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Reassembling Marseille's mosaic: urban planning in service of a post-World War II imagined identity

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ABSTRACT

Socio-spatial divisions between districts in the North and South have marked the port-city of Marseille since the post-World War II urban reconstruction period. This article analyses the decades spanning the 1940s to the 1960s Vieux Port area as well as the HLM (Habitation à Loyer Modéré, or rent controlled properties) building projects in the North of the city. This reveals a dual strategy deployed by urban planners as well as municipal and national government officials in response to an increasing immigrant workforce involving relocation into HLMs and (re-)designing public spaces. City planners, architects, and officials aimed to reconfigure the neighbourhoods in which people were to be housed and to strengthen the narrative of Marseille as a Mediterranean gateway, attracting investors and tourists, a process which also helped the city to gain a favourable reputation in Europe. The way in which urban planning, social housing initiatives, and public space designs unfolded in post-World War II Marseille has played a pivotal role in shaping the city's present-day social and geographical divisions.

KEYWORDS

Marseille; Le Vieux Port; post-World War II; urban planning; port-city identity; social housing/HLM; immigration; public spaces

Introduction

‘Marseille, a fractured city: Divided between north and south, France’s second-largest city lags far behind in terms of infrastructure’¹ reads the headline for a 2020 article in the influential French newspaper *Le Monde*. [All translations from French to English were done by the author.] It explains how Marseille is a city marked by poverty, how it is socially and geographically divided and fragmented between the southern and northern districts (where social housing predominates), as well as within the city centre, the Vieux Port (or old port) area, where the ‘poorest neighbourhoods’ adjoin the prestigious urban redevelopment project *Euroméditerranée*.² The concerns expressed in *Le Monde* are not recent phenomena, rather they have a much deeper history.³ Urban planners look back on Marseille’s mythic past time and again to inspire, inform and justify new project proposals for the city’s development. What this reassembling of Marseille’s city centre looked like and how neighbourhoods were reshuffled after World War II to create a new identity for Marseille is the topic of this article.

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¹Costil and Gittus, “Marseille, une ville fracturée”.

²Costil and Gittus; Bullen, “Gentrified, Euro-Mediterranean, Arabic?”

³Bullen, “Gentrified, Euro-Mediterranean, Arabic?”

Following World War II France's cities, like many in Europe, faced major rebuilding and housing challenges since so many people were displaced and traumatized.⁴ Marseille struggled to get back on its feet after it was occupied by the German forces between 1943 and 1944 and its central harbour, the Vieux Port, and its surrounding neighbourhoods were largely destroyed. Thousands of people, mostly men, from various nations – among them veterans, refugees, internally displaced citizens, and workers – were stranded in the city for an often undefined period of time as a direct consequence of the end of the war. Many found themselves without a home to return to, while others, soldiers recruited in the colonies, had to wait to be allocated a spot on a ship bound for the African continent, prolonging their stay in Marseille.⁵ The regional newspaper *Le Provençal* described this situation in July 1945 as 'an immense rendez-vous of humankind', referring to the uncertain situation of these involuntary immigrants.⁶ In the 1950s and the 1960s Cold War tensions permeated Marseille. The communist party was strong and so were the anti-Vietnam War sentiments actively shown by the powerful dockers' unions via strikes:

Yet this moment [post-World War II] was also marked by widespread labor unrest, mounting Cold War hostilities, and growing colonial conflicts. Marseille became an important battleground for French anti-communists, the local communist affiliated Ports and Docks Union, and the American CIA, who all cultivated different visions for the future of postwar France.⁷

Alongside these tensions, from 1954 to 1962 the Algerian War was fought. This brought at least one million repatriates to Marseille when Algeria gained independence.⁸ This time marked by anti-colonial efforts, Cold War conflicts and the French post-World War II economic boom resulted in an increase in immigration, as well as the implementation of measures by Marseille's city and planning officials to tackle housing shortages and the social tensions simmering in the city centre. These planning schemes, so this article argues, shaped the way the city's identity is narrated and laid the groundwork which created the city's socio-spatial divisions which have been allowed to persist up to today.⁹

