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ABSTRACT

This article aims to extend the notion of port-cities and counter the mainstream narrative that port and city, in cases like Rotterdam, have become disunited, by reviewing its public spaces in their unique port-city characteristics. These characteristics can be found by systematically approaching and describing public spaces as biographies of place, along the lines of geosemiotics methods, including topological and typological dimensions.

The article underlines that port-cities have unique spatial networks of public spaces, including unique kinds of public spaces, each having unique properties, and physical settings and attributes, activities and concepts or meanings affirming differences in the experience.

Following the multi-scalar approach and by introducing micro-narratives, this article introduces an integrated perspective on port-cities, thus stipulating the union of port and city.

The emphasis lies at the observation that the port-city is one in everyday space, which is omnipresent.



The Port-City Portrayed in its Public Spaces. Introducing Micro Biographies of Places

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KEYWORDS

Port-City; Public space; Urban design; Architecture; Public art; Biography of place; Micro-narratives; Geosemiotics; Typology; Topology; Rotterdam

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Introduction

This article emphasizes that port-cities are portrayed through their public spaces on all levels of scale. Port-cities are unique in terms of the formation of their street networks. A port-city consists of innumerable specific types of public spaces each with specific spatial properties that are preserved under continuous urban transformation, given the multitude of buildings and elements shaping these spaces. Also, all kinds of signs and symbols are applied in their built environments. These interventions, up to the smallest detail, make the space a place influenced by being a port-city. The characteristics of a port-city resonate in the form, uses, appropriations, and meanings of public spaces. Yet, Rotterdam, as case of investigation, is often seen only either as a metropolitan area known for its immensely industrialized world port located in the delta of the European Low Countries, or as a cosmopolitan city known for its hyper-diverse neighborhoods, international commerce, and topsy-turvy architecture protruding from its Late Modern skyline. Particularly through the lens of governance, Rotterdam either focuses on its harbor areas being a 'Global Hub' and 'Europe's Industrial Cluster', or on its civic areas as 'the future of the city'. And, although the two are intended to go hand in hand in both the vision of the respective responsible administrations; Port Authority and Municipal Government', their bifocal perspective remains prominent. The two visions, drafted by two more-or-less independent authorities, each mandated to exercise power in its own territory of the port-city, strengthens a presumed duality. From a societal point of view this becomes a major problem because both authorities within Rotterdam want to connect port and city (Harteveld 2021).



Figure 1. New Meuse, with the building 'The Bridge / The Quay'. (© Maurice Harteveld, 2021).

¹ Havenbedrijf Rotterdam (2011), and Programmabureau Stadshavens Rotterdam (2011).

The prevailing dichotomous approach to port-cities follows the geographical 'Any-Port Model', of 1963 which has stipulated a disunion of port and city over the subsequent decades. Rotterdam has been one of the returning examples in confirming the model (Bird 1963, 1971; Hoyle, 1989). A urban biography on the port of Rotterdam, published by the municipality in 1953, can be seen as a witness of immediate political adaptation of the international model (Kossmann, 1964). The reasoning served three decades of diplomatic efforts to gain more independence for the port authority by writing narratives on the port, its development away from the city, and its economic interest as one entity². Although, today, historiographies seem to have moved away from such traditional political and diplomatic histories towards social and cultural approaches, the twofold approach stays manifest. In general, this current shift of interest follows a Late-Modern turn toward the marginalized and marginalizing evidence, and thus explicit hypotheses are tested and, among others, unbiased data is collected by current biographers (Haber, Kennedy, and Krasner, 1997). With explorations outside the mainstream, dominant schools of thoughts, the awareness or claim that *the* past is unknowable have come to the fore. And, the monistic claim that there is one scientific model too. In this study: the any-port model. Epistemology has been challenged, as belief systems don't fit the one model. Over the last decades, more and more, the concept of 'urban biographies' have become a safe haven to reduce complexity in the presumed relatively-closed settings of cities. The city in-casu, or a subsystem present on the micro-level, brings together different narratives (Jansen 2001). Whereas the writing of such "urban biographies have become one of the core activities of Dutch urban historians" (Furnée 2009), it may not direct stakeholders towards a conceptual and organizational reunion of port and city, thus spatial interventions are placed in two worlds. A critical review of this new practice may be that these biographies all seem to look alike, among others with a similar thematic and periodization (Van de Laar and Van der Schoor 2006). Indeed, when it comes to Rotterdam, bifocal narratives on the world port and the cosmopolitan city, remain persistent in the most recent biographies³. This sets another problem: from an academic point of view, the challenge in this study has been to move away from the idea that a port-city has one biography supporting the disunion of port and city. Thus, this article questions what kind of urban narratives convey undivided port-city related meanings in Rotterdam? And how to discover these? By opening up to the multiplicity of narratives, this article is able to focus on descriptions of Rotterdam which fall outside the scope of the current conventional. Through the lens of 'biographies of places', this study particularly follows the so-called material turn, in difference to stories of lives or narratives on actor networks. Hence buildings and artifacts placed in context, are the principal unit of analysis, for a multidimensional interpretation of urban sites across regions and periods (Raja and Sindbæk 2020). By shining the light on the public spaces as 'places', this turn does exclude neither lives nor networks fully. Public space, public lives and public networks are interrelated. By choosing this angle, the presented narratives have the same approach as the ones underpinning the any-port model. In this manner the countering stories are able to provide not only new motivation and integration to enrich the conventional but also acknowledge that what is seen in everyday space does not match the ontology which generally is applied in Rotterdam. To greater extent, as such, the samples of the biographies of public spaces as places help to fulfill the most essential public function of researching and abiding justification (Croll 2003), while giving potency to become "a means of reinvigorating the critical public", who is generally present in such spaces (Ira 2019). This approach is operationalized by linking the urban and architectural design of public space, with studies of urban history, literature, cartography, and other urban humanities. This integrated perspective on port-cities is put forward most recently in a wider variety of projects at the LDE Centre of PortCityFutures, which has been promoted and supported for the approach below⁴.

