

# OLD LANDMARKS AND NEW FUNCTIONS. COASTAL ARCHITECTURES REDESIGN THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE COASTAL BELTS\*

Antonietta Ivona<sup>1</sup>, Lucrezia Lopez<sup>2</sup>, Donatella Privitera<sup>3</sup>,

<sup>1</sup>Università degli studi di Bari Aldo Moro, Largo Abbazia S. Scolastica n. 53 -70124 Bari, phone +39 080 5049062, e-mail: [antonietta.ivona@uniba.it](mailto:antonietta.ivona@uniba.it)

<sup>2</sup> Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, e-mail: [lucrezia.lopez@usc.es](mailto:lucrezia.lopez@usc.es)

<sup>3</sup> Università degli Studi di Catania, e-mail: [donatella.privitera@unict.it](mailto:donatella.privitera@unict.it)

**Abstract** – The geographical space should be conceived as a progressive and conscious construction, resulting from the interaction between individual and collective actions. If from the second post-war period and for the following twenty years the coastal space has maintained even a minimal break with the anthropized spaces, starting from the 1970s the rapid industrial development has increasingly occupied the coasts. These changes along the coastal space can be understood referring to the 'maritime-coastal region', which are places between the land and the sea, profoundly different by the integration of resources. During the following years, the growing awareness of the economic importance of the sea and its immediate hinterland has generated further changes in the evaluation of the role of maritime spaces in the processes of territorial organization.

The chapter focuses its attention on one of the most symbolic maritime cultural assets: lighthouses. They are distributed along the European coastlines, responding to the same historical function, and evoking a common past.

A very interesting case is Galicia, a *finisterre* Spanish region. Its coast is rich in lighthouses and other architectural structures, which for a long time have been at the service of the navy, redefined with new economic and social functions. As a result, lighthouses and other cultural resources are considered as an expression of that system of signs that binds the territorial components. From a methodological point of view, the proposal uses a qualitative approach, with the aim to point out how lighthouses have become scenarios of new functions thus satisfying the needs of tourists with a high attractive potential. In reconstructing this evolutionary process, the proposal will go through the analysis of the new socio-cultural and economic dynamics which, always guided by an inner Mediterranean identity, are transforming the coasts and landscapes.

## Introduction

Geographical space is a progressive and conscious construction defined by the relationships between geographical elements. In particular, the coastal space is a dynamic ecosystem in which natural and anthropogenic processes add up and interact, modifying their geomorphological, physical and biological characteristics.

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Historically, coastal areas have been rich in unique seascapes, tangible artifacts, and intangible cultural heritage. All of them have been constantly threatened by the changing conditions of the sea and coast, both geophysical and socially constructed. They have also contributed to cultural transmission between people, goods and ideas. Today, cultural heritage plays a central role in the narratives of coastal regions and in their reorganization as places and/or containers of historical, cultural, social and economic safeguards.

The “maritime-coastal region” defined by Vallega [1] is useful for understanding changes in the coastal space; he defines it as a special region arranged on two environments, land and sea, which are profoundly different, but which establish integrated forms of employment and integration of resources. Over the years, the growing awareness of the economic importance of the sea and its immediate hinterland has generated continuous changes in the evaluation of the role of maritime spaces and in the processes of territorial organization. The “coastal belts” is a polyvalent concept, which assumes proportions commensurate with the phenomena, parameters and functions under study. More than two joint plans, the coastal areas and the coastal sea are linked by a network of relationships that thickens and becomes complex as human organization becomes more relational.

“Coastal and marine regions are gateways connecting land and sea, with unique landscapes and seascapes and related tangible and intangible cultural heritage, such as underwater and coastal antiquities, coastal archaeological sites, traditional material cultures such as fishing, maritime communities, and traditional gear and instruments. [...] We define coastal and maritime cultural heritage as a set of tangibles and intangibles linked to human activities and interactions taking place within coastal and marine (geographical or cultural) areas in the past, the present, and imagined futures” [2] (p. 2).

