
In Front of the Sea

Essay by **Eduard Bru**, architect and director of Cercle (Research Group & Review from ETS Architecture of Barcelona)

A waterfront, a place for contemplation or neglect; a place of relaxation or intensity; a place for muse or amusement. Every city and every designer deals with that limit between land and water in a different way. Architect Eduard Bru explores some of the cities that have addressed that powerful edge.



A waterfront is a proposal of relationship between land and sea, or, almost always, between city and sea. Who owns that carpet between nature and the artificial? It can belong to one or the other, or a bypass between both: mediations that separate or connect, or cut through like a blade.

A few privileged cities need only to show to the sea what they already are. That is the case with Rio de Janeiro. Roberto Burle Marx proposes an intensification of what Rio already is: more of the sinuous topography that defines the curves of the Sugarloaf Mountain; more, and even tighter, exuberant vegetation; more color than Rio already possesses. A project as a lesson and exaltation of the city, and its natural connection with the sea.

Not always does a city own the exceptional physical structure of Rio: for example, Toronto or Benidorm. The people responsible for intensifying that relationship in those cities chose, respectively, entertainment and decoration.

In plan, the pavements, bridges, platforms and accessories of the project by West 8 and DTAH in Toronto propose a texture that identifies the transition between the artificial – the city – and the natural – the sea. In terms of usage, entertainment is introduced as the *leitmotif* shared with the boundary between land/sea. There is a lot of earthy quality in the main material used, which is wood, and quite a lot of watery quality in the sinuous movements with which Adrian Geuze moves it: in its bridges and ramps, and in its sidewalks divided in bands almost like bowling lanes.

There is something of a collective childishness in the proposal: what the citizen can do in front of the sea, and also the sea itself that, without claws or fangs, is presented almost as an aqua park for free. The solution by West 8 and DTAH already has an extensive tradition, for example, in obsolete urban ports turned into commercial and recreational areas, perhaps statements of a reduction of our perspective of what we can do, feel, or imagine in front of the sea from the city.

Carlos Ferrater and Xavier Martí from the Office of Architecture in Barcelona (OAB) decided in Benidorm, Spain, to invent a Burle Marx. On top, they added volume. There is nothing in that summer city to support the project from the context; it is a cliff, a wall of massive buildings in front of a languid coastline.

It's nothing like the cross movements in Toronto: there is no possible cross movement before the wall parallel to the water. It is only

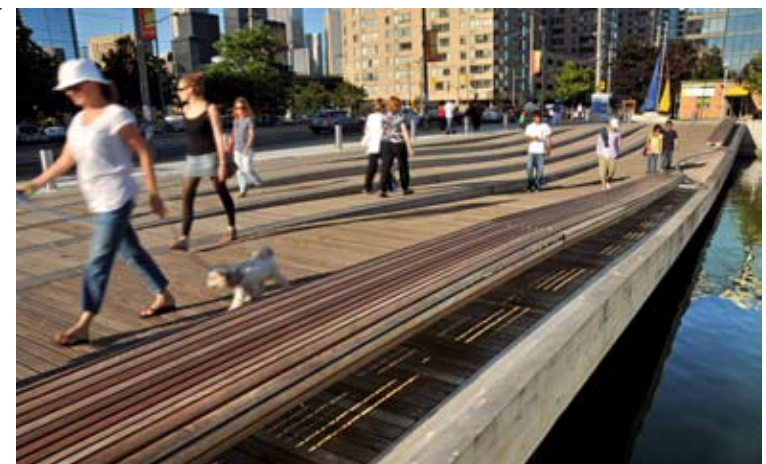
Simcoe WaveDeck, one of four uniquely Canadian wavedecks planned for the Waterfront Toronto



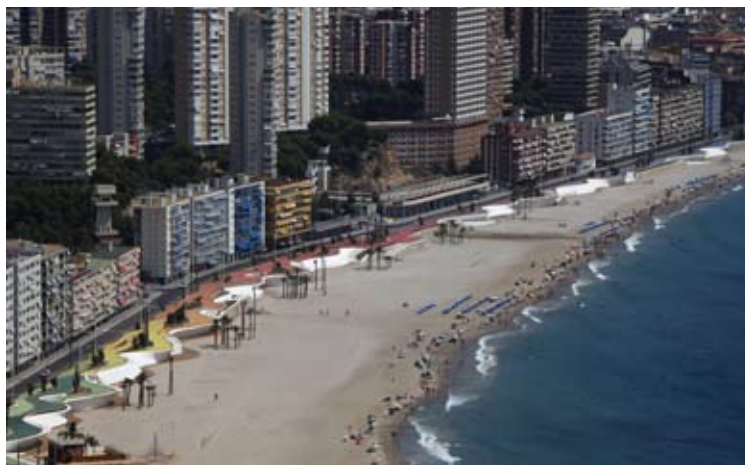
Simcoe WaveDeck and its curves that soar as high as 2.6 metres above the lake.



