Contribution by : Prof. Dr.-Ing. Carola Hein, Delft University of Technology; LDE Port City Futures

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Shifting Port City Values: Time for "what if histories" and "design fiction"?

The COVID-19 pandemic is hitting people and businesses hard. The attempt to protect people from life-threatening disease has changed the functioning of ports and cities around the world. Some ships are continuing to deliver much-needed goods, but others have become floating storage, upsetting the whole maritime system. Meanwhile, streets and public spaces are emptier than usual. Satellite images reveal a drop in air pollution. While some people are working harder than ever—think of the medical professions— others have lost their jobs and their livelihood. Many people have died. Within a matter of weeks, we have experienced a change in lifestyle that seemed impossible as a response to climate change a few months ago. Although there is yearning to go back to the way things were before the pandemic, there is also acknowledgment that we have entered a new phase and should be sketching plans for the future. Strips of tape on floors are being used to keep people apart, but we need to make sure that post-pandemic society doesn't involve increased social, spatial or environmental disparities. The COVID-19 challenge can serve as a moment for port authorities to rethink their attitude towards surrounding territories, their collaboration with cities and regions and their relationship with space, society and culture.

The current crisis has revealed the power of lifestyle changes. They have not been voluntary, but they have had an impact. Being forced to pause can lead people to reevaluate their understanding of time and space or their trust in science and the predictability of the future. It may be too early to make firm predictions, but it may be the right time to think about what I would like to call "what if histories" and what others call "design fiction." For example, what would it mean for port logistics, if port cities and their regions limit transportation? What would it mean if petroleum storage and refining sites closed and made way for new energy systems and port functions? What would it mean for port cities if cruise ships didn't travel but hosted Virtual Reality shows of far-away places while staying in port? Such questions could be posed to design students to develop new ideas and visions.

Utopias have always played an important role in imagining the future. Some of the port plans of the past now appear utopias--such as the 1969 plan called 2000+ for the Rotterdam region (Fig. 1). For more than
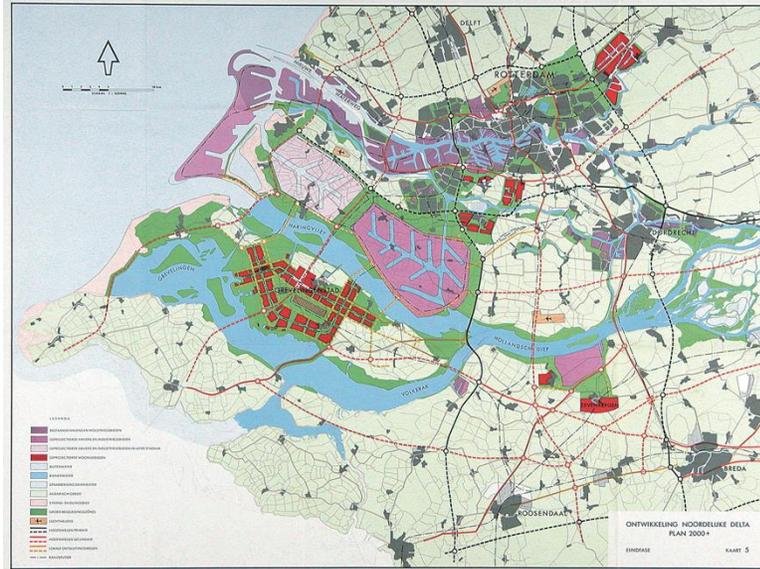

