du-sud.html> 20 July 2010



Figure 1. The perimeter of Euroméditerranée.
Illustration by studio Magellan, design: Therese Troika. Copyright: Euroméditerranée

A vision for Marseille

Ambitions for a large inner-city redevelopment project focusing on economic progress were initially presented by Marseille's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCIMP) in 1987.⁵ The report provided a diagnostic of the city's social and economic development path and international position. The investments made in the Docks of Joliette by the real estate company SARI in 1984 were also influential by visualising the service economy's entry on Marseille's shores when the 19th century building constructed by the Company of the Docks and Storages of Marseille was restructured into office spaces. Marseille's challenges, identified by the local planning agency of Marseille, AGAM, were primarily job creation, lack of cooperation between local authorities and fragmentation of the metropolitan landscape.⁶ These factors were conceived as slowing down the development of Marseille and heightening its social inequalities. The priorities outlined were to: make Marseille the economic capital of southern France; strengthen the domains of science and culture; work for social cohesion and quality of life; and to promote tourism and Marseille's international role.⁷ AGAM stressed the richness of Marseille's multiethnic character, yet by paying attention to growing inequalities in the discussion of cosmopolitanism. The aim to recover Marseille's economy through a large urban redevelopment project was combined with the need to revalorise the neighbourhoods adjacent to the waterfront. Promises for inner-city rehabilitation had been made for decades until it finally was on the agenda in the 1980s, at the time when waterfront projects emerged as a global-urban strategy to attain economic growth.⁸

The financial situation of the municipality of Marseille implied that central state funding was required if vast central areas were to be redeveloped. The French government acknowledged the need to develop Marseille as a "capital of the South" in order to increase the competitiveness of French cities.⁹ It was thereby ready to invest significantly in the degraded and derelict inner city areas of Marseille, in what was to be "a project of national interest" (*opération d'intérêt national*). The inter-ministerial committee established in 1993 to outline preliminary plans insisted on local ownership to the project. An agreement between local authorities was consequently signed in 1993. It implied the appointment of an Administrative Council consisting of the central state (50 % financial share), the municipality of Marseille (25%), the Regional Council of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (10%), the Department Council of Bouches-du-Rhône (10%), and the urban agglomeration Marseille Provence Métropole (5%). The project is carried out by the public development agency EPAEM (*l'Etablissement Public d'Aménagement d'Euroméditerranée*), appointed in 1995. The project has allegedly promoted more regional cooperation, which had been hampered by contra-projects when research parks, cultural offers and industrial poles were created as competitive intra-regional devices instead of compensatory

⁵ CCIMP 1987. Marseille Provence International. Marseille: Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie Marseille Provence.

⁶ AGAM (Agence d'Urbanisme de l'Agglomération Marseillaise) 1992. Working paper, XIème PLAN 1994-98

⁷ AGAM 1992. Working paper for the XIème Plan 1994-1998. Page 3.

⁸ HALL, P. 1991. *Waterfronts: a new urban frontier*. Berkeley: University of California.

⁹ DATAR 1992. Comité interministériel d'aménagement du territoire, 23 July 1992. Dossier de presse.

offers at the regional scale. Yet, the political constellations are fragile and have led to several negotiations of the aims and strategies in Euroméditerranée.

Marseille's cosmopolitan future

Marseille's master plan of 1992, *Schéma de cohérence à l'horizon 2015*, had stressed that "the population (particularly the middle classes) has escaped the city centre which has gradually been impoverished. It is necessary to react to this phenomenon". Euroméditerranée has on this background been called a "re-conquering of the city centre" and "a rebalancing project". Yet, historically, these areas have never been inhabited or used by the middle classes. Like elsewhere, the waterfront seems to be designed to cater to "transnational social classes", whose values, mobility, lifestyle and consumption preferences are shared internationally.¹⁰ The waterfront may in this sense provide what Leslie Sklair calls "transnational social space", where design and functions are homogenously composed to meet the globalised consumption preferences of the middle classes.¹¹ Inter-urban competition, which city governments conceive as a challenge and threat to urban development and growth, has led to increasingly more market-orientation in urban planning.¹² This orientation further implies that mobile professionals working in the high-end of the service industries should be attracted to the cities, popularly imagined as "the creative class", which Richard Florida claims to be today's key to economic growth.¹³ Cultural strategies are consequently used to attract mobile professionals who are supposedly "shopping" places which suit their lifestyle preferences, with the result that homogenous landscapes devoid of a true social plurality or cosmopolitan presence are designed. In Marseille, the social visions of the project have continuously shifted; from stronger emphasis on plurality in the work by the missions engaged to draft the preliminary plans of the project, to weaker outcomes as plans in the last decade are being realised. Justice in the city, expressed through the right to stay put in one's neighbourhood or that all citizens find cultural and consumption offers in the city, is reduced when cities' renovation and drive for being attractive lead to the homogenisation of cities.

