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Port City Relations:
Global Spaces of Urban Waterfront Development

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I. Introduction

Some observers of current urban development patterns have said, and mistakenly so, that ports and cities are separate entities: here is the city and over there is the port. Since the end of World War II, there has been a tendency for cities and ports to develop in separate locations. Ports, it seems, have loosened their grip on cities, and a longstanding intertwining of close relations has been said to be unraveling. But, ports and cities have always provided important interdependencies throughout the history of human settlement and maritime trade. From the earliest port cities, which continually adapted their 'windows to the world', to industrial ports, where large numbers of working men traveled daily from the city to the port to haul vast amounts of cargo, relations between the port and the city have always been central for the development of urban form and wealth accumulation processes.

In my talk today, I focus not so much on ports and their functioning, but rather on urban waterfronts that are being redeveloped as relations between ports and cities change. Decades ago, port authorities abandoned these lands, once hives of intense shipping, manufacturing and warehousing activities. Cities turned their backs on port-lands that contained antiquated and frequently decrepit infrastructures that were considered incapable of adaptation to new uses without vast capital expenditures and changes to 'structured coherencies'. Alternative port sites were favoured that promised greater returns on investments by avoiding complexities of impending globalized economic,

environmental and social problems that were often set in a morass of multiple-scale jurisdictions. But, urban waterfronts have, once again, begun generating considerable investment interest and debate about their role as spaces of promise for many port-cities. While waterfronts have always been special places where land and water meet, they have recently become key sites where global restructuring processes and local interests are engaged in complex struggles for the future of cities. It is my contention that contemporary processes of urban waterfront development both reflect and help constitute changes in global and local development modes, societal representations of the non-human environments, and urban governance—particularly security concerns. Today, I will discuss three major themes related to the current wave of urban waterfront transformations that are key elements for the futures of port-city landscapes.

- First, Waterfronts matter. Here I explore the ways that a historically-contingent convergence of economic restructuring, globalization and technological changes has given rise to new spaces. Waterfront lands have become territorial wedges of revitalization in pursuit of competitive city strategies.

- Second, current urban waterfront developments should be considered as part of the construction of urban ecologies and, in particular, new forms of socio-nature.

- Finally, port security will be an increasing important factor that must be considered in waterfront developments and port-city relations.

II. Waterfronts Matter

Waterfronts matter because of their importance as key spaces in urban transformations. I am sure that I need not convince you of this, and all we need do is look at the ubiquity of current waterfront developments throughout the world.

Recall, however, that waterfront change is constant and has a long history that predates the well-known and highly publicized commercial success of developments in Boston and Baltimore. As Brian Hoyle noted,

"…for as long as port cities have existed, the continuing redevelopment of a city's waterfront has been a basic part of the life of any active, growing settlement responding to economic and political stimuli and to technological change."

Developments in Boston and Baltimore were part of a wave of change that was sparked by efforts to capitalize on the spatial effects of economic restructuring and technological innovations, and this is generally understood to have begun in the 1970s. Relations between port and city were part of these changes, and in particular urban waterfront lands were said to be underutilized and decaying resources. During the 1970s and 1980s, many North American and European port-cities reported that decaying piers and expanding inter-city blight were associated with social pathologies and were the subject of much concern among urban residents and local, regional and national governments.

In 1979, for example, a group of planners, politicians and scholars met in Cambridge, Massachusetts under the auspices of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and its Urban Waterfront Group to consider problems and opportunities associated with changing port city relations and their urban waterfronts. The cases presented and the follow-up discussions at the conference focused on many North American cities that were suffering from the consequences of closed-down or relocated waterfront related industry and shipping facilities. Additionally, it was noted, institutional arrangements for waterfront control were undergoing a period of strained relations arising not least from a rapidly changing cargo handling technology (e.g., containerization) that had "created major changes to the use of waterfront lands."

A few years later in 1987, the Department of Geography, University of Southampton, U.K. hosted a major academic conference on global dimensions of waterfront developments. This first academic conference to examine global dimensions of port-city relations focused on a growing obsolescence of once vibrant waterfronts as economic restructuring, new shipping technologies, and the closing down and moving out of industrial establishments took hold. Scholars from around the world presented papers on a variety of topics, including the 'drying-up' of sailor-towns as large gangs of powerful longshoremen were replaced by capital intensive equipment. These colorful, and in many cases infamous, sailor towns once provided rough and bawdy services for a

transient workforce badly in need of shore leave. In the wake of new economic realities and technological changes, however, such sailor towns were ripe for redevelopment.