The Vieux Port area's reconstruction shall serve as the starting point to show how the municipal government, architects, city planners, and landscapers reacted to the immigrant workforce across the 1940s – 1960s period. Apart from the political circumstances described above, this workforce was also actively recruited in the colonies by port authorities, shipping companies, and in collaboration with members of the chamber of commerce.¹⁰ In response to this increase in people in need of housing, HLMs (Habitation à Loyer Modéré, or rent controlled properties) were built predominantly in the north-west of the city.¹¹ At the same time in the city centre public spaces were (re-)designed in ways which 'exoticized' the histories of the very immigrants who were being pushed out of sight to the HLM neighbourhoods. Planning and government officials were the ones initializing the 'exoticizing' and relocation to the north as they sought to create a specific image, a recognizable and unique identity for Marseille. Specifically, these actors aimed to produce a new urban reality matching what they imagined the city should represent: a Mediterranean gateway connecting the African coast to France, an international hub trying to appear inviting to investors, merchants and tourists alike whilst decidedly siding itself with continental Europe and hiding the immigrant workforce that kept this economic system running.

⁴Hardy, "L'habitat défectueux," 29; Yates, "Home-Making," 1085.

⁵Nasiali, "Trouble on the Docks," 903; cf. also Adimi, *Au vent mauvais*, 42–57.

⁶"Crise du Logement."

⁷Nasiali, "Trouble on the Docks," 900.

⁸Crane, "Architecture at the Ends of Empire," 126–27; Cohen, "Coming to Rest," 277; Ville de Marseille, *Statistique Générale 1953–69*.

⁹Harris, "A 'Capital of Hope'".

¹⁰Nasiali, "Trouble on the Docks," 902; Bertocello and Bredeloup, "Le Marseille des marins africains," 179-181/ 187.

¹¹Durousseau, "Ensembles et Residences," 55–60.

(Re-)Examining the soul of Marseille

Marseille's self-portrayal as a port-city sees the city's foundation by Greek settlers from Phocaea in ca. 600 BC as the grounding for this identity.¹² Since those times the port has maintained significant economic importance in the Mediterranean, initially serving the hinterlands and later playing a crucial role for the nation of France.¹³ The Vieux Port in particular marks Marseille's legendary founding place. It lies at the heart of the city and its name was coined in 1853, when the port was expanded to meet growing demands. A new set of ports stretched along the northern coast around Marseille, where first La Joliette was built in 1845, followed by five further *bassins* (or docks) until 1939.¹⁴ Marseille Fos, the main harbour handling freight today, was built in the 1960s.¹⁵

During the interwar period and Vichy governance era urban planners began discussing the complete redesign of the Vieux Port neighbourhoods, at the time inhabited mostly by immigrant dock workers of Italian, North African, and Senegalese decent. The district was reputedly full of criminals and prostitutes. The planners put forward proposals first in 1934 and again in 1942 under Vichy rule.¹⁶ These suggestions were implemented on January 23, 1943 when National Socialist German troops invaded, occupied and bombarded the strategically significant Vieux Port. The Vichy government collaborated in the forced evacuation of more than 20,000 inhabitants and actively assisted expropriations.¹⁷ Newspaper articles published shortly after the war suggest that financial and political groups aimed to take advantage of the German occupation for a real estate scheme.¹⁸ Current research confirms these allegations shaped Marseille in the image of 'France's ideal, white, rational, European landscape' (Figure 1).¹⁹

In the aftermath of World War II, Marseille was to serve as France's role model for the 'rejuvenating empire' as the nation sought to cling to its colonies, 'modernize and rationalize' itself and urged its metropolitan and colonial cities to put their urban spaces 'in order'.²⁰ Marseille's Mayor, Michel Carlini (1947–53), described this time of reorientation, as the city adapted to a new urban reality, as a moment 'to truly examine [Marseille's] soul,' thereby paving the way for the deliberate shaping of a newly defined set of characteristics for the city and as efforts were made to turn Marseille into the role model that Paris wished it to be.²¹

The ideal citizen: HLM construction and Vieux Port reconstruction

Catering to, and fostering, French nuclear families was also part of the re-planning scheme for the government of Marseille, as the 1940 – 1960s decades marked a time when the built environment was also thought to be an active shaper of idealistically conceived citizens.²² The architect Le Corbusier's ideals of sun, air, and light, the elements of a pragmatic and architecturally modern

¹²cf. Hewitt, *Wicked City*; Ingram and Kleppinger, *The Marseille Mosaic*.

¹³Rastoin, "Le commerce et l'industrie," 25; Meyer-Heine, "Le plan régional," 40.

