

# **CITIES AND PORTS : STILL THE COLD WAR ?**

*Some thoughts on Canadian and European Experiences*

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## ABSTRACT

New ideas, new outlooks and innovative ways to make different stakeholders talk to and better understand each other are needed if we want to have livable port cities. Establishing these is the purpose of the *International Association of Cities and Ports*, which operates out of Le Havre, in France.

Key issues : Should city and port planning be located under the same roof at City Hall? Is the outlook fundamentally different in Western Europe than in North America generally? Do we often ask ourselves where the most basic errors originate?

In the future, port cities that will develop and flourish will, quite simply, be those where influential citizens have developed a love for their city and their port, with a keen sense of the importance of leaving a better place for their children to live in.

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***The opinions expressed in this paper are his only.***

## CITIES AND PORTS : STILL THE COLD WAR ?

In the United States and in Canada, as in Europe, interest both private and public is growing for the control and public access to shorelines, especially urbanized. These sectors that our American colleagues usually call *waterfronts*.

I do not find much appropriate the use of the word *waterfront* to designate that kind of soft frontier between a city and a body of water. It induces a way of thinking that more or less assumes that the only worthwhile point of view is one that is city-centered. We assume that we are city people who look in the direction of the water. It's the ordinary point of view of architects, urban planners, shopping mall builders...and of most mayors. I suggest that we also give some thought to another viewpoint, the one of the fishing ship captain, of the cruise operator, of the port manager. Then what you have is not so much a *waterfront* as a *cityfront*, with wharves, basins and piers that are likely to be more or less suited for your needs.

### **The case of Quebec City**

Since the focus of this session is on new forms of collaboration between cities, ports and their environment, I will try to synthesize in a few words more than fifteen years of decisions and counter-decisions with the so-called Old Port of Québec, a Capital city that occupies a strategic location on a mighty river, the St. Lawrence. I said so-called Old Port because the historic maritime sector, more or less used for maritime operations at the time our urban experiments started, is now being reclaimed by normal port operations, cruise ships, that is. In fact, the *Old Port* has become a *New Port*. Thence the present clash between urban plans and the needs of the cruise operators and other water-based activities.

Given the limited time, I will not give you well documented case studies of port-city relationships. I will just tell you very briefly about some fads and fashions that have shaped our cityport shoreline since the last thirty years, costing tens of millions of dollars with sometimes rather strange results.

### **A look at who owns the land**

In Canada, the main ports are for the most part under the ownership and jurisdiction of the central government, whose capital is located in Ottawa. In the early Seventies, that government realized that it had an image problem, if not an economic one : more and more underused or derelict port lands adjacent to the core of many important Canadian cities, like Halifax, Québec, Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver.

At the time, a new *Federal Ministry of Urban Affairs* – not quite constitutional – saw in those vacant lands a means to assume a leadership role in urban planning in Canada, a field of jurisdiction that is under Provincial control. The lasting interest and heavy financial involvement of the Canadian government in the development of some urban shores in Canada goes back to that period.

That explains why most of the planning and building that went on at the Québec, Montréal and Toronto waterfronts, for example, was the work of Federal government corporations operating under direct political control from Ottawa. They had few built-in incentives to respond to the wishes of local mayors, associations, Provincial governments, commercial ports directly involved, not to mention the general public. Quite often they became addicted to some grandiose scheme of a local planner or architect. They planned and built pretty much as they saw fit.

On the one hand this governmental takeover protected waterfront lands from local projects and appetites, which is not a mean feat. On the other hand, their mandate reflected the wisdom of the early Seventies and was leading to the outright urbanization of the place, the maritime side of the equation often being put on the back-burner. The result was – and still is – a general philosophy of planning that cannot understand that people like to have some space close to the water, they want to be able to touch the water, to have physical access to it and do something with it, and not just stare at it from a huge pier, behind a fence that separates them from the water, their backs to the wall of some building or office tower.

Over the years, the very same pattern of events emerged in the three cities of Québec, Montréal and Toronto : the population became so upset by some plans or projects that the holding of public hearings became inevitable. These hearings resulted almost invariably in the discarding of the plans that had been pushed forward by reputed urban planners and other specialists. In most cases, the general public strenuously opposed any kind of privatization of the waterfront : like any water hole in a jungle, the waterfront seems to naturally belong to all. People really wanted to be able to approach the water, to use it wherever possible for fishing, swimming, sailing, boarding cruise boats, etc., and to be able to enjoy some green space close to it. There was not much demand for boutiques and shops but rather for snacks and pops. Tall buildings close to the water were widely condemned unless they really had some business there.