Cultural heritage is therefore that part of the past that we select in the present for current purposes whether they are economic, cultural, political, or social. Human interaction with the sea in coastal areas has shaped the natural landscape; it has played a crucial role in forging the maritime and coastal cultural heritage. Over time, it has favored the promotion of a sense of identity and place attachment [3], [4], [5]. Currently, coastal areas still play a relevant role thanks to their variety of environmental, historical and cultural landscapes, but also for their character of transition and interface between the hinterland, the coast, and the sea. Perhaps, as Zunica [6] points out, it must be admitted that the thickness of the coastal strips is a polyvalent concept, which assumes proportions commensurate with different phenomena, parameters and functions. Historically, coastal regions have played the role of cultural transmission areas, where peoples, goods and ideas from abroad interact with the local and traditional ones. Besides the uniqueness of their landscapes, coastal areas are territories often associated only with leisure activities; consequently, they are commercialized and consumed. By the way, they also have a potential to assume a plurality of meanings and to become attractive areas of social interaction and collective interest. Nowadays, cultural heritage plays a central role in the narratives of coastal regions and in their reorganization as places and/or containers of historical, cultural, social and economic protection. In this sense, the definition of Maritime Cultural Heritage, refers to that cultural asset that witnesses the relationship between people and sea. This definition refers to all the cultural materials (in the water and on the nearby land) and intangible assets that are an expression of a water-based culture (saltwater and fresh water) that has anthropological, archaeological, historical, architectural, artistic, scientific or literary values or interests, among others [7]. Indeed, communities have become aware of the importance of these

maritime heritage, not only to narrate their territorial identity, but also to plan a locally based sustainable development. According to Gillis [8], under the gaze of the tourist, coasts are considered places where human life was simple and picturesque.

The chapter advances the authors' understanding of how lighthouses could become resources for sustainable development on the social, economic, touristic and cultural levels. The study would help local governments with examples to enhance the historical resources to create a new identity that led to a sustainable development of a landscape, and to create networks with other comparable museums all over Europe to better exploit the touristic and cultural potential. The chapter suggests a systematic classification of lighthouse experiences with not traditional function and suggested some research propositions for further research. Public decision makers, maritime authorities and tourism operators may acknowledge the theoretical and practical contributions provided by this article and develop innovative escape experiences. The new functions of lighthouse such as tourism is an innovative and creative way to promote the sustainable development of waterfronts of port cities, giving more "energy" to these coastal and often rural areas [9].

### **Old landmarks and new functions - The symbolism of lighthouses**

The architectural emergencies (lighthouses, towers, forts) that have presided over the coastal areas have undergone a continuous change in their value in use. From ancient symbols of the constant movement of people and goods that needed those garrisons to reach ports safely, today, after years of neglect, they are once again perceived as indispensable landing places. In short, tangible representations of man's eternal need to move from one place to another and, arriving there, mark the space with identity "objects".

Among the most evident coastal territorial signs are the lighthouses, which for a long time were the place of contact between the sea and the land, a connective element between two different but inextricably interconnected systems. The custom of accessing bonfires on the top of the hills in order to guide nocturnal navigation goes back to ancient times, as evidenced by the writings of travelers of the past and only in a subsequent phase did they begin to build towers on whose top fires were lit. The lighthouse of Alexandria in Egypt, built by Sostrato di Cnido (III century BC), considered one of the Seven Wonders of the world for its magnificence, became the prototype to be imitated. After all, the name of the island Φάρος, located at the mouth of the port where the building stood, ended up designating this type of artifact in many Romance languages. The resumption of commercial shipping during the Middle Ages represented a further incentive for the construction of new night markers. The Genoa Lantern built in 1128 is still today the tallest construction of this type in the Mediterranean; this medieval artifact represents better than others the power of the city at that time, so much so as to identify the city itself from an iconographic point of view.

The technical evolution of the building (always with a central plan), the technological evolution of fuel to light the fire and finally that of the use of lenses in order to amplify the light signal, have marked the historical evolution of this type of building. In a first phase, its construction spread to the Mediterranean area and then passed to northern Europe and the rest of the world, in relation to the increase in the importance of commercial traffic in those lands. Currently, with the appearance of satellite navigation for about fifty years, no more new lighthouses have been built; in many cases, the surviving ones have lost

their maritime signaling role, so today they are solitary witnesses of the long past. It is therefore necessary to ask ourselves how to proceed with their conservation compatible with their structure, in the same way as any other testimony of the past.

Tourist use is certainly the most suitable one and in this sense it is possible to distinguish a "tourism of lighthouses" where the building has a museum function that can be a documentation of the historical or environmental characteristics of the surrounding area, and a "tourism in the lighthouses" when the structure welcomes the receptive functions [10] or to inspire the design of dark tourism experiences because lighthouses do not always evoke positive feelings [9] (p. 63).

The conservation and re-use of cultural resources for tourism purposes, such as lighthouses, cannot take place in the same way everywhere. "While there is a logical set of steps to take, changes may need to be made to suit the conditions, needs, purposes and objectives of the place. These steps, or phases, are not mutually exclusive, as there is the possibility of some degree of overlap" [11] (p. 18). Consequently, the general success of the reuse of the lighthouses will depend on the contextualization of each of the initiatives and on the overall vision of the implementing bodies.