¹⁴Couteaud, "Le Port de Marseille," 18.

¹⁵Benoit, "Marseille et l'urbanisme," 11–12; Billoud, "Les zones du plan," 13; Carlini, "La protection du site marseillais," 36; Meyer-Heine, "Le plan régional," 45; Nasiali, "Trouble on the Docks," 901–902/904.

¹⁶Cohen, "Coming to Rest," 276; Voldman, *Fabriquer La Ville*, 95.

¹⁷Remacle, "Les mystères de l'épuration, XII"; Remacle, "Les mystères de l'épuration, XIII".

¹⁸Remacle, "Les mystères de l'épuration, XIII"; Remacle, "Les mystères de l'épuration, XIV"; Crane, "Mutable Fragments," 2; Kitson, *Police and Politics in Marseille*, 150.

¹⁹Cohen, "Coming to Rest," 276.

²⁰Nasiali, "Ordering the Disorderly Slum," 1021; Nasiali, "Trouble on the Docks," 902.

²¹Carlini, "La protection du site marseillais," 35; cf. also Voldman, *Fabriquer La Ville*, 104.

²²Yates, "Home-Making," 1086; Voldman, *Fabriquer La Ville*, 93.



Figure 1. View of the Hôtel-de-Ville district and the ongoing reconstruction of the Vieux Port area. Photo taken by Léon Borel, 04.10.1950. [195 Fi 407 / Archives de Marseille].

standard of living, were ensured via the creation of dense housing with shared green or open space access nearby. This model influenced many post-World War II French mass housing constructions countering housing shortages. The Ministry of Reconstruction and Urbanism (MRU) was meant to oversee reconstruction projects in France in the spirit of ‘modern urbanism’ – e.g. standardizing plot and living spaces sizes, building mass housing and generally increasing quality of life with amenities such as running water and WCs. In Marseille, the MRU supported, among other projects, the reconstruction of the Vieux Port, and Le Corbusier’s housing unit *Cité radieuse*.²³

An interview with M. Cristofol, Deputy President of the Municipal Council’s Reconstruction and Urban Planning Committee from July 10, 1945 reveals how he interpreted the new living standards and their impact on the people to be housed:

We mustn’t forget [...] that Marseille is at once Provençal, national and international: we must therefore seek to preserve all its picturesque character within the framework of the demands of modern urbanism. And above all [...] we must never forget that housing must promote the development of the French family: it must therefore be healthy and comfortable.²⁴

Here again, Marseille’s uniqueness is highlighted. Simultaneously, there is acknowledgment of the city’s orientation towards metropolitan France (omitting the city’s connection to the colonial territories particularly in northern Africa), and its efforts to seek European and North American recognition. Yet all the while the specific individuals encompassed by Cristofol’s concept of the

²³Nasiali, “Ordering the Disorderly Slum,” 1022; Voldman, *Fabriquer La Ville*, 99-100/106.

²⁴Carasso, “Enfin un projet constructif.”

'French family' remain undefined. Equally lacking in clarity was the term 'immigrant workers' which was used interchangeably with 'Maghrebians', 'Algerians', and 'North Africans'. Sources reveal a degree of confusion by planners and politicians regarding the specific identity of the workforce. What is clear is that the immigrant workers, living in what remained of the Vieux Port neighbourhoods and adjacent to the *bassins* of La Joliette, were not considered to be 'French families' and therefore did not fit the character of the city centre that was aimed for. They were yet to become the sort of ideal citizens that the city officials wished to promote.²⁵ Chief urban planner André P. Hardy, for example, described the Vieux Port inhabitants as 'a population with a very limited education in hygiene and family life'.²⁶ The 'insalubrity' of the neighbourhood was a recurring justification given by the French government for the redevelopment.²⁷

Thus, these either unwanted, or non-conforming urban dwellers were sent to live in social housing (HLM)²⁸ mainly in the North of the city, where it was thought that they would perhaps be shaped by the newly built environment. The official reason the government of Marseille gave was that this move would enhance workers' living conditions with shorter commutes as commercial focus shifted to the northern ports.²⁹ All these reasons echo Le Corbusier's 1940s *Charte d'Athènes* which included hygiene and comfort, access to outdoor spaces and nature as well as taking into account the 'four functions of modern life': dwelling, work, taking care of physical health, and transport access.³⁰