By exploring micro-narratives on public spaces in Rotterdam, port and city persists undivided. This is shown in the most elementary readings to port-city public spaces, following the approaches as

² De Commissie (1931), Havenbedrijf der Gemeente Rotterdam (1934a, b, c).

³ e.g. Van de Laar (2021), Van der Horst (2017), Oudenaarden (2015), Droogendijk (2015), and Giersbergen (2010).

⁴ <https://www.leiden-delft-erasmus.nl/en/port-city-futures>, and <https://www.portcityfutures.nl/home>.

presented below. For instance, sheltered water adjacent to land have provided fine places to settle throughout history, and this can be recognized throughout the city. Together with a continuous presence of docking of ships, (un)loading of goods and people, and related flows, production, trade and services, such basic port-city characteristics determine the nature of many public spaces. They do also in the case of Rotterdam, even though the urban fabric of the inner-city was reconstructed at large in the post-war period, and has been and still is quickly evolving ever since. Even in the everyday space⁵ of the Modern metropolis, we see the echo of some of the most fundamental port-city characteristics: water-land relations and flows of good and people. As such, the port-city is portrayed in its public spaces in a complex but integrated manner, where the dichotomous approach is absent.

*Rotterdam is niet te filmen. De beelden wisselen te snel.
Rotterdam heeft geen verleden, en geen enkele trapgevel.
Rotterdam is geen illusie, door de camera gewekt.
Rotterdam is niet te filmen, Rotterdam is vééls te écht.*

*Rotterdam cannot be captured. Too soon the images are gone.
Rotterdam just has no past, and stepped gables there are none.
Rotterdam is no illusion, by the camera created.
Rotterdam cannot be captured, Rotterdam is just too real.*

Table 1. Poem by Jules Deelder (1990), translated by Annemarijn Ferweda⁶.



Figure 2. De Kleine Kapitein [The Little Captain], children's bookstore in the Inner City of Rotterdam.
(© Maurice Harteveld, 2021).

Geosemiotic Methods and Micro-Narratives

To move away from the mainstream narrative that port and city have become disunited, hence have become two entities, constructing 'biographies of places' has been a relatively new but proven effective refutation method. In this approach, the physical setting and attributes in public space together with their conceptions, or meanings, and the present human activities tell the story of 'place' (Canter 1977; Punter 1991). In other words, following the definition of place, signs and

⁵ ff. Chase, Crawford and Kaliski (1999).

