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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

NECSUS 12 (1), Spring 2023

[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

MMV YouTube:

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Pleasurescapes: From maritime stereotypes to uncanny infrastructures

by Vincent Baptist, Judit Vidiella Pagès, and Aurelio Castro-Varela

Where people have fun, encounters happen. Where encounters take place, change begins. Are pleasurescapes in port cities Europe's true driving forces after all?

With this tagline, the research project [Pleasurescapes](#), funded by HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area) and running from 2019 to 2022, investigated historical spaces and legacies of modern entertainment and deviant culture across European port cities. Established as a collaboration between scholars from the port cities of Hamburg, Rotterdam, Barcelona, and Gothenburg, the Pleasurescapes project sought to address the dominance that has traditionally been reserved for port cities' economic and industrial importance, and rebalance this by shedding light on their underexplored cultural heritage. In doing so, the

research team utilised the new ‘pleasurescapes’ concept to craft links between past and present maritime urban contact zones, from bygone sailortowns to contemporary waterfronts, but also to point the attention to overlooked international events and intriguing cultural practices that found a fertile breeding ground in port cities’ transnational environments. Main publications focused both on the conceptual ramifications of the ‘pleasurescapes’ term and its operationalisation within different contexts.[11] Additionally, the project’s final output intends to reimagine and recount the cultural counter-narratives of the investigated port cities: a museum exhibition and theater play, both based on sources and heritage objects uncovered during the collaborative research, are set to launch in the coming year.

This cultural output will reconnect audiences in port cities to their roots, so to speak: by (re)presenting the cultural traces that have made port cities stand out from other cities through history, and by showcasing how such legacies are still being reworked nowadays to competitively position maritime urban environments. Think of Hamburg’s famous Reeperbahn, a pleasurecape par excellence, whose dense cultural facilities nowadays present a glossier, touristified

version of the rowdy sailor street it once was, populated with seafarers and 'women of pleasure'.^[12] Such quintessential figures, together with other emblems like anchors, lighthouses, and mermaids, have become firmly ingrained in the general public's imagination of port cities and the maritime sphere. Contemporary usage of this kind of iconography often appears more lucrative than subversive, however. A recent campaign to market Katendrecht, a formerly neglected port peninsula in Rotterdam with a past as Chinatown and red light district, for instance appropriated stereotypical sailor imagery to attract more affluent resident groups, thereby uncovering strong ambivalences among former inhabitants regarding the use of such nostalgic and class-based markers.^[13]

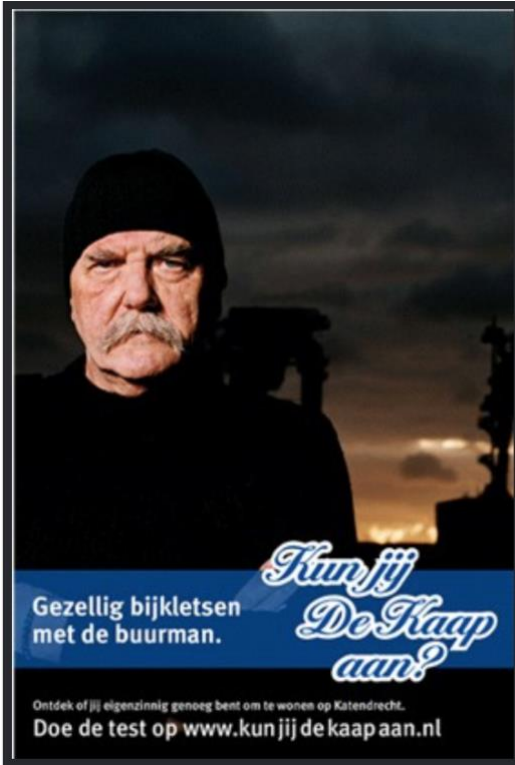


Fig. 6: Residential campaign poster for Katendrecht, Rotterdam (2006).