Planning experts designed and constructed the HLMs as high-density housing with the aim of reducing costs for what they referred to as the 'most disadvantaged categories of the population'.³¹ The National Housing Improvement Fund and the Departmental Commission gave subsidies.³² Additional national funding was provided, notably via the Société Nationale de Construction and the Ministry of Reconstruction and Urbanism (MRU), alongside local, municipal and private companies and programmes (AGAM, LOGECO, CIL, FIORIO Grands Travaux de l'Est, LOGIREM, Société d'HLM de Marseille, Société Nouvelle d'HLM, Office Public Départemental d'HLM des Bouches-du-Rhône, S.A. d'HLM Provence Logis, S.A.R.L., etc.³³) that either helped to fund and/or manage the projects. The national government in Paris never ceased to show interest in Marseille: The port-city was far enough away from the capital so as not to taint it with its imperfections and problems, yet profit was produced for the country with Marseille's harbour an important transportation node and hub for the French economy.

Returning to the 1950s, the perspectives of the people who were relocated to the HLMs, reveal that this planning scheme – so positively described by Hardy, Carlini et al. – entailed, in reality, physical and social marginalization.³⁴ Mehdi Charef, author of the autobiographical *La cité de mon père*, describes the new housing in this way: 'The HLMs were planned to house a maximum of families in small spaces. To park as many children as possible in as little space as possible was cruel.'³⁵ Indeed, instead of providing sufficient public outdoor spaces in the neighbourhoods to compensate for the tight living conditions, loggias were promoted by Hardy as an indispensable

²⁵cf. also McKay, *Romance in Marseille*; McKay, *Banjo*; Voldman, *Fabriquer La Ville*, 94.

²⁶Hardy, "Enquête Démographique".

²⁷Voldman, *Fabriquer La Ville*, 94; Blanc-Chaléard, "Les immigrés," 22.

²⁸cf. Ben Yahmed, "Quelques Jalons."

²⁹Meyer-Heine, "Le plan régional," 41–42; Malcor, "La réalisation du plan," 48.

³⁰Le Corbusier and Giraudoux, *La Charte d'Athènes*; Voldman, *Fabriquer La Ville*, 114.

³¹Malcor, "La réalisation du plan," 49–50.

³²Hardy, "L'habitat défectueux," 32.

³³cf. Ministère de la Culture, "Marseille, ensembles et résidences"; Voldman, *Fabriquer La Ville*, 122–124.

³⁴cf. Nasiali, "Ordering the Disorderly Slum".

³⁵Charef, *La cité de mon père*, 63.

