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Port City Resilience: (Re-)Connecting Spaces, Institutions and Culture

17 Mar 2020

By Carola Hein

Ports and cities and their surrounding regions coexist in a limited, shared space; today, they face multiple challenges, including climate change, energy transitions, digitization, or social transformations. These challenges require coordinated responses from all stakeholders: port authorities, city and regional governments, private and public actors, as well as NGOs and citizens. Historically, such collaborations are a trade mark of port cities around the world, their public and private stakeholders displaying great capacity for overcoming challenges meaningfully, forcefully and rapidly. Together, such stakeholders have dealt with a broad range of external and internal shocks to the advantage of both their ports and the neighboring cities.

This resilience—the capacity to bounce back after disasters and to adapt to political, economic, social or other challenges—derives from a combination of spatial forms—such as port, water, road and rail infrastructure—, social structures, including political and legal frameworks—and cultural patterns, often captured in literature, art or films, that link ports and cities to the advantage of both. Physical port spaces—cranes, warehouses, and infrastructures dedicated to the exchange between water and land—create **spatial** resilience, attracting new streams of goods, people and ideas. Stable relationships among institutional stakeholders and governance agencies in ports, cities and regions assure **institutional** resilience. The availability of appropriate legal systems, of institutional networks, the presence of educational institutions, and opportunities for recreation and leisure have helped port cities recover from disasters. Internal collaboration, in turn, guarantees **social** resilience through promoting shared interests and avoiding resistance. As public and private actors pursued shared goals for environmental, economic, institutional and social resilience, they invest in **technological** interventions and **spatial** structures that assure such resilience will last into the future. This historical resilience of port cities is the theme of a forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of Urban History*. Six contributions are already available online with three more to come (Ramos 2017; Strupp 2019; Kuroishi 2019; Nazarenko and Smirnova 2019; Garcia 2019; Dahl 2019) and (Hein 2020/forthcoming, Hein/Schubert 2020; Azman 2020).

We argue that the historical resilience of port cities is embedded in a **maritime mindset or port city culture** based on a strong and dedicated collaboration among diverse groups of public and private actors from different backgrounds around shared values. It is therefore important to assess, find and reinforce these **shared values** in light the challenges of today. The importance of close port-city-region relations, and shared values, has been emphasized by various scholars and organizations (e.g. OECD, [AIVP](#), [RETE](#)). While the economic effects of port city collaborations have been studied, an examination of socio-spatial impacts and the integration of port and city regions is still missing. Today, many ports are carefully assessing stakeholder involvement in the port, but such transitions also involve frictions and solutions towards resolving them are not yet clearly emerging. Numerous initiatives for technological, environmental and social innovation are ongoing, but a clear assessment of their collective support is not yet existing.

As in the past, the meaningful co-construction of future-proof strategies needs to be supported by all stakeholders in the port-city region to ensure resilient development. Shared social values, spatial patterns and cultural relations can help tie port, city and region together. They can also facilitate the emergence of new port-city paradigms, attract creative maritime and port-related businesses in finance, law or digitization, generate support among local politicians and citizens for new maritime businesses and practices, and educate people so that port city regions can become maritime hubs where new ideas and technologies are developed. Port cities must build on their past strengths to reinvent themselves for the future and prepare for coming challenges. To better understand how the development and planning of ports and cities is related to institutional and governance frameworks, the PortCityFutures group is working on a space-based methodology to better understand spatial, social and cultural relationships in port city regions.

Acknowledgement

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. Thanks for comments and reviews to Andrew Littlejohn.

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