The main purpose of each conversion process must therefore be the recovery of the buildings from degradation to guarantee them a new use, activate the territorial economies and return it to the community, creating a solid opportunity for local development and a social well-being of the resident community.

In recent years, in the world and in Europe in particular, those lighthouses that have lost their original function have been objects of various initiatives aimed at promoting their architectural recovery and reuse for tourist and cultural purposes. In many cases, their light continues signaling activity and, even in this eventuality, the pertinent spaces (warehouses, guardian's house, etc.) could still host new uses.

For example, the Italian legislation on cultural heritage has introduced, for some years now, the concept of enhancement and use of cultural heritage by entrusting cultural assistance and hospitality services for the public to third parties. In this direction, in 2015 and in the other subsequent editions, the national project "Valore Paese" of the State Property Agency was launched. Its main aim was to promote the enhancement of the Italian public real estate assets through the cooperation between the tourism, art and culture, economic development and territorial cohesion. In this sense, the recovery of public assets owned by the State and local authorities has the possibility of being considered no longer only in terms of cost for the community, but also as a significant lever for territorial and social development, in a public-private partnership [12].

From the start of the project, new synergies have been created for the effective implementation of the project; for example, private entrepreneurs who request and obtain the concession for the use of lighthouses and other coastal structures and who will promote and use them will have to cooperate profitably with public administrations. New ways of entrusting cultural, hospitality and organizational assistance services were then prepared, also related to the establishment of mixed companies. The enhancement of lighthouses concerns the economic importance of the cultural heritage and the impacts it determines with its activities and services.

The Italian conversion of lighthouses and coastal structures has its respective in Spain, with the "Faros de España". This project was presented in 2013 by the Ports of State and the Port Authorities, with the aim of enhancing the spaces of inactive lighthouses for the service. Its main aim was enhancing the development of activities other than maritime

signaling, including hotel-type activities, as well as hostels or accommodation. According to this project, lighthouses can foster the development of cultural or similar activities of social interest, to allow them to be open to society and ensure their conservation in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way.

The "Faros de España" initiative, like the Italian one, focuses in a distinct way on promoting hotel-like development in lighthouses, but also includes projects in sectors other than tourism. Thus, this strategy guarantees and promotes responsible, sustainable and environmentally friendly conservation, sustaining the development of activities.

Another European example aimed at the recovery of the coastal building heritage is "Revive". It was created in 2016 by the Portuguese Government to recover and enhance historical heritage through tourism. The government recognized those artifacts as a strategic national asset, present throughout the national territory, and the importance of ensuring their preservation, valuation and disclosure as well as a wide access to their enjoyment. "Revive program" opens up properties to private investment to develop them as tourist attractions by concessioning through public tendering. State heritage properties are a very important part of the historical, cultural and social identity of a country, and make a rich and distinctive contribution to the attractiveness of a region and the development of tourism. (<https://revive.turismodeportugal>).

## **Lighthouses of Spain - Examples of Lighthouses as tourism product**

Spain has 187 lighthouses; 55 of them are inhabited. Although, the signal technicians, former lighthouse keepers are not dedicated exclusively to the maintenance of their facilities, but rather they provide help to the port authorities. Their function can be considered in at least two respects. On the one hand, lighthouses are maritime signals to maintain their typically nautical value as an overall safety system for ships. On the other hand, lighthouses are territorial signs that require the conservation of their historical and technical heritage, as well as the development of complementary uses that revitalize them through the development of uses not related to maritime signaling.

These are the assumptions that favored the launch of the aforementioned state initiative "Faros de España" of the Ministry of Public Works and implemented through the public agency Puertos del Estado and the Port Authorities. It aims to diversifying the activities other than maritime signaling (including hotel-type businesses and rental homes and accommodation), as this could encourage the development of cultural or similar activities in the social interest and make lighthouses accessible to society. Moreover, it is important to ensure their conservation in a sustainable and ecological way. Thus, while Lighthouses will continue providing the marine aid to navigation (most of them have been doing for over 150 years), an effort is made to reuse the old lighthouse keepers' quarters with a similar residential and touristic functions.

The lighthouse will continue providing its service and these actions will be carried out, as is already being done in some cases, in the lighthouse's ancillary spaces. An effort is being made to ensure lighthouses are more than just lighthouses by turning them into infrastructures that collaborate in improving our country's tourism fabric, enhancing this industry's competitiveness by attracting top-quality tourism.