Most importantly, the conference heard Brian Hoyle's presentation of a model of port-city relations during the 20th century that provided a context for understanding patterns of urbanization, such as industrialization, de-industrialization and re-development. He identified five successive stages of waterfront development: the primitive cityport, the expanding city port, industrial cityport, retreat from the waterfront, and redevelopment. According to his model, changes in patterns of economic activities and new technological developments were the primary forces that gave rise to new spatial and functional relations between the port and its city.

In the two decades since the Southampton conference, change on urban waterfronts has proliferated. There have been major development projects from Oslo to Hong Kong, from Dubai to Hamburg, from Rio de Janeiro to Vancouver, and from Shanghai to Glasgow. Not only has a spatial expansion and integration of the global economy been fundamental to these projects, but new technological developments in the form of larger ships, more accurate navigation and communication systems, as well as further refinement of inter-modal systems have also played an important role in advancing shipping operations. Many commentators have noted that developments during this period have become a hallmark of urban revitalization efforts driven by partnerships between governments and the private sector. The once intensely strained relations between port management organizations and interests representing non- industrial uses have entered a new phase. Recently literature has argued that waterfronts are being reconfigured in light of port consolidations and world trading patterns (Schubert), new tensions from post 9/11 anti-terror port security initiatives (Cowen and Bunce 2006), and the complexities associated with globalized urban spaces (Bassett 2002; Desfor and Jørgensen 2004). Port, industrial and shipping agencies have redefined relations with non-port-related interests to more readily resolve issues for determining primary land uses on the waterfront. It appears earlier battles have been largely won by proponents for residential, entertainment, leisure and mixed-used commercial developments.

Central to the most recent phase of redevelopment is an over-arching concern with globalization. We cannot begin to make sense of recent waterfront developments

without squarely focusing on the influences that this ensemble of spatialized relations has had. I contend that to understand transformations taking place in globalized urban areas, waterfronts must be considered not merely as physical spaces where land and water meet. Rather they must be regarded as spaces of relations where many economic, political and environmental influences come together in a web of intense flows and linkages. We cannot begin to make sense of the physical reality of waterfront change unless non-territorially based relationships are included in our analysis. Waterfront change is linked not only to plans formulated by partnerships of development corporations, local-state agencies and special purpose bodies, but it is also connected to myriad regulatory, economic, political and environmental systems that have little regard for administrative boundaries.

Consequently, waterfronts matter because they are so intimately involved with the multi-layered dynamics of urban change. I do not mean to essentialize urban waterfronts as places where "everything" occurs. Focusing on a microcosm can cause problems in terms of research and analysis, and I wish to avoid an understanding of urban waterfronts as static or essential spaces. Urban waterfronts are not objects of study where attention is focused solely on what occurs within the terrain of the waterfront area. Rather, they are inextricably connected with decisions and phenomena that occur at varied scales. An emphasis on the relational and fluid connections between and within scales of analysis provides a more rigorous method by which to analyze the reproduction of spatial areas. Urban waterfronts are complex spaces that, when studied with attention to broader transformative processes, allow for new insights into the production of nature, patterns of social entanglement, and political-economic configurations.

III. Port security and waterfront development

The attacks on the World Trade Centre of September 11, 2001 and the US-led response to a global 'war on terror' have had profound influences on a variety of national, international as well as urban issues. Port and waterfront developments are among the many areas that have been influenced by increasing security concerns, and have become the subject of intense investigations and policy formation. In these sensitive border areas with busy centers of economic activity, extensive international exchanges occur and

feature nodes of concentrated transportation facilities. Their simultaneous attributes as centres for wealth accumulation, high-end consumption and critical links in security operations have given rise to a number of program and investment strategies that have generated considerable tensions. Ports and waterfront developments have become sites where proponents of national security concerns must interact with economic growth interests to advance objectives that are sometimes complementary but at times conflicting.

As described by Cowen and Bunce in a recent article, port security issues raise tensions in three principal areas of port operations: economic efficiency, changing relations of power, and urban planning and design practices.

1. Economic Efficiency

The strongest conflict identified by Cowan and Bunce's research arises from incompatibilities between agencies concerned with port security and those focusing on economic growth and efficiency of port operations. Strategies for increased citizens' safety and security of commerce may not be compatible with the more immediate objectives of moving cargo and people through a port or border quickly and efficiently. Systematic inspection of containers causes delays and delays cost money, particularly within just-in-time based production systems. Neither importers nor exporters are pleased by the prospect of increased time for inspections and delays in their goods clearing port security operations.