Spadina WaveDeck with its curves that are constantly changing to create ledges for seating and new routes to access the water's edge



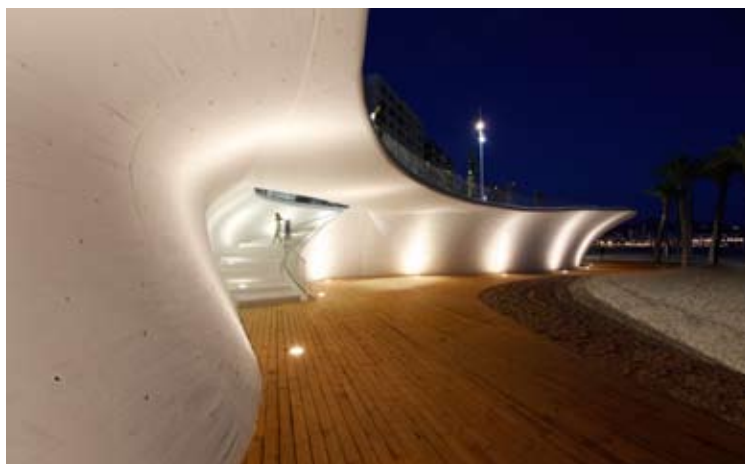
Aerial view of the Benidorm West Beach Promenade, a project that, with its organic layout, it recreates the shape of the cliffs and the waves



The promenade is built of a single material, white concrete, with pavements of various textures and colours



Night view showcasing the stairs connecting the level of the beach and the level of the city



possible to act in the same strict line between nature and extreme vertical construction. Because of that, the whole project happens there. Ferrater and Martí blew air into the tropical sinusoids turning them into volumes that allow the user to go up and down, penetrate, select the height and hang over the sea.

There are no elements with which nature can collaborate in this operation. The color, like the rest of the elements, is introduced by the project. Colors as intense and contrasting as premeditated plantations, sequences of shades organized by the movements ordered by the line turned into volume. From the abstraction, the project resolves, brilliantly, everything that neither nature nor the project for the existing city have ever imagined.

There is not much to say either, between city and sea, in the area of Matosinhos, Portugal, in which Eduardo Souto de Moura operates. The same inane architecture, but with less volume and presence, and the same irregular linear coastline. Souto creates his project out of that lack of communication. He proposes to be between the city and the sea. His project is a kind of bridge that cleaves the border line. The main character is neither the city nor the sea. The transit itself between them is the element that Souto creates. The parallel views to the coast take priority: even in the crosswalks he avoids the cross circulation. It never tempts us to leave the grounded platform. To feel strange both in the city and in the sea, to not go through one or the other, but in between them, so much so that we wouldn't be surprised if at any given moment the flat barge, sharply cut on the sides and from which we are the load, would start a slow movement, a slow and heavy, uncertain adrift.

A little bit north of the Matosinhos of Souto's setting, in areas of lower urban density and close to the parks of Fernando Távora, the coastline becomes rocky and rugged, nude and exposed to the winds. It is the land where the Boa Nova restaurant, designed by Alvaro Siza, is situated, as well as his swimming pools of Leça da Palmeira.

Between the first and the latter, with a few added smaller interventions, an open waterfront takes place proposing an encounter of sea/city, not from the context of mediation but from their difference. Siza says simultaneously two contradictory aspects: cuts like a blade the areas of land and water, but he makes it evident to us that both are matter, two matters that look and understand each other and a geometry as a rasp that defines them.

Aerial view of the waterfront designed by Eduardo Souto de Moura in Matosinhos, Portugal



Aerial view of the waterfront designed by Alvaro Siza north of Matosinhos



Aerial view of the Leça da Palmeira swimming pools designed by Alvaro Siza in 1966



The rock and the city share destiny and function: both have cavities that the sea fills and that we call swimming pools. The area of the bowl that belongs to nature is made fiercely, by the aggregation, still and forever visible, of the magma that stopped and cooled down there. The built half is made by manufactured materials, concrete adapting the rectilinear geometries that its artificial nature and construction technique demand. Both meet each other and accept together the water and the passage of time that is inexorable, that sometime will separate them: that tense temporary community is the project.

