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Mapping Maritime Mindsets: Mental Maps

28 Jul 2020

Maurice Harteveld

Imagine: You are asked to draw a port city from memory. What would you put on paper? Do you think of harbours? Water, docks, cargo, moving loads, and ships? If your drawing shows these elements, don't be surprised. Sixty-five graduate students also took on the challenge. In answering: "draw the port city of Rotterdam by mind", the drawings of the participants (fig.1) displayed exactly the above features. Of course, this makes sense. A port just happens to be a place on the water in which ships shelter and dock to (un)load cargo and/or passengers. A harbour is a sheltered place too, and in its nautical meaning it is a near-synonym for sheltered water, in which ships may dock, especially again for (un)loading. So, all the above linguistic lemmas are there and all these are connected to imaginable objects.

Apparently in a 'port city', the adjective 'port' modifies the meaning of 'city' in such an extent that this echoes in the mind. Objects associated with the port form what we call a *mental map*. In general, putting such a map on paper displays a person's subconscious representation of an area, and although each map is subjective, a representative sample helps to identify areas and people's affiliation to these areas. Yet, mental maps with a strong emphasis on ports - rather than of port cities as a whole - seem very limited.

In general, people use to approach ports as a vague relatively large section of the city: In the urban design perspective of Kevin Lynch (1960), we may call port areas a 'district' in our mental maps, with the river as water edge and predetermined path for ships. It is alike all those areas we know, but not know exactly. In the Rotterdam sample, students occasionally give some sort of detail: if so, they draw different areas with containers and oil drums. These are large enough to identify as specific nodes and they are used as an image of the port for decades.

Also, the old-school landmark cranes are sometimes drawn clearly. They are big enough to experience when you are in the port area today, and, again, they are pictured to represent the port city for at least over a century. In contrast, the lesser-known and more-recently developed areas including huge wind turbines are seldom drawn. Likewise, the overhead cranes in the iconic non-human automated port terminals of Rotterdam are nearly absent in the maps. They are only a few years old, mostly out of view and not yet so often used as an illustration of the port area. The unobserved is never taken into account, whereas objects generally associated to ports are. It is a duality which is recognised since the birth of an experimentalist search for psychophysical correlations (Boring 1934).

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Figure 1: The mental maps of the 'port city of Rotterdam' (2020).

The limited amount of information in these mental maps can be explained fairly simple. Mental maps are always based upon our experiences and upon information we have gathered over time. When we know less, we draw less. In the Rotterdam case, we only draw physically large features that we may have seen from a distance, and/or objects we presume are there. This is connected to the lack of public accessibility of the port area itself. Public space is often fenced and walled there and the street network is large gridded. Since the general public cannot access most of its maritime and industrial landscapes, few people can map the exact layout of the port area from their memory. In addition, the lack of detail in the maps also relates to the speed visitors have. Public spaces in the port area are car-dominant. An old urban design lesson teaches that we see less if we move fast (Appleyard, Lynch and Myer 1964, Venturi, Scott Brown 1972). Applying such lessons in a harbour may result in huge signs to be recognised and remembered (e.g. Dunlap 1992).

Still, instead of a blind focus to the port, and therefore its harbours, I prefer to consider the resilient and acculturated interrelation of port and city in order to identify port cities as 'cities'. Thus, I asked the same group of graduate students to "draw Rotterdam by mind", before challenging them to draw the 'port city'. In this question, 'port city' was explicitly left out. This set of mental maps is richer in the kind of objects drawn and still they do relate to a subconscious image of port cities (fig. 2).

Fundamentally, it makes sense that this question generates more info. Networks of public spaces are more refined outside of the port areas. Here, we can experience cities very differently and here, we move with different paces. Our paths are different, our perspectives are different, and our perceptions are different. We can be informed in various ways. Very fundamental in environmental psychology is the difference between people who know the city in mediated ways and those who reside there (Canter 1977). We may know the city by heart, or through a novel or other books. We may recall paintings or online images. We may be informed through a wide variety of social media, films and music. Despite a multiplicity of differences between individuals, their mental maps, the set of drawings show many more elements related to port cities than the ones introduced before. Remarkably, if the question is less biased, the amount of information drawn in mental maps increases.

In order to test if the information in the mental maps actually relates to an identity of port cities, we can study to what extent the drawn objects are tied to the specific port city, and thus their what we call situational conditions. And, we can relate these elements to imaginable concepts, which are deriving from the accumulating port city research. In other words; We can test if what is present in the drawings, may also be indexical in port city research texts and vice versa. The set of mental maps of Rotterdam

reveal for instance buildings related to long established migrant relations, objects related to global capital, and nodes and lines related to distribution.

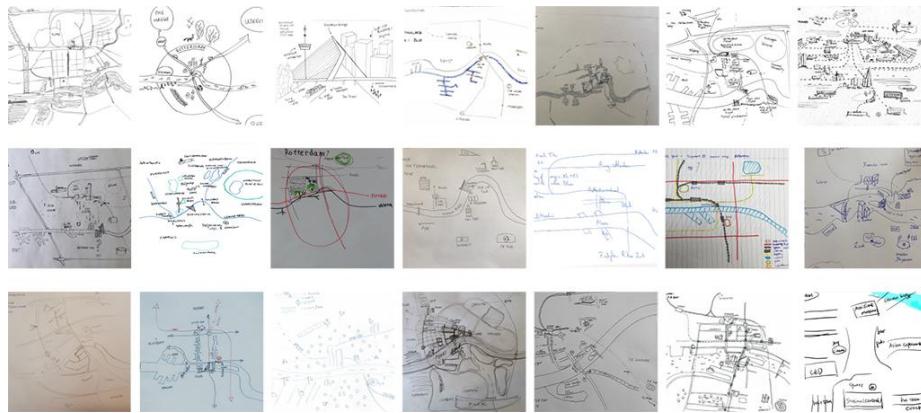


Figure 2: Selection of the mental maps of 'Rotterdam' (2020)

This approach builds upon the method of mental mapping as it has been adopted in urban design, both in academia and practice, to connect histories of cities to future making. (e.g. Moughtin, et al 2003, Carmona et al 2003, Larice and Macdonald 2013, Sheppard 2015) It can also be seen as a continuation of participatory approaches in urban planning and policies for development. (e.g. Berman 2018, Banks et al 2013) Yet, it takes into account that what is drawn is “rooted and influenced by cultural frameworks of experiences”, and what is discovered in the maps reflects “the biases and values of their beholders.” (John-Steiner 1985, White, and Gould 1974) Within the PortCityFutures team, the update of the method is being catalysed by overlapping insights of many colleagues. By uniting among others visual ethnography, cultural anthropology, human geography, urban sociology, and port economy, the novel application of mental mapping can help to reveal hidden dimensions of port cities and understand their complex nature.

At a certain point of saturation, new maps may not be surprising anymore; still, the undrawn is always out there. The intent cannot be complete, however, to discover maritime mindsets which help us to look beyond the water, docks, cargo, moving loads, and ships in the future.

Acknowledgement

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This blog is the second in the series ‘Mapping Maritime Mindsets’. The first blog was published on the 13th of July 2020: [Mapping Maritime Mindsets: Towards a Shared Methodology](#).

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