⁶ Deelder (1990), and Deelder, Van der Ent (ed) (2004). Since 2014, the poem is seen as public art in the gate next to author's house, Mathenesserlaan 186, Rotterdam.

symbols of any kind, manifested through urban and architectural design and in conjunction with public life, are relevant in portraying public space as port-city entities. They have to be described in their ways of conveying specific place-based port-city meanings, against the background of past events. These signs and symbols need to be situated in the concrete and material world forming the public space. As such, they are “shaped by and shapes” the material world people live in. They are not only at our disposal in public space, more so, signs and symbols are “being more fundamentally grounded in the earth and the spaces in which we live.” This is where the biographical study makes use of syntactic approaches grounded in the heart of ‘geosemiotics’, namely: situated semiotics. It composes the narratives on the basis of data gathered around the setting and elements which are unique for a specific place. Consequently, the study excludes those which appear in “multiple contexts but always in the same form”, as alike universal utilities or brand names and logos, or those which are “are out of the place”, respectively understood through decontextualized and transgressive semiotics (Scollon and Scollon 2003, 145-146, 159). Particularly, this methodological elaboration brings together perceptual gestalt with activities, essential in understanding place, “to construct representations of the topological as well as the typological aspects of being-in-the-world”⁷.



Figure 3. Former Lloyd headquarters in the Maritime Quarter, Rotterdam. (© Maurice Hartevelde, 2021).

On the one hand, a distinguished topological dimension of meaning constructs the place-based narratives; by focusing consequently on continuous change and co-variation with the physical setting and use of public space. In this public space is described by its proportionality, degree, quantity, gradients, et cetera, as grounded in the urban morphology. On the other hand, the typological dimension of meaning, distinctive within certain geographical areas, focuses on the categorical evolution of physical attributes and activities in public spaces. Such descriptions of public space rely on classification, discrete variants, qualitative distinction, to the extent of identifying (re)occurring ideological symbolic values in specific urban elements. In the combination of both, the exemplary places, which are investigated, follow the above vectors, consolidated in micro-narratives as presented below. These very short narratives are the starting point of extended biographies of place. They answer the question by illustrating ways to convey undivided port-city related meanings in Rotterdam, while capturing the essential data to justify reasoning outside the mainstream.

⁷ This elaboration is adopted from multidisciplinary linguistic analyses, see: Lemke (1999).

Where Land Meets the Sea and People Live with the River...

In the in-depth review of public spaces in Rotterdam, by zooming in and out, a rich and undivided image of the port-city can be confirmed. The urbanized landscape of Rotterdam reveals, first and above all, the central area of a hundred of kilometers wide Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt estuary. This is reflected in the delta-shaped core of the port-city where streams flow into the river, but also in the surrounding fractions of ancient polder structures. It still grounds today's urban fabric. By matter of course, the formation of its spatial networks of public space is the result of human interference in the environment by design and redesign, but as such, about every street links to water. Of all those public spaces, many within today's urban fabric emphasize unique port-city relationships, and the particular links between nature and artifice are very explicit. Most obviously, riverfronts, docks, inlets, piers, wharves, embankments, and landings come to the fore. This may be recognized when reading the street signs, yet more so when taking in the sense of the structural features which come along with these spaces. These types of public spaces appear on or in close proximity to water. We also see close ties between water and land in public spaces created on local inland dykes, seawalls, and other sea-level protections, as well as along canals, and on former ditches and for example sluices (Palmboom 1987). These can be recognized topologically in daily urban life, especially in the urban areas around the Westzeedijk and Oostzeedijk (13th Century) in Rotterdam⁸: A first exemplary micro-narrative. At this place, the artery roads on inland seawall dykes have a vertical datum of 4 meters here and the streets on both sides are located at -1⁹. It's a witness of the age-old protection of the inland area against rising water and storm surges. The inner portion of Rotterdam includes several 20 meters-wide canals and former ditches, and is surrounded by extended nineteenth century waterworks with green banks, in Dutch known as 'singels': between 50 to 100 meter wide. These manage the water and keep the feet dry. Going over the dykes, roadways and bicycle paths slope, while sidewalks at several places continue in stairs. One of those spots is connecting the Westersingel (1842-1850) with the so-called Maritime Quarter on the other side of the dyke¹⁰. People either opt for sloping routes or for a walk close to the facades and using stairs. Either way this communicates the proximity of the sea, although on distance, as it has been doing for ages. The land-water interface is manifest in many buildings along the same route too. In different but obvious ways, architecture emphasizes this relation by design and in detail. An inland red-brick pumping station annex house/office (1891)¹¹ documents height differences and local water circulation from and to the old Veerhaven (15th Century) on the other side of the dyke. Here, outside the sea defense system, the urban fabric continues and includes densely urbanized harbors and waterfronts. It's a place for a stroll and sitting at a table on the terrace of Grand Café-Restaurant Loos in the Atlantic House (1928-30)¹². Nowadays mostly pleasure boats are docked in the harbor. the leisure images resonating past harbor life. In a material sense, the former Rotterdam Lloyd headquarters (1909) stands out from a semiological point of view, because its cantilevered round watchtower decorating the beveled corner is carried by a natural stone console with a sculpted ship's bow. A figurehead with winged helmet on this bow represents Mercury (a.k.a. Hermes), the god of financial gain, commerce, eloquence, communication, travelers, and boundaries. It is referring to trade and shipping. The iconography of the crest piece, with attributes of seafaring such as an anchor, a caduceus and fishes, communicates to the public a water related maritime identity¹³. We see the same themes and symbols in the nearby monument for the Dutch water management engineer Pieter Caland

