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Flows, Territory, and Identity: Understanding Transformation in the Strait of Messina Through Art and Cartography

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Abstract:

This project investigates the dynamic interplay of individual flows, territorial transformation and identity within the context of the Strait of Messina, Italy (Figure 1). Integrating perspectives from art, cartography and time-geography, it explores how flows—ephemeral yet impactful—shape human perceptions of space, time and connectivity. Grounded in the theoretical framework of Torsten Hägerstrand's time-geography (Hägerstrand, 1970) and informed by developments on this (e.g. Ellegard K., 2019) , the study examines how potential infrastructural transformations, such as the proposed Messina Bridge (which would connect Sicily with mainland Italy), could redefine mobility, accessibility and regional identity.

Central to this investigation is the concept of flows as a lens to analyse mobility practices and their implications at multiple scales. Building on the works of Jenny et al. (2018) and Sirbu et al. (2021), the project conceptualizes flows as both analytical tools and visual expressions of movement. Flows bridge global phenomena like migration with localized patterns of urban mobility, reflecting the evolving dynamics of contemporary spaces.

Figure 1.Image from the exhibition "La mia isola", ©AleksandraStanczak

The project incorporates both artistic and technological approaches to represent these dynamics. The photography series "My Island" (La mia isola), exhibited at the SFM Photography School garden in Messina, captures the transformative essence of the Strait as experienced by residents and travellers. This series emphasizes the Messina Bridge's symbolic potential as a connection across lands, cultures and histories, highlighting its influence on mental and territorial landscapes. Complementing this artistic perspective, a prototype application, Flight-Train-Connect (Github:train-flight-connect), was developed to model and visualize the dynamics of travel flows and accessibility in the Strait of Messina.

Drawing from Hägerstrand's space-time prisms (Hägerstrand, 1970), the application explores how the bridge could reshape the spatial and temporal dimensions of movement A central feature of the prototype is the growing tree model (Stanczak & Moore, 2024), which is used to projects the hypothetical increase in train connectivity between Messina and Naples (Figure 2). At this stage, the application analyses current and proposed train schedules and then demonstrates potential changes in travel frequency and duration, illustrating how reduced travel times could enhance regional integration and transform Sicily's global identity.

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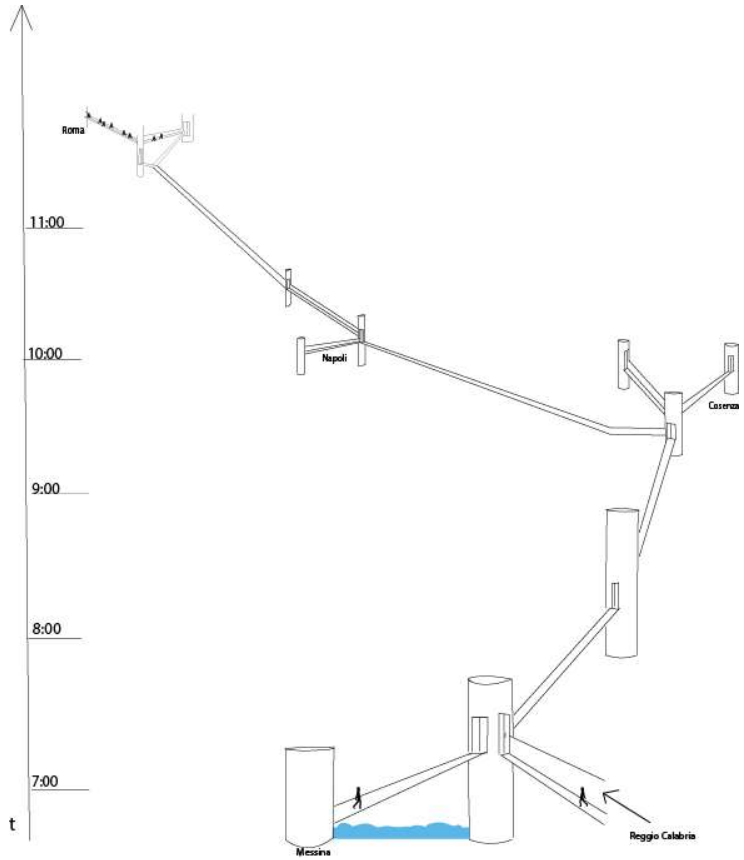

Figure 2. Potential flows after construction of the bridge in Strait of Messina

Additionally, the application will evaluate how improved train connections might affect perceptions of accessibility to other transportation hubs, such as the island's airports, potentially shaping travellers' choices and regional mobility patterns. It will integrate layered, data-driven visual representations that include artistic elements, illustrating how travel routes and accessibility evolve in real-time across geographic and conceptual terrains. It will highlight the changes and modifications caused by the impact of traveling flows and accessibility in the region that could hypothetically occur due to the construction of the bridge.

The visual proposal is designed both for individual travellers seeking to understand how the construction impacts connections between major airports and local destinations, and for local residents whose daily routines may shift due to changes in the travel network. This investigation builds upon previous projects, like the “Journey as a Flow” initiative (Stanczak & Moore, 2024), which merges art and mapping to visualize personal movement within dynamic and shifting surroundings. Specifically, the expanding tree concept further develops these themes by showing how individual routes might evolve into new possibilities over time.

The project also revisits the role of time in shaping flows. Inspired by Robert Levine’s meditations on natural rhythms (Levine, 1997), and insights from Meyer E. (2014) it reflects on how modern infrastructures synchronize movements, replacing organic temporalities with mechanical ones. The Messina Bridge, as both an enabler and a disruptor of flows, symbolizes this shift, marking a potential convergence of local traditions with global networks. By combining empirical data, artistic interpretation, and theoretical modelling, this multidisciplinary study underscores the transformative potential of connectivity. It demonstrates how infrastructural changes might reshape human-environment interactions, alter perceptions of place and time, and influence regional and global identities. Ultimately, this project provides critical insights into the Strait of Messina’s evolving role as a nexus of mobility, culture, and innovation.

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