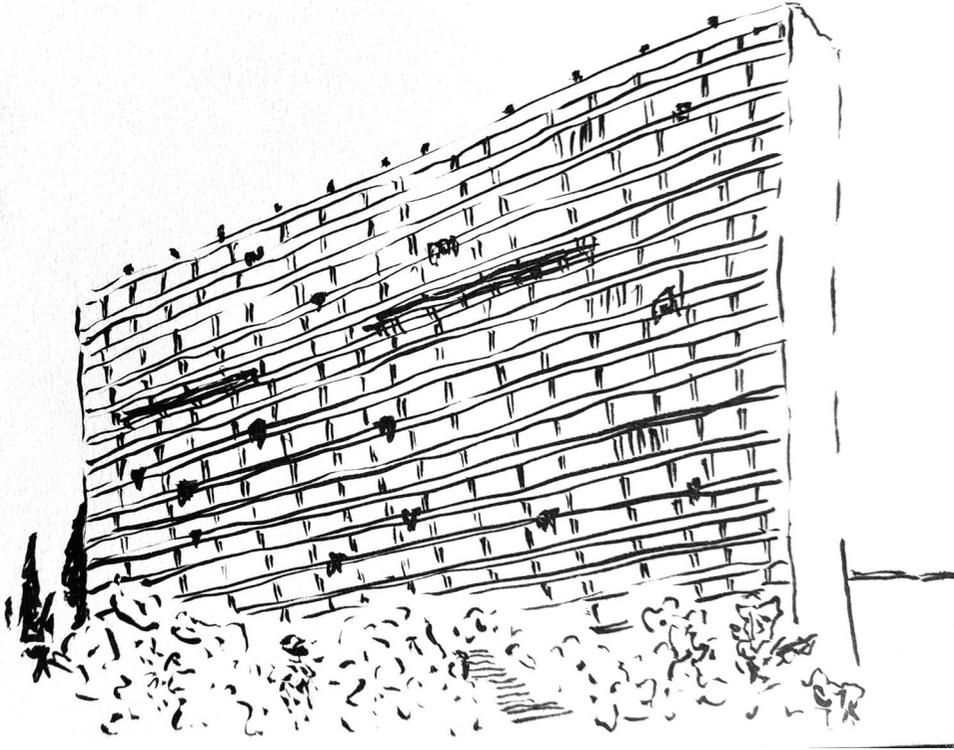


Figure 2. Loggia façade of the nine-building development Parc Kalliste, built in 1958 and financed with capital gained by private, Indochina-repatriated timber company entrepreneurs. [Illustration by Yasmina Zian, original image and documentation in ‘544 – Parc Kalliste’ in: *Notices monographiques des 80 ensembles et résidences étudiés*. 2004/2005 Thierry Dourousseau.]

feature of Mediterranean living, thus apparently fostering a Mediterranean sense of identity (Figure 2).³⁶

Effectively, adding such so-called perks and linking them to Mediterranean or French ways of living served time and again as justifications in urban planning schemes. Author Hadrien Bels also experienced the move to an HLM and narrates in his book *Cinq dans tes yeux* how many families came to accept the relocation to the ‘HLM towers planted in the middle of nothing.’³⁷ While Bels speaks of acceptance, Charef speaks of initial excitement when he tells the story of his father who had worked as a labourer in France to provide for his family in Algeria. When the family could finally join him in Marseille in the 1960s and were allocated their own HLM apartment, they felt they had finally been accepted to ‘live in society.’³⁸ Yet, soon Charef’s family noticed they were being pushed to the margins: there was hardly any public transportation to the city centre, and French families living in the vicinity moved away when immigrants started populating the new neighbourhoods.³⁹ Many young immigrants felt deceived. Until 1962, Algerians were considered French citizens and anticipated being treated as such in France as well. However, upon

³⁶Hardy, “L’habitat défectueux,” 31.

³⁷Bels, *Cinq dans tes yeux*, 134.

³⁸Charef, *La cité de mon père*, 14.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 38–39.

arriving in Marseille, they were very much ‘othered’ and lost French citizenship when Algeria gained independence.⁴⁰

By retelling the beginnings of HLM planning in connection to the Vieux Port reconstruction, it becomes clear how the port-city of Marseille has functioned ambiguously: exchange and marginalization go hand in hand, economic growth seems prestigious but stands on the shoulders of a workforce that city authorities and planners would rather make invisible.

Marseille: France’s flagship city for modernism and financial prosperity

After the HLMs had been built and the workforce had been relocated, city officials and planners could tend to Marseille’s image as the flagship for modernism and financial prosperity of France. The rebuilding of the city centre, the Vieux Port and its surrounding neighbourhoods, was especially important in manifesting the narration of Marseille’s new identity. A mix of Mediterranean, North African and French culture emerged via the built environment. Urban planners carefully balanced the ratios of how much of each culture should be incorporated in the designs for the city centre.

In 1951 M. Rambert, Director of the Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Marseille, described the port of Marseille as the point of contact to the Mediterranean sea and beyond, as well as ‘a city of 65,000 inhabitants in the middle of a desert.’⁴¹ Louis Pierrein, professor at the Université d’Aix-Marseille, explained how remarkable it was that in literature, art, or simply in general opinion, Marseille was often represented as outside France, at its margins – despite being crucial to France.⁴² Titles such as ‘Porte de l’Empire’, ‘Colonie Grecque’, or ‘Porte de l’Orient’ placed emphasis on ‘l’origine allogène’ and on the ‘exotic activities’ of the city. These epithets seem to link Marseille more strongly to the African coast than to France itself, underlined by comparisons to the desert, as seen above.⁴³ House architect of Marseille, Fernand Pouillon, even regarded Marseille as somewhere beyond France, and this can be seen in the way he designed HLM neighbourhoods in Marseille and Algiers, where he often made the designs of one city mirror those of the other.⁴⁴ Pouillon was influential in both cities as well as in Iran and known for his cost- and time-efficient building and his fight against the housing crisis. He was also in charge of rebuilding parts of the Vieux Port until 1953 and had a foible for reliving grand old cities which explains the roman character of the old port.⁴⁵ Harmonizing the built with the natural environment, creating places of aesthetic and liveable value, whilst speaking both to the people in need of social housing as well as creating spaces of touristic interest make for Pouillon’s lasting legacy especially in Marseille and Algiers. In this way, the architect is a compelling example for the identity narrative government officials aimed to spin for Marseille: Pouillon blended elements from different eras, styles, and cultures. He embraced the proximity to the Mediterranean, integrated local materials for a *Provençal* character,⁴⁶ combined North African with European heritage, whilst applying architectural ideas of the *esprit moderne* – just as the government officials wished to do as well (Figure 3).⁴⁷