⁸ Also known as Hoogen Zeedijk (Zas, 1658: 437) All general dates of origin of public spaces are retrieved from the "Straatnamendatabase," the digital interactive map of Rotterdam including all historical dates of streets, retrieved online at: <https://rotterdam.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=5bedd4cf37074468a6ef07437472d5fb/>.

⁹ "Actueel Hoogtebestand Nederland (AHN)," the digital interactive height map for The Netherlands, retrieved online at: <https://ahn.arcgisonline.nl/ahnviewer/>.

¹⁰ The design of the Westersingel is of Willem Nicolaas Rose, opened a few years later. This was part of the western extension of the city, known as Tweede Nieuwewerk.

¹¹ Gemaal Westersingel is designed by Gerrit Johannes de Jongh.

¹² Designed by Petrus Gerardus (Piet) Buskens.

¹³ Designed by Jan Muller, and Constant Mari Droogleevoer Fortuyn.

(1907)¹⁴. Particularly in this area, a story on port-city public spaces can be rich in their signs and symbols. The place is full of port-city-related references, yet not always explicit when thinking of port-cities (Harteveld 2021).



Figure 4. *The Dam*' at Binnenrotte Square, Rotterdam. (© Maurice Harteveld, 2021).

...and as Discovered in its Public Spaces

Water plays an important role in the age-old representation of the port-city by all means. Even today, in the largely reconstructed city center of Rotterdam, this echoes through. We can read this for instance at the Binnenrotte square, where the biweekly open market is held, and its spacious crossing with the Hoogstraat, a high-street (first named as such in resp. 1874, and 1396)¹⁵. The high-street is interrupted for about 80 meters. Here, at the second exemplary place, two enormous aluminum slightly-turned feet, each 7.5 meters high, are demarcating recently (2021) the public space to remind people that it has been a dam at the lower end of an open fen stream Rotte near the New Meuse. The two sculptures artistically intend to remind us that many have crossed here before (Potters 2019). To be precise: *The* biography of port-city Rotterdam often begins here at this spot. 'Rotte' and 'dam' are the city's obvious name-givers. In the past, open water moved south to the river and onward west to the sea. Before the dam was constructed (c.1270)¹⁶, the dammed part of the stream Binnenrotte used to be a natural harbor along which the earliest settlement Rotta, or 'muddy water', emerged (Jacobs and Guiran 2004). Port and city were born together and that can be recognized today, even though the water-land relationships are not always immediately visible as they are at other places. A close reading or thorough review of today's public spaces is needed to reveal former presence of the water. Even though the open water of the Rotte has been filled in 1871 and its dam lives on only in contemporary public art and

¹⁴ The Calandmonument is designed by architect Henri Evers and sculptor Arend Willem Maurits Odé, and used to be located in at the Coolingsingel until 1939.

¹⁵ Binnenrotte has also been known simply as Rotte, Rottesloot, and Kerkrotte when still open. It was named Gedempte Binnenrotte between 1874-1942 (Straatnamendatabase). Hoogstraat appeared as Hooghstraet, also known as Middeldam (Zas, 1658: 552).

