



PASSEGGIATA
SPIAGGIA DI PRA'

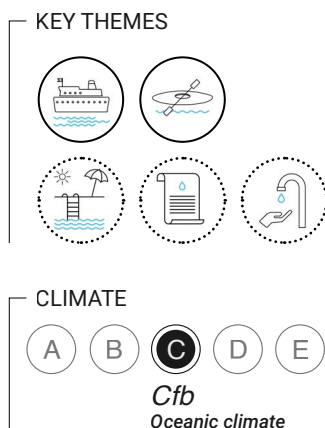


The Shore as a Politicized Space for Community Heritage: The Case of Pra', Genoa

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Changes in coastal and maritime environments, increasingly caused by the climate crisis and large infrastructural projects such as global port construction, significantly impact community identity. When a community's terraqueous space – a space that transcends the land-sea binary distinction – suffers a shock, long-term sociability within the community and relationships with nature are altered. This article connects the challenges of coastal community spaces and the community's cultural heritage by articulating a critical ontology of the shore. The connection is illustrated using the example of Pra' in Genoa, where constructing a large port terminal has detached the local maritime community from the sea.

Keywords: coastal communities, everyday-life, shore, port infrastructure, maritime culture



< Fig. 1 A plaque with toponymy of collective memory "walking path Beach of Pra" (Source: Francesca Savoldi, 2021, CC BY).

Coastal Space and Cultural Heritage

Between 2010 and 2014, the construction of a port terminal for ultra-large vessels on the beach of Pra' – a coastal quartiere of Genoa, Italy with 20,000 inhabitants – forced the local maritime community to become detached from the sea, triggering social mobilization. This illustrates both the importance of water as a dimension of the socio-cultural identity of the community and the socio-political significance of the shore for its cultural heritage.

Coastal and maritime cultural heritage has been defined as a set of tangible and intangible components linked to human activities and interactions taking place in coastal and marine areas in the past, present and imagined futures (Ounian et al. 2021). UNESCO (2011) categorizes tangible heritage as physical elements, such as buildings, archaeological sites and objects, while intangible heritage refers to practices, knowledge, skills, groups, expressions and cultural spaces. The significance of cultural heritage has been shown through the invocation of memory (Vecco 2010) in communication with a sense of identity or experience (Parkinson et al. 2016). In that sense, the space of community, considered in Lefebvrian terms, is a determinant of cultural heritage across its tangible and intangible components.

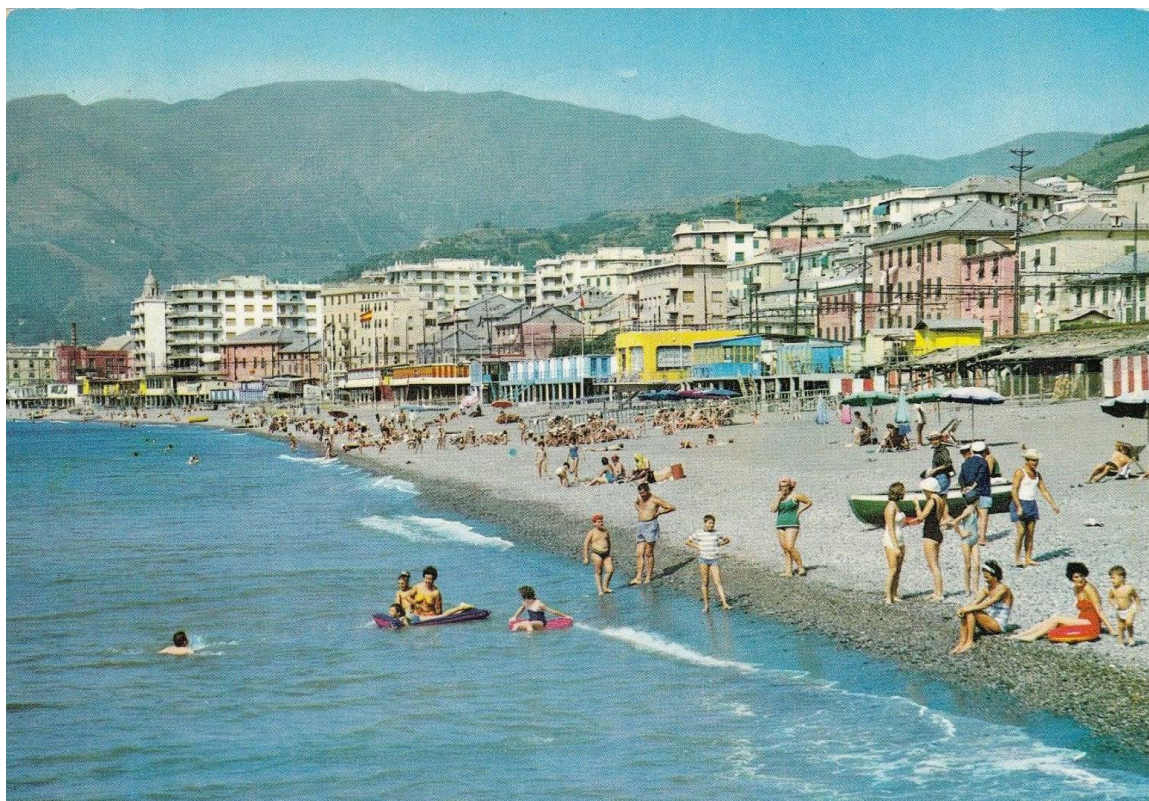
According to Lefebvre (1991), space is produced by relations which mold and reproduce its social morphology, with the transformation of space deeply affecting community values. Cultural heritage also relates to everyday lives, communication and the meaning attached to a physical space (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995). Local streets, for instance, are increasingly recognized as reflecting traditions, local stories and beliefs,