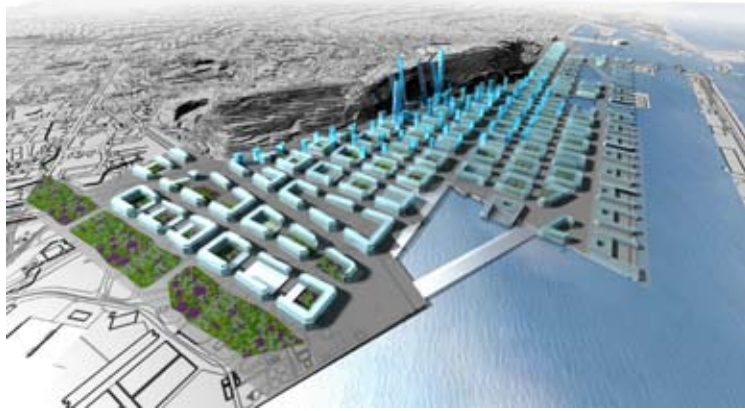
Otherwise, I like more the cities when they reach the sea without mediation at all, when they reach the sea with all their energy. All the construction, the agreement between material wishes and the things that the city is, all stopped right in front of the water... it is mutual fascination without the possibility of any kind of surrender or agreement. Naples or Syracuse, hanging by the edge of the water.

My city, Barcelona, progresses each day with an excessive agreement between sea and city: there is so much mediation that you hardly perceive the water. Calm, like liquid asphalt. With Mamen Domingo and Conxita Balcells, besides friendship and academic activities, we share big scale projects on the Barcelona coast. Conxita is the author of the Marine Zoo. Mamen proposes to live in front of the sea – as Le Corbusier did with the GATPAC of Josep Lluís Sert, Torres Clavé, etc – but now at the foot of Montjuich, which can therefore play a vital role in the city, beyond being the “green lung” and traditional venue for exhibitions.

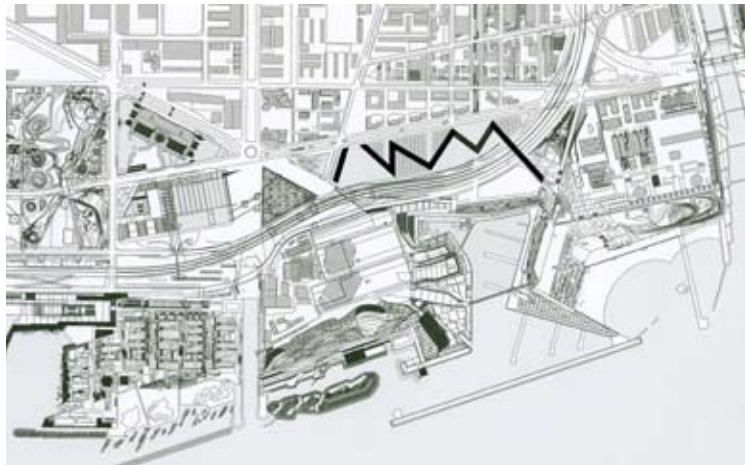


View of the Bay of Naples, Italy

Volumetric view of the proposed residential neighborhood at the foot of Montjuich



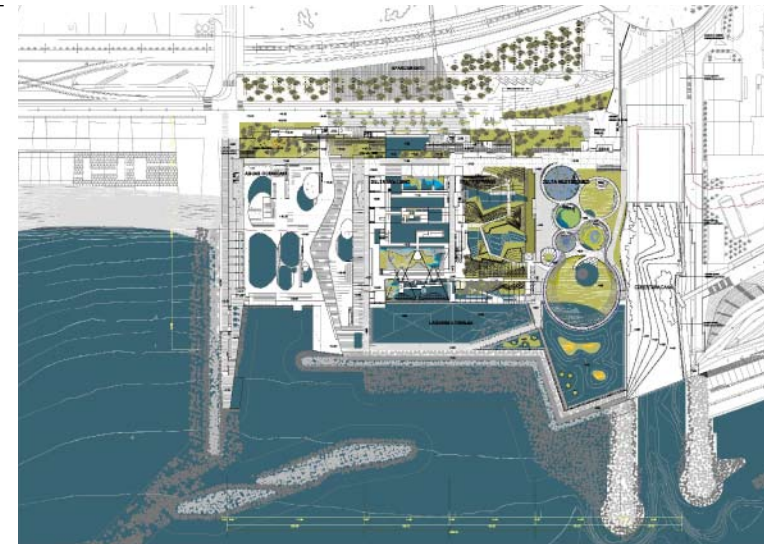
Plan of the Campus de Llevant in Besós at the end of Diagonal Avenue in Barcelona



Model of the Campus de Llevant in Besós



Plan of the proposed Marine Zoo in Barcelona



Mamen from the South and Conxita and myself from the North prefer to live with the sea instead on walking by it. As a result, in my project for the Campus de Llevant in Besós I try to extend the urban tension all the way to the edge: like the Venetian Arsenal, like our naval dockyards when they were in front of the sea. I take the pattern of the main road, from my master plan done with Josep Lluís Mateo and the late Enric Miralles, and the plan of the Forum building by Herzog and de Meuron, and I transform it into a zigzag line, that is a water-front, that creates plazas of land and plazas of sea, a zipper between water and soil.

Probably, what these three projects in Barcelona have in common is their wish not to insert a waterfront between city and water; it is the whole urban public space that offers itself to the water to turn it, also, into city.