a century and a half, the paradigms of faster, bigger and further away have led societal development. COVID-19 requires slowing down, focusing on circularity and local systems. These are concepts that have been discussed for some time already. Visualizing the outcome of potential future development in space can help clarify societal implications. Students in the MSc 2 Architecture and Urbanism Beyond Oil at TU Delft, for example, have produced "design fiction" (Fig. 2) These may not be realistic visions and they may not be desirable. However, testing the reaction to these kinds of visions may help us identify the values that are meaningful for the future of ports, cities and their regions.
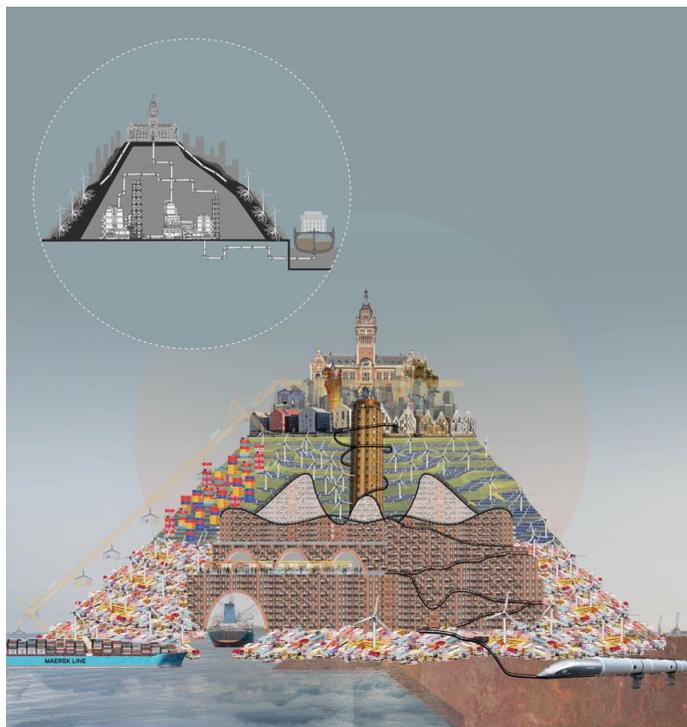
Figure 1: 1969 Rotterdam 2000+ plan

Figure 2: Rashid Ayoubi, Design fiction for port and city of Dunkirk

Even without the current pandemic, port city regions around the world face complex problems that require rethinking and collaboration on the part of port, city and regional actors. There is a need for integrated spatial and social planning and design measures so that port, city and region can jointly evolve in a limited space. The OECD Port-Cities Programme has called for any vision for ports to be "imaginative rather than technocratic".[i] Their research hints at the need for port, city and other actors to prepare the ports and their surrounding regions for coming challenges of climate change, digitization and migration, instead of the economic and port-competition criteria that have long dominated port city decisions about infrastructure and planning. Citizen support is a key element to re-establishing links between ports and regions, and tools are needed to gain that support.

Some European seaports—such as those of Dublin, Hamburg and Barcelona—have already started to rethink their cultural engagement and the choices they make that relate to climate change. We need new tools to evaluate the importance of lifestyles, institutional relationships, and maritime mindsets or port city cultures (including films, art, literature). Port cities are a particular type of city, because they have traditionally created institutional, social and cultural frameworks that have helped them respond flexibly and creatively to all kinds of disasters. They have nurtured a particular kind of evolutionary resilience that includes thinking of the interests of all parties involved. In line with Bart Kuipers' assertion that the new normal is regional and Michaël Dooms' thoughts on the "social licence to operate", it is important to re-humanize the port authority even as—or perhaps because—the port dehumanizes. This does not mean promoting a nostalgic past, instead it means focusing on spaces where the port business makes an impact, even if these spaces are not under the port authority's control. This means sharing the practices and skills of the port for the benefit of the city and region. Advanced knowledge of logistics and digitization may serve cities, but educational and cultural facilities can provide the creativity needed to imagine the port of the future.

To assure the long-term resilience of both ports and cities, port authorities should reflect on how they impact territories of sea and land beyond the areas under their direct control. When I interviewed actors in the Rotterdam region, several cited a lack of port city DNA, or, I would say, port city culture. To (re)-anchor the port in its larger physical context, the port needs to engage again with local social and regional practices. We need ways not only to measure the economic or infrastructural impact of the port, but also its presence in the societal and cultural context of its larger region. Such an engagement is important both to educate the port workers of the future (human capital), but also to interact with the population at large and to create a maritime mindset, where the creativity of the larger population engages with maritime practices, and contributes to long-term port city resilience. Rather than short-term marketing efforts, what is needed is long-term engagement with local publics through education, spatial integration, social investment, cultural engagement and questions about how lifestyles and culture can contribute to (re)building shared values of port, city and region.

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[i] Olaf Merk, "The Competitiveness of Global Port-Cities: Synthesis Report," (2013). p. 62.