representing a sense of cultural identity (Yung and Leung 2019). Space should then be considered as a category of cultural heritage.

The shore, as a habitat of maritime communities, is imbued with terraqueous cultural engagement. The everyday lives of these communities involve practices and skills, a particular ethos and social and economic relations that take place between sea and land. The importance of the sea-land continuum, interweaving vital material and immaterial interdependencies between the environment and society, becomes politically visible when communities protest its loss.

Communities on the edge of port cities are contesting the expansion of ports. In the ongoing phase of global infrastructural expansion, ports are demanding more resources from cities, including land for containers, cranes and related infrastructure. Ports are also occupying sea spaces because of naval gigantism and land reclamation. This has triggered civic contestations where the demands of local communities can be framed by the slogan "Right to the City." We can understand this resistance beyond the sea-land division and describe this demand as a "Right to the City and the Sea." Examples of socio-political contestation of terraqueous spaces can be seen worldwide. For instance, a large coalition of citizens and civic organizations, including pier fishers in Durban, South Africa, have been protesting against port expansion, and since 2013 South African courts have recognized fishers' right to access the piers and continue fishing. Other examples include the fishing communities in Makassar, Indonesia, and Negombo, Sri Lanka.¹ In all these cases, the construction of a large port has altered the material and immaterial relationship with the sea, putting livelihoods, culture and heritage at risk.

1. More information on these cases can be found on the platform contestedports.com.



^ Fig. 2 The shore of Pra' in the 1970s (Source: unknown, 1970. Courtesy of PRIMA'vera).

Framing the political significance of space in the definition of the cultural heritage of coastal communities brings up important questions regarding agency: Who decides what can be lost or must be conserved in coastal communities not protected by UNESCO? What are the dominant narratives that define territorial priorities? Who decides which cultural heritage must be preventively preserved and how it should be managed? A critical ontology of the shore demands a reinterpretation of the socio-political significance of such space in its sea-land continuum. This approach emphasizes the centrality of spatial practices in forming cultural heritage. Space isn't an abstract category in material and immaterial cultural practices, however it is the factor that shapes them: "Rather than imag-

ining space as a sort of ether in which all things are immersed, or conceiving it abstractly as a characteristic they would all share, we must think of space as the universal power of their connections" (Merleau-Ponty 2012). Hence, the space of the shore determines the cultural heritage of maritime communities by shaping the connection that forms relationalities between objects and subjects.

The Disappearance of the Shore – A Right to the City and the Sea in Pra'

The process of port construction on the shore of Pra' started in the 1970s and concluded in the 1990s, transforming the landscape of a mar-



^ Fig. 3 A panoramic view of Pra' in 2021 (Source: Francesca Savoldi, 2021, CC BY).



itime community into an industrial one (figs. 2–3). This process has triggered social mobilization that has fostered a collective process for reformulating the space of the community. The community has demanded public spaces with renewed access to the sea, expanding their case for the “Right to the City” to include the sea. Such reformulation has resulted in public participation in which local inhabitants have co-designed a buffer zone between the port and the residential area, producing new interpretations of the shoreline.