2. Changing Power Relations

Security concerns have given rise to a reshuffling of power relations in large urban ports. While conflicting jurisdictional responsibilities in ports have been a long-term issue, recent port security concerns add new actors and increased complexity to an already existing tangle. For example, in the US, Homeland Security, the US Coast Guard and the American Association of Port Authorities have become responsible for port security and are able to exercise authority over particular port areas.

In addition to changes in particular port management arrangements, a new international regulatory regime has begun to emerge. It includes a US led initiative at the UN's International Maritime Organization that has developed standards for all ports and

ships involved with international shipping. The 2004 *International Ship and Port Facility Security Code* (ISPS) requires compliance from 55,000 ships and 20,000 ports in 152 countries. This international code calls for uniform standards for the certification of ships, the development of security plans for all ports that are based on vulnerability assessments, the designation of security officers and new labour management practices, and stricter standards for accessing and handling cargo. In addition to this effort, the US government's Customs and Border Protection Agency has its own global program, the Container Security Initiative (CSI), which includes at least 36 cites around the world. The objective of this program is to extend the US zone of security outward so that US borders are the last line of defense, not the first. Both of these programs are key aspects of in consolidating a regime of global port security.

3. Urban Planning and Design Practices

Security agencies, port operators and city planners all agree that derelict waterfront lands are bad for security and for the pursuit of urban growth strategies. Abandoned waterfront sites increase possibilities for security problems as well as providing a poor image of a city competing to attract large-scale development projects. This convergence of interests provides a basis for supporting waterfront revitalization.

Unfortunately, many such revitalization schemes, while reducing security concerns and supporting global-competition strategies, have given rise to considerable spatial exclusion. Cities are tending to create new waterfronts as centres of consumption activities where waterfront vistas are being commodified through the production of expensive condominiums, mixed-use office buildings, sailing and other recreational facilities, high-end retail outlets selling everything from replicas of little mermaids to real (?) marine treasures, and spectacular entertainment projects all designed to bring back upper-income groups to the waterfront. For example, spatial exclusion of significant sections of urban populations has arisen in many current efforts to attract the so-called creative class. There seems to be a global shortage of creative folks and many cities have devised expensive, creative and novel strategies to attract this valued-class of apparently mobile professionals. New waterfront developments, in particular, have targeted these folks with a plethora of rhetoric and images in advertising that appeal to this highly

sought after class. Creativity has become a code word for a high-income, urbanized and globally hip class. But, I believe that cities and their waterfronts need to be accessible to a diverse and wide variety of people.

IV. Waterfronts and the construction of socio-nature

The second theme concerns the ways that nature shapes and is shaped by waterfront developments. My point in this section is, essentially, that understanding waterfront development requires careful consideration of something called socio-nature. Let me explain. Urban waterfronts are places where material components of nature such as large bodies of water and land formations, and ecosystems such as woodlands and marshes, intersect with each other with great fluidity. The human manipulations of nature have not left urban waterfronts as pristine natural places, but, indeed, have heavily influenced their transformation over time.

Within this great fluidity, one of the problems of understanding waterfront development is that natural processes have become impossible to separate from human processes. Everyday we encounter vast numbers of "things" and "processes" composed of inseparable human and natural aspects. Global warming, for example, has resulted from a combination of human and non-human influences. And consideration of urban waterfronts would not be complete without including effects that rising temperatures will surely have. A more local example is land fill, a ubiquitous waterfront development process that brings together solid wastes from city developments (concrete, bricks, steel, asphalt, etc.) with bio-physical material (soil, water, flora, fauna, etc.) in a way that combines physical forces (e.g., littoral currents) and human interventions (e.g., labour organization, environmental regulations). There is little doubt that the resultant land and land forms are not outside the influences of human endeavors. Indeed, they contain highly inseparable bio-physical and human processes. It is just not possible to say where the natural or the human begin or end.

So, why is this problematic? Primarily because modern Western culture and our knowledge systems have, since the Enlightenment, largely considered nature and humans to be in separate and distinct spheres. Within our dominant knowledge system, nature is something that lives in wilderness areas. Modern conceptions of nature take out the

human. Classical scientific methods have supported this conceptualization of nature with experimental designs that do everything to remove humans. Thus, results from scientific experiments are intended to be free of human influences; they should be reproducible, objective and transcend cultural specificities.

