Delft University of Technology

PortCityFutures

Mindsets and Values, Contestation and Friction

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Ports and media: A research project showcase

PortCityFutures: Mindsets and values, contestation and friction

Vincent Baptist, Francesca Savoldi, and Carola Hein

PortCityFutures is an interdisciplinary research center, originally set up between the Dutch universities of Delft, Rotterdam, and Leiden. It focuses on the legacies, uses, and future developments of port city regions, motivated to let port and city jointly evolve again, after decades in which these entities have increasingly grown apart under industrial imperatives. As port cities are uniquely located on the edge between sea and land, they have limited space for reinventing their infrastructurally dense and culturally rich territories. Yet, the historical trajectories of port cities also comprise a persistent resilience towards change and future challenges, which can be capitalised on by (re)cultivating shared values and mindsets.[1]

In order to investigate the evolving socio-spatial and cultural conditions that have mutually shaped ports and cities, PortCityFutures provides an international platform for a continuously growing group of scholars and practitioners interested in the many domains through which the maritime and urban sphere meet. PortCityFutures organises monthly research meetings that are open to all and hosts an online research blog. It has established MOOCs and a special educational Minor program, in which participants use both historical thinking and design fiction practices to instigate the reimagining of port city regions. Discussions on shared design principles and values steer critical and creative views on how to envision port cities whereby corporate, governing, and civic stakeholders are better aligned again for the future of their living and work environment.

Fig. 1: PortCityFutures video 'The Magic of Port Cities'.

Fig. 2: PortCityFutures design fiction (Beyond Oil Studio, History of Architecture and Urban Planning, TU Delft: Benjamin Evans, Samuel Hartman, Adam Hill, Anne de Jong, Sophie van Riel; see also Hein 2020b).

PortCityFutures disseminates its research activities through a wide variety of publications, special journal issues,[2] and conference reports.[3] It connects with local residents, actors, and institutions of the maritime urban spaces it investigates through impactful research-driven output, from a podcast that

captures the sounds and stories of Rotterdam's river delta to a serious board game for teaching the socio-cultural significance of water values. Most importantly, PortCityFutures acts as a network to connect other researchers and projects that focus on port city regions in light of their multifaceted future challenges, from climate change and energy transitions to issues of cultural diversity and social cohesion. One of these projects connected to PortCityFutures is ContestedPorts.