¹⁶ Between 1261 and 1277 (Stichting Boor, 2020: 9).

the name of its high-street, thus street signs, the former presence of water can also be discovered at the basis of the Lawrence Church (1449-1655)¹⁷, located just north of what was the dam. This only still-standing medieval building of the city has been rooted in the Rotte most literally¹⁸. In 1418, when building process started, the church was maybe built too close to the water. Facing opposition by the Water Board acting in the port-city, construction was stopped for quite some time in those days. However, extended delay in construction was prevented by the opposition of the Alderman of the port-city, who introduced a penalty of 3000 stones and an additional 1000 for each following day to the church¹⁹. From an epistemological point of view, this incident illustrates that dualism and thus conflicts between those made responsible for the water and those responsible on the land may be part of a port-city heritage. The church itself has been designed as a huge brick building with Flemish sandstone mullions and trceries and some natural stone elements in façade and interior, which must have arrived over water in the past. Its base is slightly thicker than the upper masonry walls. This forms a so-called damp, made of clinker bricks and hard mortar preventing the build-up of moisture from the soil and helping at past times of flooding. It's a relatively small showcase of ancient, but still absolutely readable port-city relationships between nature and artifice. We may be able to read the tension and mediation between water and land perspectives in the materialization of this edges of the public space. We may also read it at other places in similar situated ways.



Figure 5. Fish store 'Marost' at the Zwaanshals, Rotterdam North. (© Maurice Harteveld, 2021).

Former presence of water can be discovered at a second medieval witness of the port-city. By following traces 'downstream', just south of the church and going below the surface, people can find a remnant wall, which is floating on stilts in the interior public space of Blaak station above underground train tracks. This wall, having a clear damp too, used to be part of the Blaauwen Toorn (1606)²⁰. This was one of the two defense towers built five years after the Rotte quay was strengthened by brick walls. According to historic maps (Braun and Hogenbergius Ded. 1572), the

¹⁷ The Sint-Laurenskerk (constructed between 1449 and 1525) is designed by unknown architects. Hendrick de Keyser, extended the tower with a wooden spire (1621, demolished 1645), and Dirc Davidsz (1645-1646), did so in its current form.

¹⁸ Zas (1658), pp.466-468.

¹⁹ Kortebrants (1772), pp.75-76, and Manheer (1783), p.37.

²⁰ Constructed between 1577-1579, design unknown (Manheer, 1783: 152).

towers stood at both sides of the former harbor entrance of the city, called 'die Blake' or shiny water (1480)²¹. Ships could dock safely beyond this point, as they did for ages given a punt or flat-bottomed boat found underneath the dam during recent archeological excavations²², while the water has been taken from the public eye and disappeared in culverts and been bypassed by trunks, even most ancient maritime memory may be still readable in public space at the present. Eventually too, this marginalized biography of the place shows that other infrastructures have overtaken part of the role of the waterway.

A Closer Look

People have an inherited relation with water at many places in the port-city. Again, also from this lens, there are much more public spaces where the encounter with the water is revealed. All these places are telling stories. These can be found at boat landings, fishing spots, fish markets, stores and restaurants, inner harbors with dedicated anchor areas, marinas or yacht clubs, and quays. Here people are living, working and staying on the water. Houseboats, a B&B-boat, and a floating pavilion stand out in Rotterdam. More general, the nature of the territory having all kinds of water relations in close proximity to each other, seem to shape the port-city character. Waterfronts in Rotterdam have become quite populated given the intensity of public life across its urban boulevards and quays, and the high-rise development along these public spaces. Recently the 215m Zalmhaven skyscraper²³ is added (2021): "the view is simply breath-taking", the local newspaper reports. One will see the harbor areas and the Meuse meandering into the sea from its public interior (Liukk 2021). Such a place may introduce just another port-city narrative. It may be illustrative for the attractiveness living with water, although the river may not be the prime entry point of the city anymore and only a few roads and public stations come actually close to the river.

*Midden in dit schoon verschiet,
Dat elks oog kan behagen,
Pronkt de Rotte in haren wagen,
Met haer' kranss' van lis en riet.*

*'k Zie die Stroomgodin, gestegen
Uit haer glazen waterzael',
Als in blyde zegeprael',
Ryden langs kristallen wegen.*

*In midst of this beautiful distant,
That is able to please every eye,
The Rotte exposes herself riding'by,
With her' orris' and reeds garland.*

*I see that River Goddess, rising
From her glass water territory',
As in glad triumphal victory',
Along crystal roads mobilising.*

Table 2. Poem by Dirk Smits (1750), translated by the author²⁴.