However, recent scholarly contributions recognize the difficulties of making a separation between nature and society and have instead attempted to dismantle the long standing modernist divide that separated the human and the non-human. Critiques of this divide have come from many disciplines, and point out that nature is, in no small measure, socially constructed. Bruno Latour, a well-known French scholar and observer of scientific studies, posits that this hallmark of modernity is really a misconception, and that indeed, "We Have Never Been Modern." Noel Castree, a British geographer, notes that "the social and natural are seen to intertwine in ways that make their separation – in either thought or practice – impossible." Erik Swyngedouw, a prominent urban theorist, has suggested that we use the concept of 'socio-nature' to explain the inextricable relationship between society and nature and also to define the socio-ecological products that are created through processes in the social production of nature. Other terms that are used to describe the products of produced nature are hybrids, cyborgs, or quasi-objects (Haraway 1991; Gandy 2002; Latour 2004; Swyngedouw, 2004). All these terms denote 'things' that are constructed by assemblages of social processes with material forms of nature.

This is an important point for the analysis of urban waterfronts because waterfronts are socio-nature. Understanding the production and re-production of urban waterfronts requires us to simultaneously consider those factors which constructed the waterfront: that is, both human and non-human influences. The ways that these actors and forces come together is complex, arising not only from the difficulty of understanding bio-physical processes, (e.g., the ways bacteria breakdown contaminated soils), but also from the multiple scales that must be considered, (e.g., the growth of viruses at the cell level, global climate change, immigration controls, investment flows, tax incentives, environmental regulation, etc.). Additionally, socio-nature is neither fixed nor static but rather is continually being re-made. Why is this so? Because socio-nature is, to a

significant extent, socially-constructed. As such, it is highly dependent on particular moments in time or historical conjunctions that are continually changing.

The historical development of urban waterfronts has shown the intricacies of the inter-relationship between society and nature, and how socio-nature is constantly reproduced through social processes. Socio-nature is an integral component of the history of economic production on urban waterfronts. For example, during the development of mercantilist colonial cities, port areas—a socially produced form of socio-nature— were complex and highly political intersections between the sale of incarcerated African and indigenous slaves, the trade of natural resources, the development of trade cartels, and the institutionalization of colonial power took place. In the period of heavy industrialization in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, industrial practices were institutionalized in port, canal and railway infrastructure development as well as in land-fill procedures and the construction of factories adjacent to port sites—all of which are, again, socially produced forms of socio-nature. During this period, the construction of large urban ports with extensive docks and piers on both the eastern and western seaboards of North America assisted mass immigration processes that in turn fuelled economic production in both Canada and the United States.

In the current period, waterfronts have been reconfigured once again into new land-forms with uses such as media facilities, film production, multi-media electronics and knowledge-based industries that are more compatible with residential and leisure-based uses. In association with these economic activities, new approaches in the social production of nature have been undertaken and include: remediation of contaminated soil and ground water from earlier industrial practices, restoration of marshes, and the cleaning up of water bodies for swimming, fishing and even drinking. These approaches, while apparently less invasive than those of earlier periods of heavy industrial production remain, nevertheless, new ways by which society re-produces socio-nature.

V. Conclusion

I'll conclude my talk by presenting an urgent call to action. This call, as highlighted in the UN Environment Program's recently released *Global Environment Outlook,* arises because humanity's very survival is a stake due to declining conditions of the earth's environment. The report states that "The systematic destruction of the Earth's natural and nature-based resources has reached a point where the …viability of economies is being challenged—and where the bill we hand on to our children may prove impossible to pay." We need to act now to formulate new policy approaches that safeguard our own survival and that of future generations.

Those of us concerned with ports and waterfronts are in a position to influence these new policies because waterfront developments are the territorial wedge of competitive urban growth strategies in a global economy. We need to turn our attention to formulating policies that take into consideration the need to improve the earth's declining environment. Failure to consider climate change, water shortages, devastation of forests, and the destruction ocean resources are no longer acceptable. New policies must be based on a increased awareness and sensitivity for socio-nature relationships and include production processes that are markedly less resource intensive, buildings with reduced energy consumption profiles, industrial processes that are non-polluting, modes of transportation that are less energy intensive, and the promotion of social and environmental justice.

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