⁴⁰Ibid., 58.

⁴¹Rambert, “Marseille et sa région,” 6.

⁴²Crane, “Architecture at the Ends of Empire,” 99.

⁴³Pierrein, “Marseille en France,” 4.

⁴⁴Crane, “Architecture at the Ends of Empire,” 112/133.

⁴⁵Maachi-Maïza, “L’architecture de Fernand Pouillon” ; cf. also Bonillo, *La reconstruction à Marseille*.

⁴⁶Carrières de Provence, “Bâtiments en pierre”.

⁴⁷Boulbene-Mouadji, “Fernand Pouillon”; Maachi-Maïza and Kacemi, “Fernand Pouillon”; Leborgne, “Les Sablettes”.



Figure 3. View across the Vieux Port to the reconstructed quay and the town hall (cf. Figure 1 seven years earlier, where the neighbourhood was still barren). The three main buildings on the quay were designed by Fernand Pouillon. Photo taken in 1957. [6 Fi 11325 / Conseil départemental 13 / Archives départementales – Tous droits réservés].

Via economic endeavours Marseille tried to balance being on the margins with staying connected to Europe. Railway connections helped here as Marseille provided France and other European countries with goods such as phosphates, fertilizers, fruit and vegetables as well as ‘exotic products’ from the African colonies.⁴⁸ These activities and narratives of built environments show this constant ambiguous identity being retold, imagined and addressed to France and Europe by the various political and financial stakeholders in Marseille.

Digging deeper, planning officials made manifest the specific discourse of the ‘exotic’, the advantages of the close ties to the African coast, via public spaces. Marseille’s city planners proposed a so-called ‘exotic garden’⁴⁹ at la Corniche to emphasize historical links between the ‘Orient and the French Union’.⁵⁰ This garden was to be placed just 2 km from the old port and close to the World War I ‘Monument to the heroes of the Eastern army and the distant lands’, or ‘Porte d’Orient’. In general, public urban green spaces should please tourists and make the city more liveable, so the engineering team argued. Gardens such as the Jardin du Pharo, adjacent to la Corniche, would allow tourists to discover ‘surprising views of the old and new harbours’ showcasing history, a healthy economy, and a tidy prosperous city (Figure 4).⁵¹

Mayor Carlini placed special emphasis on preserving and showcasing Marseille’s abundant heritage and even accepted one piece of North African heritage in the public space of the Vieux Port area (Noailles and Belsunce): souks (or covered markets).⁵² City officials noted that customers

⁴⁸Couteaud, “Le Port de Marseille,” 18; Guédiguian and Leidet, *Marseille, port d’attaches*, 76.

⁴⁹Malcor, “La réalisation du plan,” 50.

⁵⁰Meyer-Heine, “Le plan régional,” 43–44.

⁵¹Malcor, “La réalisation du plan,” 51.

⁵²Carlini, “La protection du site Marseillais,” 36–37.



Figure 4. 1950 aerial view of the rebuilt Vieux-Quartiers (with Pouillon’s ‘immeubles’), Belsunce, the Vieux Port, and the Jardin du Pharo (from left to right). [6 Fi 6366 / Conseil départemental 13 / Archives départemental – Tous droits réservés].

enjoyed walking through the narrow streets of the areas undamaged by World War II and with the open-faced shops ‘reminiscent of African souks’ and with ‘the distinctive features of old Marseille’.⁵³ Because of this commercial and touristic value, some souks were accepted while others were bulldozed to make way for parking lots and roads.⁵⁴ The souks became especially important in the early 1970s, when Algerian merchants established themselves and then again in the 1980s when Tunisian, Senegalese and Moroccan merchants joined and strengthened the network. The markets offered goods that were otherwise not easily findable and served as a meeting point for the diaspora. This shows that despite the planning officials’ contempt for the souks, they remain firmly rooted in Belsunce until today.⁵⁵