²¹ Zas (1658) p. 437, brick walls, p. 435.

²² Stichting Boor (2020).

²³ Designed by Diederik Dam.

²⁴ Smits (1750), p.5.



Figure 6. The Erasmus Bridge, Rotterdam. (© Maurice Hartevelde, 2021).

Where Goods and People Arrive or Depart...

Instead of being in a high-rise interior public space and having a distant view on the endless harbors, one may as well fly over the Rotterdam conurbation (a.k.a. Rijnmond) and better distinct the different shapes. When doing so, the huge man-made harbor areas extending towards enormous landfills in the North Sea clearly stand out. Here again morphology is uniquely port-city related. Oil refineries producing petrol and automated cranes serving transshipment give the territory its unequalled structure, and a machine-like image. In the extensive Europort and Maasvlakte I and II areas, resp. chemicals and containers have overtaken lands (resp. in 1958-1964, 1965-1997, and from 2008 onwards). Ships traveling the world's oceans dominate the mouth of the river. Freight flows to the hinterland do so at the rest of the waterway. It may support the traditional narrative of the port authority. Yet, on the ground, most harbors in these areas are fenced and places are inaccessible from the land side. Quays are largely privatized. From the water side, only water taxis, boat tours, ferries, and cruise ships may give a public audience a glimpse of what is happening. Having such a rare typology of industrial elements, which all together is reproduced numerous times in images in books, magazines and online, these industrialized harbor areas are dominant in our memory as *the* image of port-city Rotterdam. This echoes through in perceiving the port-city in its central core; place of the third exemplary narrative. One of the most often remembered elements related to its port-city image, next to harbors, water, docks, cargo, moving loads, and ships, is the Erasmus Bridge (1996) (Hartevelde 2021). While walking or biking on the bridge, next to the people in the 36.000 vehicles daily (Van de Werken 2018), the place provides a wide angle view on the on-distance harbor activities at eye level. In terms of topological space, the extensive harbor areas come close to the civic areas, without necessarily being measured by a numeric distance. The biography may start with Late-Modern cable-stayed and bascule techniques applied in the design of the bridge. These have made it possible to allow intense inland vessels transportation to continue, while connecting the two riverbanks over 802 meters²⁵. When people cross and watch the water, they most often see dry bulk, like coal, passing by (though volumes are decreasing). If not, they either see ships with

²⁵ The bridge is designed by Ben van Berkel.

chemical and petroleum products, and/or more and more container ships²⁶. Not surprisingly, this bridge is dominant in mental maps of the inner city of Rotterdam. From the semiological angle again, the unique design of the bridge, as a symbol, is supported by its views. This sticks to the brain. The perspective on material signs, which it offers, represents the dominant story on the industrialized world port. In addition, again, when taking a closer look, the placement of signs, similarly communicating the flows within the port-city, manifests itself much richer *within* the urban fabric of the city. All kinds of port-city-related urban places, elements, buildings, and signs and symbols are present in the minds of people too, as studies show, however often this is not explicit when thinking of port-cities (Hartevelde 2021).



Figure 7. Pakhuismeesteren at The Kop van Zuid. (© Maurice Hartevelde, 2021).

...and as Discovered in its Public Spaces

Behind the riverfront, along the New Meuse, seemingly uniformed public spaces introduce more alternative stories about the port-city. The fourth narrative seems another obvious one. The place of biography is the Kop van Zuid, a redeveloped pier not far from the landing of the bridge and facing the Maritime Quarter on the other side of the river. In its outlook, its design is quite in line with the industrial image of the port-city. The whole pier has been redeveloped after harbors became in disuse. Such transformation reformed port-city evidently, but not fully. Here too public art reminds people to the heritage of this place. A two meters-high bronze statue of a dock worker with bale on his shoulders is giving witness of the harbor identity since the mid-century (1950) (Trouw 1950; De Volkskrant 1937). This so-called Load Bearer celebrates the rebuilding of a destroyed warehouse in the midst of the twentieth century²⁷. Its replacements, today still clearly recognizable warehouses, named Celebes, Borneo, Java, and Sumatra of the company Pakhuismeesteren (1941), have been transformed into apartments in the recent years²⁸. While cargo is gone, the story stays. Same goes for the flow of people, to a certain extent. This particular

²⁶ <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2020/13/binnenvaart-vervoerde-minder-droge-bulkgoederen-in-2019>.