Class-based tensions have underlaid many older instances of socio-cultural appropriation and control in other port cities, from the strict practices of alcohol licensing and shifts towards civilised amusement parks in Gothenburg,[14] for example, to the 1929 Barcelona International Exhibition.[15] During the latter event, Barcelona's local elites saw an opportunity to turn Montjuïc, a mountain overlooking the harbour from the

southeast, into a site of civic values, modernisation, and monumental character. To this end, a set of modern infrastructures (gardens, pavilions, a funicular railway) came to re-urbanise Montjuïc. This established a landscape streamlined for the middle class and attuned to principles of morality and beauty, while simultaneously sweeping away very different, more informal pleasure practices on the mountain: picnic areas next to rural fountains and surrounded by barren land. The clash between these two forms of entertainment on the same urban waterfront shows how the material and the cultural can become 'hyphenated', [16] through the infrastructural patterning of pleasure and social life.



Fig. 7: Picnicking crowd on Montjuïc, Barcelona (1907).

During early-20th century modernity, entertainment in port cities not only concerned the arrival of varied groups of people looking for fun; it also depended on socio-material forms that shaped these urban milieus to offer that fun and make cultural exchanges possible. In other words, pleasure in port cities required infrastructures to be located, displayed, felt, and valued within specific areas. From avenues to docks, parks, cafes, terraces, theaters, or brothels, these spaces all entailed particular ways of lighting up, making audible and visible, arranging mobility, leading to encounters or even hiding from social conventions. These infrastructures were therefore not fixed or inert, but rather alive in their mediation of the entertainment on offer, and in the spreading of new cultural repertoires and practices coming from overseas. This mediating role can be ascribed to port cities on a more general level. Their role as logistical hubs is not merely a technical one, but also often establishes a reciprocal relationship with local elites and entrepreneurs regarding the management of a successful industrial complex that can bring competitive advantages and prestige. As much as this side of port cities has been meticulously planned and replanned by actors throughout history, their equally crucial role as a mediating ‘switchboard of culture’ has proven more

heterogeneous,[17] even giving an impulse to cultural fringe practices as another Barcelona-related example shows.

Due to the historical connection between maritime trade and freedom of conscience, in the second half of the 19th century European port cities like Barcelona took the lead in cultivating and articulating novel socio-cultural practices and ideals. New forms of entertainment even included spiritualistic practices and hypnotic experiments related to the modern supernatural, which spread through transnational flows supported by the rapid expansion of new transport and communication means.[18] Spiritism built ‘real and productive communication networks around an infrastructural uncanny’,[19] which travelled over land, overseas, and wirelessly to reach millions of people. As with the transmission of global epidemics or traditional cultural repertoires, port cities were nodal points in this infrastructural communication network through which supernatural literature and seance practices spread from the US to Europe. The historical spread of spiritist leader Allan Kardec’s ideas is illustrative in this respect: news articles from the mid-19th century recount how 300 of Kardec’s forbidden books became a pawn in the hands of clandestine maritime trade networks, with

merchant captains, notaries, and editors all weighing in on the cargo's sea routes. On arrival in Barcelona, however, the books were confiscated by order of Bishop Antoni Palau, who burned them on 9 October 1861 at Ciutadella Park in a ritual of public penance to condemn heretics. Nevertheless, Kardec's work remained very impactful on Barcelona's maritime pleasurescapes and populace, and its transnational allure did not die out immediately. In the Netherlands, the translator of Kardec's work was J.G. Plate, son of an important merchant – linked to the port of Rotterdam.



Fig. 8: Impression of a spiritualist seance published in a Spanish newspaper (1853).

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Francesca Savoldi works at the intersections of human geography, political ecology, and urban studies, with a focus on terraqueous spaces. As a Marie Skłodowska-Curie postdoctoral fellow at TU Delft (2021-2023), and a member of PortCityFutures, she is critically investigating the port-city relationship. Her ongoing

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Judit Vidiella Pagès has developed a career in art and cultural pedagogies with a focus on arts-based research practices, first in the Fine Arts Faculty at University of Barcelona, later in University of Évora (Portugal), and since 2015 in Girona at ERAM College (University of

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