Apart from the souks, Belsunce remained a thorn in the city planners’ sides. It was a neighbourhood where mainly ‘single male laborers from North, West, and Equatorial Africa’ lived, and who managed to evade transfer to the HLMs, and where many so-called ‘African’ cafés and bars were located.⁵⁶ Situated between the port and the train station, Belsunce was also a transit area for travellers and migrants, and thus a ‘testing ground for all the tools designed to address the built environment and improve quality of life.’⁵⁷ In this way Belsunce was both a space for opportunities as well as a threat. Neighbourhood committees wrote letters of complaint to the Minister of Culture

⁵³ Malcor, “La réalisation du plan,” 51.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁵ Peraldi, “Marseille: réseaux migrants transfrontaliers”.

⁵⁶ Nasiali, “Trouble on the Docks,” 907; cf. also Bertoncetto and Bredeloup, “Le Marseille des marins africains”.

⁵⁷ Bertoncetto, Rodrigues-Malta, and Dubois, *Opération Euroméditerranée*, 12.

M. Baromei to report ‘misuse’ of public squares by various inhabitants and visitors, and in which he eventually called for intervention in the 1970s.⁵⁸

The early 1970s, and 1973 specifically, marked a citywide intense increase in immigrant hostility and a radical change towards a strict French immigrant policy when the open-door stance was suddenly abandoned.⁵⁹ Under socialist mayor Gaston Defferre (also a key figure in drafting the ‘Defferre Law’ which would aid, according to the French view, many French colonies’ transition into independence)⁶⁰ the ‘issue of “downtown Marseille”’ was recurrently subject to redevelopment projects from ‘*tabula rasa* – in anticipation of the construction of the *centre directionnel* (1970)’ to the aforementioned relocations as well as marketing schemes for shopping opportunities to attract visitors.⁶¹ The ambitious project to build a business and commercial centre in Belsunce, took inspiration from La Défense in Paris, Centre Directionnel in Lyon, and the North American central business districts (CBDs). Linked to the creation of the Marseille Fos industrial-port zone, the project was yet another attempt to showcase Marseille’s role as an important economic player in the region and on the international stage. The official project proposal of February 1972, presented by Mayor Gaston Defferre to the city council made clear that the key function of this centre was to ‘play a fundamental role in national, European and international exchanges, given Marseille’s privileged location on the Mediterranean coast.’ The business and commercial centre was to provide regional administrative services, promote cultural activities, as well as ‘to accommodate higher-level tertiary activities, complementary to the facilities planned for the northern Marseille agglomeration.’ Parts of Belsunce district were then demolished to make way for the *centre directionnel*.⁶²

Until the 1970s, Marseille upheld the narrative of an inclusive Mediterranean culture that welcomed tourists and immigrants alike as they would contribute, economically, to the port city. This glimpse at plans and ideas behind the reconstruction of Vieux Port area in connection to the establishment of the HLM districts demonstrates how a specific ‘diversity’ was featured in a very specific setting and to a very specific degree. Marseille was, and remains, a point of connection to France’s (former) colonies. The legacies resulting from this entanglement, from this conflicted stance of needing the close ties to the African continent, but wanting very much to be considered as part of the European one is visible in the city officials’ and planners’ concerted efforts to tidy up the city centre via planning schemes. The grimy port with its immigrant workers did not fit an ideal of modernity and progress and was to be hidden or moved out of sight to the north of Marseille.

Continuation of the narrative: progress and modernity in *Euroméditerranée* and Marseille Fos

In the 1990s the portrayal of the city as an image of progress and modernity, and as a cultural ‘mosaic’,⁶³ was still on the agenda when the *Euroméditerranée* project was launched by port, city and national authorities.⁶⁴ Before the *Euroméditerranée* became an international endeavour, “*Euroméditerranée*” designated an economic, social and cultural geostrategy in view of a multilateral cooperation between Europe and the Mediterranean’.⁶⁵ Marseille understood this project, and

⁵⁸cf. Baromei, “NOTE pour Monsieur”.

⁵⁹Cohen, “Coming to Rest,” 278; Naylor, “A System that Resembles”; Steenblock, “Wir weigern uns”.

⁶⁰Nasiali, “Trouble on the Docks,” 909.