²⁷ De Lastdrager (1950) is designed by Han Rehm.

²⁸ Original designer is unknown to the author. Redesign and extension by Jan Verrelst (2018).

pier includes a former migration office too, one of the Holland-America Lines (1901-1917)²⁹. Here in its early years every week people traveled from and to New York³⁰. Now, it is a hotel and restaurant: a hotspot for tourists. Still thousands of passengers arriving weekly³¹ near this site, at the Cruise Terminal (1946-1949). Those buildings are surrounded by a collage of Late Modern skyscrapers, including the World Port Center (2000)³². Of all, this building stands out in its port-city semiotics, because its design reassembles shapes of a bow of a ship, a crow's nest, and two funnels of a ship in its design. Together the present buildings are forming a particular (first) glimpse of Rotterdam, for visitors³³. At street-level though, public spaces are serving cars more than they do pedestrians. The intent has been “to retain the robust atmosphere with bollards and cobblestones, the smell of the salt air, and at the same time to incorporate a new environment of housing, work, recreation, and traffic”³⁴. The result is an efficient design of the street pattern, without activities in the plinth nor lively sidewalks. Most high-rise residents must drive the car straight away from the underground parking garages towards other places. Office workers seem to stay indoors. The biography of the redeveloped pier resonates with a bold mechanical reinterpretation of harbor heritage. Yet, when moving inland, along the adjacent redeveloped harbor areas and crossing another seawall, other perhaps less self-explanatory stories around flows of goods and people can be discovered. A neighboring place is the so-called Afrikaanderplein (1900). The center of which is a working-class neighborhood, planned for labor migrants which have been attracted to the harbor activities. Within the surrounding urban fabric, typical Dutch tenement buildings and urban renewal shape the public space. Along its artery streets, public amenities and facilities as well as commerce are located. A considerable number of foreign language shop signs along these public spaces reveal the presence of entrepreneurs (or customers) with a foreign heritage or nationality, and/or simply a trade in international goods and services. Two, three generations ago, ancestors may have migrated to this area from countries around the Mediterranean. We read this in the types of stores present, their names and supply, but also in signs and symbols autonomously present in the public space. At the same time, a visit to the outdoor market on the central square, shows that flows of people and goods also mix, mingle and even merge. The former pumping station (1896) at the side of this place is now serving collective use, programming, knowledge sharing and neighborhood meetings³⁵. It is a common place emphasizing interrelations in port-city narratives. The Monument for the Guest Workers (2013), remembering the early influx of international migrants and prominently located on this square, underlines this too. The monument is a combination of many symbols: an obelisk as a victory column, eight colored stone for the eight countries of origin of immigrants (Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Tunisia and Morocco), terrazzo as North African material and executed by the son of an immigrant, a wrought-iron lattice tower as a reference to buildings that the immigrants contributed to during the post-war reconstruction of the port-city, ship's steel for the harbor, a sun and half-moon as Mediterranean symbols³⁶. Today, a vast majority of the local population is of non-Western descent. Eventually too, this biography represents just another marginalized sample of the contemporary dynamics within Rotterdam. The place is a representative of an urban population which we can call hyper-divers, acknowledging the multiple causes of diversity next to ancestral roots and pathways (Hein, Van de Laar, Jansen, Luning, Brandellero, Azman, Hinman, Mulder, and Hartevelde, 2020).

²⁹ Resp. designed by Muller and Droogleever Fortuyn, and later altered by Muller again, with Christinus Bonifacius van der Tak sr.

³⁰ Van Ysselsteyn (1900), p.33, 113-119.

³¹ <https://cruisekalender.eu/Rotterdam>.

³² Designed by Norman Foster.

³³ Designed by Johannes Brinkman, Jo van den Broek, and Jaap Bakema.

³⁴ Rotterdam City Planning Department (1991).

³⁵ Gemeente op Zuid, or Stoomgemeente Hillesluis, also designed under de De Jongh.

³⁶ Monument voor de Gastarbeider by Hans van Bentem.



Figure 8. Afrikaanderplein, Rotterdam. (© Maurice Harteveld, 2021).