Established by human geographer Francesca Savoldi, ContestedPorts is an online platform dedicated to citizen struggles in port cities, documenting cases of social mobilisation by using direct accounts from active citizens, scholars, and NGO members engaged on the ground. As logistical integration is reconfiguring maritime shipping through strategies of concentration that decrease transport prices and consolidate power and governance, frictions between ports and cities are rising. In showing the ubiquity of civic contestation in ports, the platform shares resources such as strategies of community resistance, scientific publications on relevant issues, and non-academic resources including documentaries, podcasts, and the collaborative zine *People, Ports and Power*.[4]
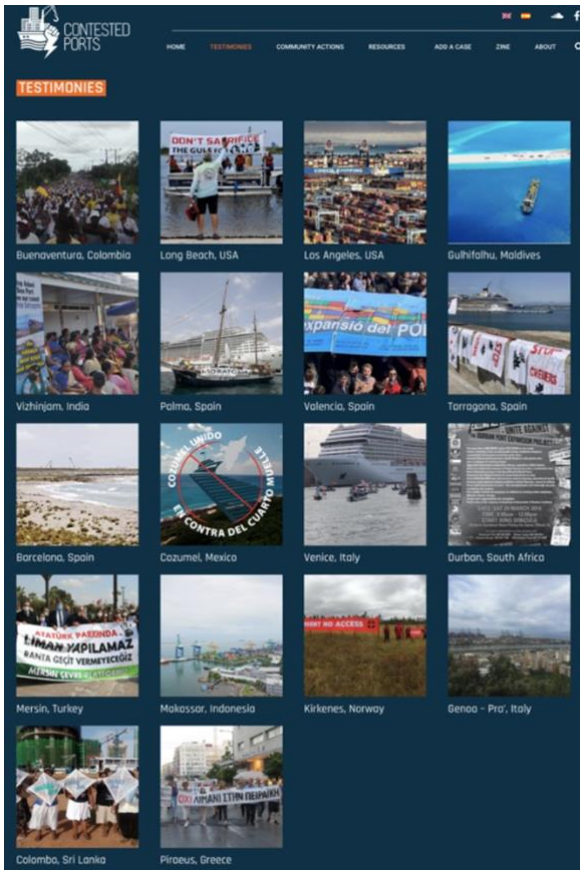
Figs 3, 4: ContestedPorts web pages.
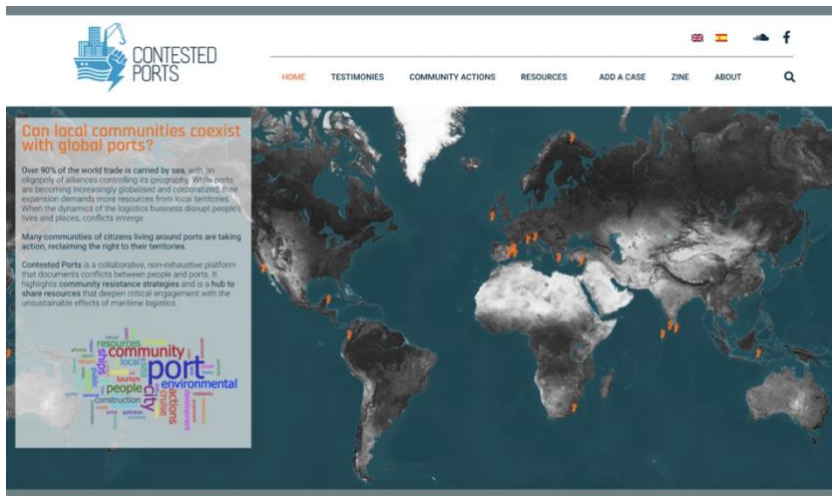
Port cities are paradigmatic examples of the complex and increasingly challenging terms of coexistence between people and the multiscalar infrastructures serving global logistics. These territories are experiencing unprecedented challenges, driven by the financial and spatial reshaping of logistics and combined with the acceleration of the global climate crisis, which make port cities particularly vulnerable to coastal flooding, erosion, and sea-level rise. As the power geometries of port-city relationships are being reshaped, the agency of inhabitants is challenged as well.

Over the last thirty years, many ports have spatially dissociated themselves from their adjacent cities. Increasingly expanding and impenetrable port infrastructure has in some cases deprived maritime communities from access to the sea, while trans-shipment activities have further detached ports from regional economies, with automatisation often leading to labor precarity. In some cases, this has evolved into a real disconnection between the port and local inhabitants, who now question whether an infrastructure that keeps demanding more resources while exacerbating ecological damage should still be a priority in their city.

Social mobilisation is rising in ports across the world, with inhabitants fighting to reclaim their territories. Collective processes of knowledge production, participatory strategies, and the search for consensus based on shared values are loaded with emancipatory potential. Narratives based and focused on human rights, commons, and the right to the city form part of

this constellation of contestation. These social mobilisations are also fostering civic sensibilities for environmental justice, and centering on more participative and democratic forms of governance.

The objective of ContestedPorts is to create awareness on the symptomatic and interconnected nature of frictions between ports and cities, providing a space for the transmission of knowledge across different contesting communities, ranging from civic society to specialist voices. Within PortCityFutures, the platform is also a point of departure for new networking activities: a roundtable held at the University of Amsterdam in the Summer of 2022 for instance brought together scholars, citizens, and activists from five port cities for engaged and practice-oriented discussions.[5]

While port cities are increasingly becoming territories of great challenges, they also harbor power as terrain for change and innovation. Emerging from the research principles, design practices, education initiatives, and social outreach adopted in PortCityFutures and affiliated projects is a holistic program grounded in academic activities and explicitly reaching out to all stakeholders inhabiting the port city regions under investigation, to rethink, reorient, and redesign these towards a future with mutual benefits for port and city, renewed cultural and socio-spatial synergies, and regenerative practices driven by environmental justice and participatory governance.

Showcasing the 'Ports, Past and Present' project through its media

by James Louis Smith

The Irish Sea basin forms a distinct node of histories, economies, and identities. The Ports, Past and Present project considers five very different ports and their communities on either side of the sea: Dublin Port, Rosslare Harbour, Holyhead, Fishguard, and Pembroke Dock. Project partners are University College Cork, Aberystwyth University, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, and Wexford County Council. The project has enhanced engagement among port town communities with their own rich heritage and that of the Irish Sea, and as such used that heritage to promote tourism and deepen a sense of shared identity.