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Thinking Europe through the coasts and the differences of the four seas

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Abstract

Europe is a continent surrounded by water on three sides, with major seaports and metropolises along its coastlines. Each of these waters is different in terms of depth, water quality or role in global shipping, and their unique characteristics have influenced the planning of coastal and port city developments on their edges. Looking at Europe from the water allows us to study how people have adapted the spatial configuration of their port city territories to the characteristics of their neighbouring waters, and to identify similarities and differences in the development of port city territories on a single sea, across seas, rivers or river networks. We argue that such a historical perspective on planning offers decision-makers new insights into the complex territories at the water/land interface and the challenges for future planning in Europe and beyond. Mapping can help us overcome the limitations of historical boundaries and institutions that shape planning and act as a 'gap finder', identifying spatial, institutional or functional opportunities and challenges and where planning can be beneficial. In the context of Europe, we argue that the internal focus on nation states, national borders and European unification has distracted policy makers and stakeholders from a multi-scale and maritime perspective of the continent. Crossing borders, exploring territories from sea to land, highlights the unique role of seaports in shaping Europe, past, present and future. By exploring the conceptual and methodological underpinnings of the Port City Atlas, this presentation provides an insight into the role of mapping in planning history.

Keywords
port city territory, mapping, water-based approach, planning, Europe, history

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