Again, a Closer Look

Of course, there are other public spaces, which are designated to transport, to an even higher degree. Such places can be found either close to large shipping and transit hubs at the edge of the port-city, or to cargo and distribution centers along the ring road system. In contrast, as subsequent examples, there are more public spaces which serve logistics, but are integrated in the differentiated, layered, and refined socio-spatial urban fabric of Rotterdam. Many streets serve the movement of merchandise and people, and they do already for ages. These everyday spaces are more human friendly than the efficient dedicated harbor areas. Still, transport is in the DNA of a port-city. When, on the one hand, it comes to distribution of newly arrived goods, there are innumerable places, thus stories, embedded in the port-city, and defining public space. Even to the smallest levels we find them near public pick-up and transfer points, or mail shipping services. These do support public life in the streets, as do stores and shops selling a wide variety of international products. On the other hand, when it comes to distribution of people, many people arrive from the hinterlands by car or public transport and not from the river. Different 'ports' have popped up over the decades; for a visit, short stay or immigration. Continuously, people and goods meet in the cores of the port-city and at a wide variety of neighborhood places. For both flows the networks of public spaces are essential. Connectivity and accessibility resonate in where, what and who is present. In abstraction, the agglomeration advantages of having all kinds of goods and people in close proximity to each other seem to make the port-city booming still. The ongoing urbanization of Rotterdam is a witness of this.

*En gij, geliefde Stad! waar ik eerst adem haalde,
Waar mij het eerste licht op 's moeders schoot bestraalde,
O dierbre Vaderstad! der kunsten koor en troon,
Gij zijt een eedle steen aan Neêrlands gloriekroon.
Stijg op in roem en eer! dat hier de lauwer groeije!
Dat hier de welvaart woon! dat hier de handel bloeije!
Verbreed uw blaadrendos, o twijg van d'eedlen stam!
O bloeije Nederland en bloeije Rotterdam!*

*And thou, beloved City! where I breathed first,
Where the earliest light on my mother's womb burst,
O dearest Father City! of the arts choir and its throne,
Thou art of Netherlands' glorious crown its precious stone.
Rise in fame and honour! that here the laurel grows!
May here prosperity dwell! that flourishing trade bestows!
Widen thy foliage, o twig of the noble stem!
O flourishing Netherlands and flourishing Rotterdam!*

Table 3. Poem by Lambrecht van den Broek (1828), translated by the author³⁷.

³⁷ Van den Broek (1828) Gedichten. Rotterdam: De Wed. J. Allart. p.37.



Figure 9. Inner Court of the Rotterdam City Hall. (© Maurice Hartevelde, 2021).

Beyond the Obvious, Where Worlds Comes Together and Port-City Persists

Civic areas, which include a refined network of public spaces and are places for daily life, reveal much more tangible and intangible signs and symbols related to the characteristics of the port-city. Perhaps more than do the huge harbor areas. At such places particularly urban narratives convey undivided port-city related meanings in Rotterdam. Water plays an elementary role throughout the public spaces of the port-city. The flows of goods and people do too. It may be no coincidence that a bronze sculpture of Neptune (a.k.a. Poseidon) the god of the sea and freshwater joins one of Mercury in the court of the Early Modern sandstone building of the City Hall (1920)³⁸. Port and city are one. Nevertheless, it does not say all. Rotterdam, port-city and its population, may have an immense energy in this union. This “indomitable energy... is more than an image”, as the newspaper reported just before the building and its inner public space was opened (De Nieuwe Courant, 1919). People’s activities and conceptual understanding are crucial too. By using micro-narratives drawn along the lines of geosemiotic understanding, the port-city is one in its everyday space as it always have been. Although in this manner there is not one narrative, this integrative understanding may help Rotterdam in further development. It may suggest a departure of the dichotomist governance model, instead introduce place-based approaches. There is not one monistic model nor one biography, instead rather pluralistic models and endless biographies, thus situated approaches. Each giving an account of specificities in the undivided port-city. This conclusion remains challenging from both a societal and academic perspective, because what is discovered reflects “the biases and values of their beholders” and what stays in the mind is “rooted and influenced by cultural frameworks of experiences” (John-Steiner 1985; White and Gould 1974). Again: at any place it is neither just port nor just city. Or as Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus would quote Horace: “virtus in medio”, or virtue (lies) in the middle, between the extremes³⁹. To gain a more-complex picture, more views are needed, and ...an open mind.

³⁸ Sculptures designed by Bonaventura Maria Alphonsus Ingen Housz, and the building designed by Henri Evers.

³⁹ Erasmus (1517), and Erasmus, and Guy (ed) (1998), p.37.

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