

City and Port – Han Meyer

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Critical review

The book “City and Port: Transformation of Port Cities – London, Barcelona, New York and Rotterdam”, by Han Meyer, was published in 1999, and is a reference book on the study of port cities and, especially, in the issues regarding port-city relations from the perspective of urban planning. The attention the book gained upon its publication and the need to understand its scientific relevance and timeliness requires that we briefly contextualize its theme.

In fact, if we go back to the second half of the 20thc, we may realize the economic and technological advances taking place since the end of WWII and which had a huge impact on port cities. One of the evidences of this process is the gradual freeing of urban waterfronts from industrial and port functions, a process resulting from several factors. From the specialization and increase in size of ships and the consequent need to adjust docks (including their location to ensure ship access) to the need to improve land accessibility (ensuring the connection to port infrastructures and high capacity road and train networks, enhancing their connection and fostering the hinterland), through deep changes in how goods are stored (in particular due to the introduction of container units).

The consequences on land - both in regards to the city and to the port area – of the changes in sea transportation industry and in “port geography”, as well as the processes of the city regenerating and repossessing waterfronts, led to interest by different scientific fields and, since the 1960s, much has been published on this matter from different scientific and technical perspectives. Among those, we would point out the works developed by Bird (“The Major

Seaports of the United Kingdom”, 1963), Hoyle (“Development dynamics at the port-city interface”) and Hayuth (“Changes on the waterfront: a model-based approach”) – the last two included in the book “Revitalising the Waterfront: International Dimensions of Dockland Redevelopment” (1994). The relevance of the above-mentioned works is due to the models they propose to analyse progress and change in city-port interfacing throughout time.

Within this scope, the importance and timeliness of Han Meyer’s book lies, to a great extent, in its approach to the issue of port-city relations and in the depth of his analysis (complemented by a wide and careful selection of illustrations). The author proposes an innovative approach based on the acknowledgment of specificities in port cities that determine both the space relation between city and port and their different cultural approaches. This perspective is then applied to four different types of port cities: English port cities (represented by London); Mediterranean port cities (represented by Barcelona); American port cities (represented by New York); and Northwestern European cities (represented by Rotterdam). The book is 424 pages long and is divided into six chapters.

In Chapter I (“The Nineteenth-Century Port City on Its Way to the Twenty-First Century”), Han Meyer provides a context for the theme, focusing on: (i) analysing the effects of several economic cycles - which took place in the 19th and 20th centuries - both in the port city and in the relation port-city; (ii) discussing the changes in the role and in the function of public space in the context of those changes.

The next chapters analyse in detail the changes in each of the types of port cities. London (Chapter II – “The English Port City: London and the Wonder of Docklands”), whose dock structure has been separated from the urban environment since the 19thc. The case of Barcelona (Chapter III – “The Mediterranean Port City: Barcelona and the other Modern Tradition”), a city whose urban design is, according to the author, based on three principles: “historical continuity, in which territorial characteristics play a major role; spatial continuity, in which the port area takes its place within various spatial systems

simultaneously; and functional complexity, in which public space fulfils various functions at the same time” (p. 179). New York (Chapter IV – “The North American Port City: New York, a Boundless Urban Landscape”) which, like other American port cities, has an historical link to its port, made evident in “the initial absence of striking contrasts in spatial form and use between the site of port activities and the rest of the city” (p. 183). Rotterdam (Chapter V – “The Northwestern European Port City: Rotterdam and the Dynamic of the Delta”), representative of a type of city in which the risk of flooding is visible in the concern to build dams, impressive landscape structures which formed “not only a division between land inside and outside the man-made barriers, but also between the city and the tidal port”, and “the alternating relationship between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ areas, and between city and port, is an essential characteristic of Rotterdam (...)” (p. 53).

Finally, in Chapter VI (“Urbanizing Infrastructure: An Urban Design Project”), Han Meyer pays special attention to discussing the difficulties in coordinating and integrating large transportation infrastructures (including port infrastructures) in urban design, as evidenced in urban planning, and then describes the different approaches to the issue in the 1980s: (i) clear separation between the city and the infrastructure so as to keep harmony and coherence between public space and architecture; (ii) city and infrastructure relation as fashionable design project; (iii) city and infrastructure relation as architectural project; (iv) city and infrastructure relation as urban project.

To summarize, and as Fernando Monge stated when writing about this work (in a text on Port Cities, published in 2004 in the “International Journal of Urban and Regional Research”), this is “a powerful and well elaborated analysis and proposal (...)” (p. 231). A book whose reading we recommend to all those who are interested in port cities and in the port-city relation.

Han Meyer – City and Port: Transformation of Port Cities - London, Barcelona, New York and Rotterdam. Utrecht: International Books, 1999.