The geographical visions of Euroméditerranée

The recent formula for Euroméditerranée is that the project should contribute to the international promotion of the Marseille region by "developing required services in the fields of culture, economy and education, and by assuring urban and architectural quality in the new neighbourhoods (...)".¹⁴ The strategies outlined to meet the objective of positioning Marseille are economic and urban development, the promotion of the city and the revitalisation of existing neighbourhoods. Strategies for economic development include encouraging and concretising the location of large French

¹⁰GOTTDIENER, M. 2000. Approches to Consumption. Classical and Contemporary Perspectives. in: GOTTDIENER, M. (ed.) *New Forms of Consumption*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

¹¹SKLAIR, L. 2006. Iconic architecture and capitalist globalization. *City*, 10, 21-47.

¹²HARVEY, D. 1989. From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism *Geografiske Annaler*, 71, 3-17.

¹³FLORIDA, R. 2002. *The rise of the creative class: and how it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life*, New York, Basic Books.

¹⁴http://www.euromediterranee.fr/html/index.php?module=Infos_PN_Menu&idm=11
30 September 2009, 13:30

and international companies, small and medium sized firms and local, commercial businesses. Within the domain of urban development, the strategies are to provide access and facilitate social plurality through public space and institutions, modern urban design and to valorise the cultural heritage. The material landscape is consequently an important means by which Marseille's attraction to both metropolitan and external/foreign groups should increase. The project name symbolises the geographical orientation and visions in concerns of the kind of attraction desired.

The name "Euroméditerranée" has fostered expectations and debate since the project was named. Cooperation between the EU and the rest of the Mediterranean basin is considered an opportunity to increase the importance of the Mediterranean pan-region. The *Barcelona Declaration* was adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean conference in 1995 by the European Council and representatives from 27 European and Southern Mediterranean countries. The partnership was based on an agreement "to establish a multilateral framework bringing together economic and security aspects and (...) social, human and cultural dimension[s]".¹⁵ Euro-Mediterranean partnership was re-launched in 2008 as the *Union for the Mediterranean*, approved in Marseille by 43 partners. The visions of Euroméditerranée have anticipated the aims of the Union, even prior to the Barcelona process, promoting Marseille in Euro-Mediterranean affairs. EU's aspirations are thereby a framework within which Euroméditerranée is enhanced. Another Mediterranean cooperation, *Arch Latin*, was initiated in 2002 by the coastal regions between Andalusia and Campania.¹⁶ There are additional aims to put Marseille centrepiece of this arch, which to Marseille is most importantly centred between Barcelona and Genoa. This European scope may thereby come to compete with the Pan-Mediterranean vision of Euroméditerranée.

To Genoa, the redevelopment of the port and the flagship events of the Columbus anniversary (1992) and the European Capital of Culture (2004) have put the city on the map internationally. The image and attractiveness of Barcelona has been successfully enhanced in Europe and beyond since the early 1990s and thus gives the city an advantage and an established image. "*Barcelona is a capital, a capital of the North, which happens to be in the south...*"¹⁷ Marseille, on the other hand, "*appears the most African city in Europe, being more cosmopolitan than Paris*".¹⁸ These representations resonate because the differences between Barcelona and Marseille's modern and cosmopolitan character are visible: a refurbished centre in Barcelona, a run-down one in Marseille. Immigrant domination in the centre of Marseille; tourists in Barcelona. "Cosmopolitan" as a characteristic and image of the city's inscription in the world is a twofold concept in current competitive urban strategies. One fits the image of the creative city, where the city is connected to prominent world cities and to transnational social classes. The other refers to the cultural plurality expanded by colonial and post-colonial immigration which does not fit in the representation. Many of the immigrant populations and entrepreneurs who have lived and run business in the areas now encompassed by Euroméditerranée are pushed or moving out because of renovation and rising real estate prices. Changes in the cosmopolitan character are signalled in these areas, as