In 2021, I conducted ethnographic work in Pra’. Seven in-depth interviews were conducted with residents of different genders, ages and occupations using a snowball sampling. In addition to interviewing and observing residents, I examined relevant institutional documents and publications, including the back catalog of *Il Pra’no/Supra’tutto*, the local community magazine published monthly between 2009 and 2019. Interviews explored the material and immaterial relationships between the community and the shore before and after the construction of the port terminal, as well as the collective actions and consequences of the social mobilization. Through narrating their experienced realities, interviewees compiled a counter-narrative of port-driven transformations of the shore, distant from the dominant idea that associates port activities with the prosperity of local communities (Savoldi 2024).

Pra’ is currently part of Greater Genoa, located 20 km west of the city. From the Middle Ages, it was an autonomous municipality until 1926, when Benito Mussolini’s government centralized territorial power by creating the Greater Genoa area. This made Pra’ and 18 other suburbs of Genoa, where they succumbed to a top-down culture of disregard toward the urban periphery (Gangale 2019). This peripheralization

made the authoritarian expansion of the port along the western coast of Genoa possible, generating a path dependency of coastal degradation, which eventually reached Pra' in the 1990s.

Pra' has been known in the region as a seaside town since the seventeenth century, with shipbuilders, fishermen and sailors playing a fundamental role in local traditions. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Genoa's bourgeoisie built villas along the littoral, while the economic and social role of the beach was expanded. Many local inhabitants worked at the shipyards, with local ship-building traditions considered prestigious across the Mediterranean, with particular value attached to the *brigantines*, fast two-masted sailing vessels used by merchants and pirates. Next to the shipyards, the beach was home to both fishing and touristic activities, providing space for fishing boats, resorts, hotels, restaurants and beach clubs. Until the 1970s, the beach remained a central public space for the local community – popular for socializing, resting and playing – especially among children of working mothers. In the 1970s, under pressure from major industrial groups in northern Italy, such as Fiat, the port of Genoa planned its expansion along the shore of Pra'. The terminal was redesigned several times, adapting to the fast changes of containerization, and its construction was finally concluded in 1994. With a severe lack of communication from the port and city institutions, and a lack of public consultation, the entire beach of Pra' disappeared to make space for the new container terminal for ultra-large container vessels. The container terminal was built on the beach, too close to residential buildings, producing strong negative impacts on the community, especially air and noise pollu-

tion. These impacts have been accentuated by the morphology of the territory: a narrow terrain squeezed between mountain and sea, an echo chamber where a container dropping resounds greatly, day and night. Poignantly, instead of being called Genoa-Pra' Terminal, the port was named Voltri – after a nearby town, asserting the total disconnection between the port and the local community.

The port's construction entailed demolishing 34 small resorts, including hotels, restaurants, a beach club and fishing spots. Such a transformation produced socio-economic and socio-spatial trauma in terms of lost jobs – never fully replaced by the employment opportunities offered by the new port – and in terms of altered and/or lost identity. The space, as well as residents' sense of place changed. A long-time site of maritime importance and coastal tourism was now overtaken by a neighboring industrial port and community members no longer had access to the sea. This led to the disappearance of traditional practices and a change in locals' everyday lives. Fishers slowly disappeared, with them, the fish market and other traditions, such as anchovy-curing. Residents had to change their lifestyles, reorienting their social life and collective celebrations toward different spaces, and elderly people had to readapt to different uses of public space and to alter their health routines. Maritime knowledge, skills and practices were lost in the place where they had evolved and been maintained. According to the interviewees, the community perceived this transformation as a socio-environmental disaster that changed the community's identity, described by some of them as saddening and gloomy. They felt abandoned by city institutions and rendered passive subjects in their own territory.