Lighthouses and their public domain are assigned to the different Port Authorities, which oversee processing the applications to perform activities other than their marine signaling activities at lighthouses.

The activity will always be performed under an administrative concession for several years in accordance with the prevailing legal framework and the business plan. Apart from adapting the spaces to the new activity, the developer will generally have to carry out any refurbishment or consolidation work on said facilities, starting off from their current state of conservation. The public concession will always be granted by the Port Authority to which the lighthouse in question is assigned.

To date, the project promoted by Puertos del Estado - which now depends on the Ministry of Transport, Mobility and the Urban Agenda - is still in force, although for the moment even with little success. There are currently only three operating hotels in Spanish lighthouses: Isla Pancha in Ribadeo, Lugo; Punta Cumplida, on the Canary Island of La Palma; and Lariño, A Coruña, en plena Costa da Morte; while the lighthouse of Cabo Silleiro (Vigo) is currently in the planning stage for its transformation into a hotel [13]. Most of them are in inaccessible places, which is why those who know them best, the lighthouse keepers who have been taking care of their maintenance for decades, propose a more cultural and social use. An example of this is the Finisterre Lighthouse in Galicia which, in addition to its signaling function, it houses a cultural center. (Figure 1).



Figure 1 – The Finisterre Lighthouse - Galicia, Spain.  
(Source: Ivona, Lopez, Privitera, 2022).

The Lighthouse has relevant historical and legendary connotations. constitutes a relevant signaling point in navigation along the Atlantic coasts. In fact, the most western lighthouse in Spain is the nearby Faro de Cabo de Touriñán. The original project consists of a main building (housing and warehouse), on one level, and ground floor rectangular for the service of three keepers. The tower elevation is of 17 m above the level of the site while the lamp rises

140.50 m above the level middle of the sea. Over the years, the residential building has risen and warehouse on two levels. It has an outstanding value for its historical, architectural interest (typology representative composition), technology, location and future viability. Can be easily visitable and integrated into a thematic network on the Lighthouses of Spain.

The Faro de Isla Pancha in Ribadeo, also in Galicia, is the first Spanish lighthouse transformed into a small hotel in 2017; it has 2 apartments and 8 beds. Since 1984 it was closed to the public for safety reasons (Figure 2). It was of extreme importance for the local economy, in addition to its role as conventional signage. It is a special situation because the original construction, close to a new Lighthouse consisting of a tower erected in 1983. The initial Lighthouse has therefore lost its function. The initial project consists of a main building (housing and warehouse), in a single height and square plan with a side of 11.30 m, planned for the service of two keepers, and a tower elevation of 8.80 m above the site level. The lamp stands 24 m above the level middle of the sea It has an outstanding value for its historical interest (Plan of 1847), architectural (representative composition typology), technological and for its future viability. It can be easily visited and be integrated into a thematic network on the Lighthouses of Spain [14].



Figure 2 – The Isla Pancha Lighthouse - Galicia, Spain.  
(Source: Ivona, Lopez, Privitera, 2022).

## Conclusions

The interest in the reuse of lighthouses as tourism accommodation is growing everywhere in Europe. As far as Spain is concerned, the great interest was not followed by an equal transformation of the projects in concrete cases. While in Italy the lighthouses transformed from maritime signals into structures with other uses (mainly hotels), in Spain, three lighthouses are currently operating for hotel use, plus another one under renovation. Probably the causes

are to be found in the location of the 187 Spanish lighthouses, in many cases inaccessible or simply extremely far from other tourist attractions.

Lighthouses were restored and turned into a place of culture, tourism, sometimes research and higher education. But their main attractive role is directed to visitors, generating both domestic and international tourist flows and making a heritage a real resource for the area. Such an ongoing trend is evident, thus confirming the need to reposition these ancient artifacts, symbols of human movement and safety precautions, as tools to activate a model of sustainable development. In many cases, they could become the unique and unrepeatable element of the tourist offer precisely because of their positioning in exceptional landscape-backgrounds. In conclusion, the overall maritime and coastal cultural heritage is an important part of our cultural resources. Neglecting cultural resources leads to the loss of the identity associated with them; loss of tourist, recreational and educational opportunities; and, finally, loss of opportunities for social and cultural capital. Literature and practice show that only for a few years there has been an acknowledgment of the importance of coastal cultural heritage as an economic and social resource. In short, finally, the coastal garrisons are also or again transforming themselves into useful garrisons for the overall well-being of the local population if properly redesigned.

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