### **Successives approaches**

I will just say a few words about Quebec City. In the last thirty years, three general approaches have permeated our regional planning wisdom as far as the relationship between city and water is concerned.

The first approach dates back to the early Sixties and goes like this : « There is this urbanized sector over here, there is the St. Lawrence River over there. Let's build one of those new highways of which we are so proud, right at the water's edge, between the urban fabric and

the River. » For miles upstream and downstream of the Old City of Québec, the highway geniuses have had their way, and, as a result, the population is neatly cut-off from a magnificent river. (In Montréal, about at the same period, there was some serious talk of replacing the historic waterfront street – the Rue de la Commune – by a highway. In Toronto, they actually built one parallel to Lake Ontario. I guess it was the spirit of the times...)

The second approach (early Seventies) : « There is that piece of derelict real estate between the historic city, the port and the river. Let's add some landfill and let's build a New Age city in front of the old one. Let's make it as futuristic as possible, basically all aluminium and glass. Its elegance and cleanliness will show the way of the future to those attarded troglodytes, suffocating in the dusty quarters of the Old Town. By the way, let's hope that the industrial port activity, and those unsightly grain elevators, will eventually fade into the distance, thanks to the lawsuits that will arise from those new resident yuppies...and damn the industrial development. »

The third approach (early Eighties) : « Let's imitate the Americans by building one of those *festival marketplaces* where the yuppie generation will crowd trendy boutiques, drink in ferns bars and buy a kite for Junior, before going home to a condominium overlooking the marina to watch the evening news. »

In the case of Québec City, these approaches have all come and gone. They left ugly traces on the urban landscape and holes in the public budgets. Tens of millions of dollars of Canadian taxpayer's money were spent with the most recent fad, the festival marketplace. On top of that, when in 1986 the Federal government wanted out of the waterfront business, some land was sold to a private entrepreneur and a huge aluminum building went up between the historic quarter and the water, *inside* the perimeter under the protection of UNESCO. It now sits right in the middle of one of the most beautiful urban panoramas in the world. During all those years, no thoughts were given to protecting – much less regenerating – the natural environment and ecosystems. Not much has changed since then.

### **The port and its environment**

Nowadays, if we do not want to be left behind in a world where sustainable development is less and less an empty word, it is risqué not to be familiar with the many studies and reports that have been published – in English and in French – by the Royal Commission of Inquiry on the Future of Toronto's Waterfront. Their approach is a prefiguration of what is likely to come to many of our cities and ports. Before you even *think* of building a new shed, somebody will ask : « What will be the effect on the ecosystem of the immediate area? »

Let's only ask a few questions. When we say that ports and cities should work together, are we simply saying that port officials should work more often with city officials? What is a city? How does it progress? Should whatever ideas that may be floating in the public at large be actively sought after? Do we know from where the new and sometimes eventually prevailing ideas originate in a city? In government offices? In downtown taverns? In coffee-houses?

Some more questions : would it help if the port administration was a department of City Hall? Should your port infrastructure and appearance change if your traffic is people instead of general cargo? And how far are we really from a sustainable development approach to port activities, when even minimal mitigation measures are still considered by many as a concession to appease the Greens?

### **Economic impact of public hearings**

We cannot overestimate the huge impact that well organized public hearings have had on the decision-making process in Québec City, Montréal and Toronto. In Québec, it has been observed that through the public hearing process, important commercial port activities have been shielded from non-port urban developments by citizens groups, well aware of the economic importance of maritime business.

### **The International Association of Cities and Ports**

As for future developments and cooperation, I would like to say a few words about the *International Association of Cities and Ports*. What started in 1988 as a mainly European network made up of cities, ports, Chambers of Commerce, city planning departments, government Ministries, building companies, consultants and so forth is now spreading outside Europe.

This Association operates in French and English and its members share experiences and knowledge through newsletters, meetings, seminars, etc. By focussing mainly on the interrelationships and synergy between cities and ports, the Association takes a quite different approach from the one we are used to in North America, that is to consider the problem mainly in terms of waterfront rejuvenation.

The *International Association of Cities and Ports* organizes a major international conference every second year, which draws in the range of three to five hundred participants. The first such event was held in Le Havre, then Barcelona and Genoa. Next year, for the first time out of Europe, the Conference will be held in North America, in Montréal. This will give the opportunity to North and South Americans, Europeans and participants from all over the world to compare approaches and practices of city and port cooperation and planning.

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