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PortCityFutures + Lorentz Conference: Report and call to action

11 Mar 2022

Vincent Baptist, Thomas van den Brink, Yvonne van Mil, Lukas Höller, Francesca Savoldi, Stephan Hauser, Hilde Sennema

For the PortCityFutures community, the working year of 2022 started with a five-day workshop hosted by the Lorentz Center. Even though we couldn't meet in person because of the lockdown in the Netherlands, these five days were full of connection: between academic, societal and governance partners, between new ideas, concepts and tools, and between water, culture, space and society. Through presentations, discussions and hands-on exercises, we got to know each other's work better, but were also introduced to new ways for balancing the focus on technology and economy within port cities with a diversity of spatial, social and cultural approaches. In this report, we look back at each day and synthesize the main learnings from this workshop for our world-wide research community.

Day 1 - Overarching Questions

The first workshop day set the stage for an array of exciting, wide-ranging discussions to craft new linkages between current research endeavors related to port cities and water culture. Throughout the day the participants worked together to find new concepts and approaches that can help stimulate and channel innovative scholarship on the crossroads between these subject areas. In mapping out the scope and depth of potential future research collaborations, various introductory presentations touched upon domains, such as hydrology, socio-legal research and strategic (stakeholder) management.

This provided an inspiring backdrop for renewed exercises, both practical and conceptual ones, to engage the diverse group of participants within the interdisciplinary framework previously set out by PortCityFutures. Based on his [earlier work](#), Maurice Hartevelde (TU Delft) for instance asked attendees to draw mental maps of their most familiar port cities, but with an explicit focus on contemporary (and potentially conflicting) land-water relations. It led to a creative output and discussion that highlighted the translation of intricate knowledge about local contexts into recognizable images and stories. In addition, it uncovered new questions regarding interdependencies between water, ports and cities that need to be investigated further, for instance through the conceptual lens of porosity (Hein 2021), or the practical example of land use, as Lucija Ažman Momirski's presentation showcased.

Other recent PCF output provided the basis for critical reconsiderations of the proposed 'maritime mindset' concept (Sennema et al. 2021), and debates about current heritage standards and vocabularies (Dai et al. 2021), within the workshop. The discussion was followed by Paul Hudson (Leiden University College), Adriaan Bedner and Sabine Luning's (both Leiden University) approach on (inter)disciplinary perspectives. This ultimately linked to three interconnected PhD pitches by Vincent Baptist, Hilde Sennema (both Erasmus University) and Didem Yerli (Leiden University) which collectively called for increased attention to the types of narratives that have been, and are still, being put forward by certain authorities, actors and communities in shaping port and water related transitions with an eye on the future.

Day 2 - Geospatial Conceptualization

The second day of the workshop focused on spatializing the research, for example through the act of mapping. Yvonne van Mil and Thomas van den Brink (both TU Delft), introduced the topic, arguing that maps and mapping have the power to bring together different disciplines. In the morning session, the first presentation was on the “PortCityAtlas”. As part of a book project that will feature maps of 100 European port cities territories, Van Mil and Lukas Hoeller (TU Delft) gave a hands-on demonstration on working with European open access datasets and the benefits and struggles of creating uniform maps for spatial and statistical comparability. The main conclusion of the first session was that maps should not only be a final output/illustration of research, but need to function as a research tool. Mapping works as a 'gap finder' (as argued by Carola Hein and Van Mil in their 2020 article) and helps create new questions and research trajectories which have been hidden within the complexity of reality.

The presentations by Nancy Couling (Bergen University), Merlijn van Weerd (CML) and Paul Hudson (LUC) on “Geospatial Conceptualization” structured the afternoon’s session. Couling’s presentation on “Mapping sea spaces and why it matters” talked about the necessity of reconceptualizing waterscapes, their spatial characteristics, connections and processes to understand the complexity of, and our future engagement with, water in contrast to spatial planning on land.

Van Weerd introduced us to his research on the case of the Cagayan Valley, Philippines. His work, done in collaboration with an interdisciplinary and international group of students, showed the importance of mapping in order to understand the environmental, cultural and economic specificities of a region to respond to - rather than prevent - impacts such as population pressure, waste production, shrinking biodiversity and natural disasters, for example typhoons. One takeaway was that some natural disasters are of a magnitude that is unfamiliar for the Dutch water control narrative.

Lastly, Paul Hudson’s presentation focused on his research and education programs in which he analyzed the social-ecological effects of changes in natural river (and delta) systems, both in the United States and in the Netherlands. Although there are large differences in scale (the very large-scale Mississippi delta and the relatively small Geul in the South of the Netherlands) an important focus in both cases was on fieldwork and measurements to collect data. Furthermore, he explained how intervention plans (e.g., regarding ‘improving’ the delta for increased shipping activities and scales) can be assessed from an environmental perspective, and how different conceptualizations of rivers and river structures can lead to societal conflicts; for example, around discussions of whether old dams in the river should be demolished for renaturalization or should be considered heritage.

Before the break, Thomas van den Brink talked about the value of deep mapping in light of maritime mindsets. His presentation on historical supply chains in the Netherlands and the following discussion demonstrated how mapping can serve as glue between different disciplinary approaches. Moreover, it poses new questions on what is needed from an individual and project perspective, what are the relevant research questions, how we map time, scale and relating tangible and intangible attributes as well as what are the specific overlaps and leads in our projects in order to create a shared way of mapping.