⁶¹Bertoncello, Rodrigues-Malta, and Dubois, *Opération Euroméditerranée*, 12.

⁶²Ibid., 9; Ina, “Du Centre Directionnel”; Ville de Marseille, “Première phase,” 1.

⁶³Bertoncello, Rodrigues-Malta, and Dubois, *Opération Euroméditerranée*, 14.

⁶⁴Zahra, “Reconquête d’une friche portuaire,” 37.

⁶⁵Bertoncello, Rodrigues-Malta, and Dubois, *Opération Euroméditerranée*, 14.



Figure 5. View of the northern industrial area, parts of Marseille Fos and the HLM neighbourhoods in the background. [Image courtesy of Muriel van Ruymbeke, April 2024].

so did non-Marseillais investors, as a way to strengthen ties between the city and the Mediterranean, embracing the plurality it offered. Looking at the development until now, this planning endeavour again harks back to the city's legendary founding, the unique character of the Vieux Port and an integration of all cultures but to a clearly demarcated degree.⁶⁶ *Euroméditerranée* was very much shaped by the inputs of a handful of local project participants implementing their visions, in cooperation with larger, (inter-)national investors.

The goals set in 1995 can be summarized under five points and as to: reaffirm the port vocation of the *cité phocéenne*, restore the urban environment, establish new companies, attract international investors, and favour a 'certain social mix'.⁶⁷ Eight years later phase three of the project was launched with renewed emphasis on the port *bassins* in the city centre to create a clearly visible 'port-city interface' linking the port identity to the city of today while still ignoring the workforce upholding the port-city activity hidden away in the North. *Euroméditerranée* plans, in some unknown future, to efface the border that exists between the *bassins* of the port in the centre and the urban districts north of the Vieux Port (Figures 5 and 6).⁶⁸

The 2022 official brochure of the Port of Marseille, a collaborator in the initiative, continues the narrative this article has expanded on: *Le Port de Marseille Fos. Un Port Vert pour une Économie Bleue*, so the title of the brochure, signals sustainability, modernity, inclusivity, and progress.

⁶⁶Hagège, "Le port de Marseille," [2].

⁶⁷Zahra, "Reconquête d'une friche portuaire," 37.

⁶⁸Hagège, "Le port de Marseille," [6].



Figure 6. View of the cruise ship terminal and *Euroméditerranée* from a ferry headed to Corsica. [Image courtesy of Muriel van Ruymbeke, April 2024].

Readers learn that Marseille Fos is ‘the leader of the energy transition in its field’, and that it is the natural entry point to south of Europe, a major international trade actor, as well as a key employer in the metropolitan area.⁶⁹ The brochure thus rehashes the same story that has been told since the interwar period: Marseille is a port-city, whose identity and lived reality is firmly established within this term, that thrives on the people, goods, ideas, and money that the port infrastructure generates, a modern player offering a bright economic future to the city and the nation.

Conclusion

The firm link between port and city has played an integral role in urban planning and identity narration from Marseille’s founding days and continues to do so today. The port is a salient character trait of Marseille and the people coming and going via the port shaped the city through the architectural responses to this ever-changing composition of inhabitants. The planning, construction, and redesigning of Marseille’s ports and their surrounding neighbourhoods reveal various attempts to create a coherent identity narrative for the city especially in relation to France and Europe. The publicly accessible or visible spaces mentioned in this article such as the souks of Belsunce, the Jardin du Pharo, and the Vieux Port that were transformed into tourist attractions and the business and tourist centre of the *Euroméditerranée* waterfront are examples of how the new post-World War II built environment covered up the past of Marseille’s city centre. Prostitution, poverty,

⁶⁹Port de Marseille Fos, “Le port de Marseille Fos”.

drunken and violent sailors and dockers, immigrant communities introducing ‘exotic’ cuisine and smells, these clichéd character traits attributed to the Vieux Port area of pre-World War II were erased upon reconstruction. The deliberately sealed off and contained HLM district to the North (marked e.g. by a lack of proper public transportation to the city centre), built in the name of modernist architectural principles, allowed the municipal and national stakeholders, politicians and urban planners to create a clean slate. Until today Marseille’s mosaic of historical geographical character traits is being reassembled and continuously embellished. The process, as I have shown, exposes lasting socio-spatial divisions which are veiled by a solid city identity narrative.

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