¹⁵ http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/external_relations/relations_with_third_countries/mediterranean_partner_countries/r15001_en.htm August 23, 2009, 14:15

¹⁶ <http://www.arcolatino.org/> August 23, 2009, 12:50

¹⁷ Interview with a municipal officer, 12 November 2007

¹⁸ Interview with a local theatre director on 17 January 2008

the affluent and mobile professionals are moving into the modernised offices and apartments. Though it is not a completely explicit strategy, it is the all too often consequence of large-scaled urban redevelopment projects. Politically induced changes in the social and economic composition are accompanied by changes in cultural offers, which in turn homogenise city centres further.

Barcelona is conceived by the promoters of Marseille as both competitor and model. It is a much recited example, in Marseille and elsewhere, of a successful and smooth inscription in the global city market through culture-led urban redevelopment.¹⁹ Waterfront projects are often aimed at adding to or symbolising the “modernity” of a city, as is the case in Marseille. This drive for modernity implies that the urban landscape is the representative form through which the new economy is projected. The planned high-rise buildings, shopping facilities and cultural offers symbolise and materialise the new horizon envisioned in the modernisation of Marseille into a post-industrial, “creative” city.



Figure 2. Marseille's future skyline. Illustration by Golem Images. Copyright: Euroméditerranée

¹⁹ For readings on culture-led urban redevelopment, cf. the special issue of *Urban Studies* 2005; 42 (5-6) (May).

Citta' e waterfront

The flagship and 'pure' waterfront zone of Euroméditerranée, *Cité de la Méditerranée*, is planned to contain similar ingredients as Barcelona's Port Vell: Two cultural institutions designed by signature architecture, a shopping mall with leisure activities (Terrasses du Port), a marina and esplanade, a conference centre including a cinema and hotel, and a concert hall in a converted silo. The development agency presents *Cité de la Méditerranée* as "a very original program", inscribed in the new relations between the city and the port: "Cultural, educational, scientific, play and tertiary activities form, together with the port's activities...a unique ensemble testifying Marseille's role as a major metropolis of cultural and economic exchanges between Europe and the Mediterranean".²⁰ *Cité de la Méditerranée* is aimed to be a representational space signalling and symbolising the modern transformation and capacity of Marseille, evident to future tourists, who to this date rarely stayed in Marseille. Compared to Port Vell and similar waterfronts, the cultural institutions planned in Euroméditerranée differ from standardised offers. Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations (MuCEM) and the Regional Centre of the Mediterranean are established by the aim to put Mediterranean issues and relations in their programs, which is a shared aim among other institutions in the perimeter as well. Cultural institutions located in the waterfront thus capture the vision of Euroméditerranée as a node of cultural exchange in the Mediterranean pan-region. There tends to be, then, a dual enhancement of Euroméditerranée's vision; whereby the cultural strategies are based on historical and socio-cultural notions of exchange in the Mediterranean region, the economic and residential strategies are catering transatlantic exchanges and mobility.