After the break, Lucija Ažman (Ljubljana University), Merten Nefs (TU Delft/Deltametropool) and Merlijn van Weerd (CML) gave mini-lectures on their respective mapping practices. Nefs talked about his research on the spatial footprint of logistics in the Dutch hinterland. He uses mapping to illustrate changing patterns of logistics hubs and main ports, and gives insights into the mechanisms and actors behind logistics development. Van Weerd introduced us to another case-study area in the Philippines. Using the example of the Palau Islands, he discussed the displacement of indigenous groups from areas with ecological importance as a result of economic and industrial interests. He provided insights on how “Ancestral Domain Mapping”, in this case by using drones, can help indigenous stakeholders claim right to their land. Ažman presented her work on mapping port cities along the Mediterranean Sea. She

used mapping, for example, as a tool to compare the port and urban area of Venice. In another, she showed her work on the design of the port of Koper and some results of teaching students ArcGIS.

Day 3 - Cultures of water and port cities

The third day showed a variety of different approaches toward and meanings of the concept of culture related to water and port cities. Aylin Tschoepe (University of Basel), Francesca Savoldi (TU Delft) and Carol Bailey (Port of Limassol) presented three mini-lectures in the morning, exposing the interrelations between urban ethnography techniques, co-production and social surveying. Savoldi presented the website *contestedports.com* – a platform co-produced by citizens, activists and scholars, dedicated to port conflicts and community actions. Closing the morning, Bart Barendregt contributed to the discussion on methods, presenting a case study of digital anthropology. These mini-lectures sparked a rich discussion about how to frame different voices in relation to power geometries and governance networks, and how to stimulate dialogue between different stakeholders.

The morning mini-lectures were followed by an interactive activity led by Aylin Tschoepe, aimed at exploring qualitative experiences in port cities through visual communication and storytelling. Every participant chose three images of a port city, answering the questions: what distinguishes its port area from others? What is the quality of the waterscape? Which activity or event is particular to the place and connects the city, the port and its water? The images were shared on a collaborative virtual board, where participants could post observations and questions about their colleagues' contributions in real time.

Stephen Ramos' (University of Georgia's) mini-lecture expanded the discussion on social contestation, presenting the case of the Mississippi delta and its ecology as an infrastructure. Building up on Lefevre's concept of territory as a result of stakeholders' relationships, and Massey's emergent geography as a product of uneven geometries of social power, Ramos unfolded the meaning of "competitive rationalities" and "ecological regimes".

In closing, Kira Erwin (Durban University of Technology) and Maria Elena Buslacchi (Aix-Marseille Université) presented two cases of artistic practices in port cities. Erwin's work in Durban on the coastal justice network illuminated how storytelling can be used both as a political act and as a method for activists and public scholarship. Presenting the work of *Lalela uLwandle* – a research-based theater project that makes visible stories of living with the ocean that are seldom seen or heard in the public domain – Erwin emphasized the importance of counter-hegemonic narratives. Buslacchi (Aix-Marseille Université), moreover, showed how port infrastructures can attain a cultural meaning over time, and on the plans to open up the *digue du large* - that runs parallel to the Marseille waterfront - to the general public.

Whereas the day saw a wide range of conceptualizations and discourses on culture, it mainly revolved around the different practical approaches that governments and communities (might) take toward culture. An important conclusion was that communication between different stakeholders is a necessary step to translate cultural goals into policy action.

Day 4 - Values in disciplines & Society

In different discussions on the fourth day, a common ground is that we cannot ignore the origin and full extent of issues relating to water, land, and their relationship. In this perspective we need to give back to nature the space it deserves, not only spatially, but also historically and legally.

Inclusivity around the questions of water, ports and culture should not be limited to specific values attached solely to economic considerations. The different presentations highlighted the need to use the past and learn from it. The aim is not to copy it but adapt historical developments of a variety of fields to the current situation in order to find holistic solutions. These can be found through better enforcement of regulations, a better understanding of the origins of urban developments, as well as with a transition in the decision-making process. We must switch from a non-responsive or reactive way of dealing with problems and disasters, to an anticipative and flexible one.

As we need a more diverse understanding of businesses, we also need to acknowledge the diverse actors and fields that must be considered in identifying issues and best practices. This requires a debate on values and topics that are fundamentally transdisciplinary.

Day 5 - Conclusions and follow-up

One of the most important results was the immediate usefulness of the ideas, methods and presentations that the participants shared to ongoing research. The social and cultural impact of dredging that was discussed on day 3, for example, offered new ways of approaching the conference and special issue on shipping canals that PortCityFutures is now organizing. Aside from that, many new ideas and collaborations emerged. For example, Aylin Tschoepe has taken the initiative for a special issue on ethnographic approaches in port cities, and has already organized the first meeting to discuss this. Moreover, the interdisciplinary character offered new opportunities for publishing that were thus far unknown within our community. Conversely, guest presenters were happy to publish for PortCityFutures initiatives, like our blog or publications that the community is now working on.

The interdisciplinary nature of the conference did, once again, stress the importance of a common language and the sharing of existing resources. Lukas Höller, Francesca Savoldi and Merlijn van Weerd have taken up the challenge to work on a bibliography of publications that are of interest to all scholars studying port cities. This does not only have practical value, but can also contribute to a further conceptualization of port cities and water culture in the future.

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This blog has been written in the context of discussions in the LDE PortCityFutures team. It reflects the evolving thoughts among group members on the socio-spatial and cultural questions surrounding port city relationships. The blog was reviewed and edited by the PortCityFutures editorial team: Carola Hein, Hilde Sennema and Vincent Baptist.

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