In 2010 inhabitants of Pra' – after the loss of the

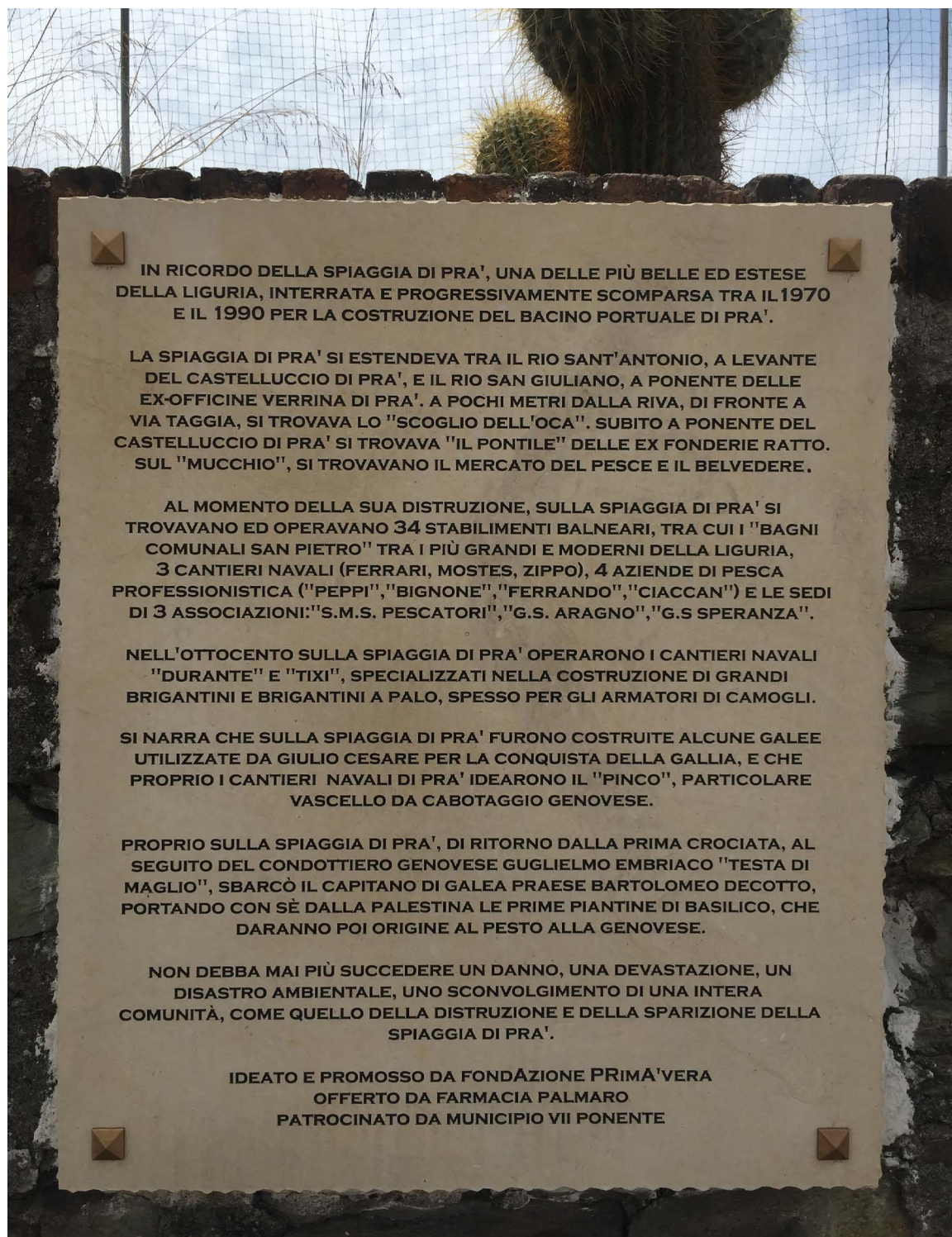


^ Fig. 4 A plaque with toponomy of collective memory “walking path Beach of Pra’ (Source: Francesca Savoldi, 2021, CC BY).

beach and weary of the impacts of the port on their daily lives – began a series of demonstrations, contesting the invasiveness of the port and refusing to be alienated from their terraqueous territory. The collective discourse of the residents framed their city as under “ransom” and demanded that their city, including the shore, be returned to them. After marches in public spaces, road blockages and other disruptive actions, a group of campaigners created the foundation PRImA’vera, a non-party local organization aimed at fostering public participation in local decision-making.