One important aim of *Cité de la Méditerranée* is to enhance the access to the sea and the waterfront. The municipal director in charge of international and economic relations conveys his concern about the development of *Cité de la Méditerranée* and its impact on the commercial opportunities in Marseille's downtown area. La Canebière and the city centre require strategies to modernise and secure social and commercial activities, and the director worries that new developments in Euroméditerranée lead to a zero-sum game in which the city centre loses out for the new areas.²¹ The rue de la République, the street connecting the new waterfront and the historical centre, was constructed in the 19th century in Haussmanian style to host the middle classes.²² This never happened, and when the street is now renovated, inhabitants and shopkeepers are forced out. The financial crises has put an halt to the development, risking that the developer does not succeed in housing an affluent population and exclusive consumption facilities in the future. A local architect who has worked on several projects both in Euroméditerranée and in the wider city-region stresses the desire prior to the appointment of EPAEM in 1995 to make Marseille different from Barcelona by suggesting plans without a spectacular programme, but rather to: "make a calm city by the sea, a local desert yet very urban. More frivolous, minimalistic...".²³

²⁰ http://www.euromediterranee.fr/html/index.php?module=Infos_PN_Menu&cidm=21
23 August 2009 18:00

²¹ Interview, 28 February 2009

²² Cf. FOURNIER, P. and S. MAZELLA 2004 (eds.). *Marseille, entre ville et ports. Les destins de la rue de la République*. Paris: La Découverte.

²³ Unregistered interview, 27 February 2008

They wanted to do something in Marseille that had not been done elsewhere, and to base the plans on a Mediterranean model rather than an Anglo-Saxon one. The preliminary mission announced the concept of “sublime banality” to designate concerns with the requirements of everyday life, with soberness in design and with local integration. This concern is present in the offer of the cultural institutions, which have reading rooms aimed at the inhabitants, as well as exhibitions and debates scheduling themes of local and regional interest. Yet, in the domains of urban design and property development, the landscape of Euroméditerranée tends to be developed much as transnational social spaces. The lack of socio-material integration of Euroméditerranée in the city’s fabric is another current concern. There are additional social and redevelopment projects in Marseille, but they are not properly coordinated.²⁴ There are consequently areas outside of the perimeter which are not ameliorated. Material and symbolical barriers heighten the experience of inequalities between the redevelopment zones and un-zoned areas. This is an effect of area-based planning when the Modernist planning goals of social cohesion and long-term development for the city as a whole are neglected.



Figure 3. Joliette’s transnational social space. Photo: H. Bergsli (October 2008)

Gaps between the visions, aims and actions in Euroméditerranée are evident in the domain of public spaces in general, and in green spaces in particular. Economic arguments are persuasive when priorities are made in urban redevelopment. In the first phase of Euroméditerranée, the need for real estate activities was conceived so important that all efforts were concentrated on

²⁴Interview with a director at AGAM, 17 October 2008; Interview with a municipal director, 28 February 2008

construction, with the result in a deficit of green and public spaces. A representative in the Administrative Council of Euroméditerranée reveals that “[we] haven’t succeeded in keeping the promise of green spaces. It is quite simple. The land has a value, but when land has a value, it is more and more difficult to include public amenities there, because a higher land value is required. It is an economic process. It’s normal”.²⁵ Several representatives involved in the redevelopment process point to the difficulties in consolidating the objectives of economic and urban (re)development. The problem of green spaces is claimed to be related to the lack of unconstructed land in the perimeter and the costs of expropriation. However, the development agency promotes Euroméditerranée as attractive to business because of its spatial reserves. The use of land is in this sense hardly negotiated between neighbourhood needs and economic incentives and gain.

Concluding remarks

Marseille is European capital of culture in 2013, and the program scheduled has integrated the vision of Euroméditerranée to enhance the city as a *lieu d’échange* between the Mediterranean south and Europe.²⁶ It describes concerns with how both the material landscape and the cultural activities taking place there are central to the event. Local capacities and activities should be enhanced, inasmuch as cultural offers targeting an international public. The development agency of Euroméditerranée has been engaged in the process of making the program. The two large initiatives have the potential to boost Marseille into a new development path. Yet the projects’ vision for how citizenship and cosmopolitanism should be reflected in the strategies determines the extent to which Marseille’s current inhabitants are inscribed in “the creative city” desired by Marseille as so many other cities.

²⁵ Interview with a representative of the local authorities, 13 March 2008

²⁶ “Marseille-Provence 2013. European and Mediterranean. Application to become the European Capital of Culture Under the tutelage of Albert Camus, who would have been 100 years old in 2013”. Available at http://www.marseille-provence2013.fr/espace_presse/Dossier_MP2013_2008_en.pdf