The foundation triggered a participatory pro-

cess, managing to open a communication channel with institutions and shaping a collective demand for territorial reparations. Ideas proposed by the foundation initially attempted to memorialize the lost maritime cultural heritage of the town. A Museum of the Beach was informally suggested, in which citizens’ objects, including photos and clothes, were to be collected and displayed alongside oral and written testimonies. One of the proposals suggested placing a traditional ship along the new waterfront; another was creating a toponomy of collective memory, reflecting the disappeared maritime pasts in the new townscape. These lost sites included Pontile (the pier), Mucchio (the fishers’ docks and



^ Fig. 5 Plaque remembering the importance of the beach for the community of Pra'; ending quote: "The destruction of the beach was Pra' was an environmental disaster and devastation, which has perturbed a whole community, and which should not be repeated"(Source: Francesca Savoldi, 2021, CC BY).



^ Fig. 6 A graphic render of the requalification project for the buffer zone between the port and the city (Source: Supratutto, 2021).

the fish market), San Pietro (the former bathing site named after the town's patron saint) and Scoglio dell'oca (a seaside landmark that no longer existed). Slate plaques commemorating the loss of the shore were installed in Pra' "for not forgetting such community suffering" (figs. 4–5). The character of these collective demands is evidence of how memory, identity and culture were embedded in the space of the shore in Pra'.

Besides these requests – only some of which materialized – PRImA'vera carried out a series of public events between 2012 and 2021, including community debates and roundtables with institutional representation. Citizens demanded a space that, on the one hand, could mitigate the effects of the port on people's everyday lives and, on the other, could give back

the shore to the community albeit in a different form. The space negotiated between the community, the port and city institutions was a buffer zone, a water lane, and a hilly fringe separating the port from the residential area. PRImA'vera's efforts aimed at "giving back the sea" to Pra', envisioning a new shore that could reinterpret the functionalities of the lost beach and regain public access to the sea. A process of co-design between several students of Pra' and the University of Genoa eventually resulted in a proposal that obtained funding from the European Commission and was incorporated into the port's urban plan. The foundation's president described this evolution as "obtaining respect from institutions and bringing back self-confidence and pride to the citizens of Pra'." The buffer zone, or *fascia di rispetto*, is a 1 km long park with dunes full of trees, a cycling lane

and a central waterway 1.5 m deep connected to the sea (fig. 6). This green area is intended to mitigate the impact of the port on the residential area, providing a new public space that resembles a waterfront.

Conclusion

The case of Pra' shows how important the role of the shore has been in the cultural heritage of its coastal community. As in the case of traditional streets, the shore of Pra' reflected local stories and beliefs, representing a sense of cultural identity. Since the shore is a fundamental space for certain coastal communities to reproduce their tangible and intangible cultural heritage, should it be considered a category of protection that calls for particularly inclusive management and governance?

The vanishing of the shore as a space where the maritime character of the community of Pra' was reproduced generated a discontinuity in its sense of identity; this turned the shore into a subject of socio-political revindication. "The Right to the City and the Sea" described citizens' demands, allowing other related political questions to emerge, such as who has the agency over that space and who should decide what space of cultural heritage is worthy of protection. The disempowerment of citizens of Pra', peripheralized as part of Genoa's territory created by Mussolini's regime, and the unilateral character of decision-making by the port and the city's centralized institutions are at the root of the problem of the shore's contested disappearance.

A critical ontology of the shore highlights how questions of space and power are central to the cultural heritage of maritime communities. If the space of the shore shapes the relations

that produce cultural heritage, who should be in charge of its transformation? This question suggests the role of citizen representation. Acknowledging the shore as a terraqueous space of civic revindication has additional implications. If we recognize the inextricability of coastal communities and the sea at a time of multiplying uses, global expansion of port infrastructure and increasing coastal expressions of the climate crisis, what should the role of coastal communities be in coastal zone management and maritime spatial planning, and what role should cultural heritage play in that?

Policy Recommendations

- Design coastal policies that acknowledge the material and immaterial dependencies of coastal communities from the shore.
- Conceive economic policies that acknowledge existent local economies and prioritize them over logistical monoculture.
- Develop governance structures with decentralized mechanisms and new legal systems that enhance participation and authority of local communities in coastal transformation.
- Improve institutional transparency in the management of port infrastructure, providing social, economic and environmental data on the interaction between the port and territory in order to inform the public debate.

Acknowledgment

This article is a result of postdoctoral research funded by Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 101026967. This contribution was peer-reviewed. It was edited by members of the editorial team of the UNESCO Chair Water, Ports and Historic Cities: Carola Hein, Zuzanna Sliwinska and Matteo D'Agostino.

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