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MAIN SECTION

Rotterdam's New Waterway: The Iconification of an Infrastructure (1860-1947)

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ABSTRACT
The New Waterway (dug between 1863-1872) brought the port city region of Rotterdam unprecedented growth. Whereas it is a national engineering feat, the Waterway and its creator, Pieter Caland, were appropriated as icons of the progress of the city of Rotterdam by the start of the 20th century. In this paper, we analyze four examples of this iconification: the monument for Caland (1906), the Diorama of the Waterway for the World Expo in Antwerp (1930), and two theatrical plays (1941 and 1947) expressing the Waterway's meaning during and after the Second World War. We argue that these esthetic and public expressions are crucial elements in Rotterdam's narrative of progress, modernism, and resilience. The symbolic meaning of the New Waterway transcended even the technological significance of port-related infrastructure. In that sense, the Waterway became a convincing metaphor of hope and economic development for a port-city region.

KEYWORDS
Infrastructure; Culture; Port Cities; Urban Iconography; Port Culture

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Introduction

In 1872, the first ship passed the newly dug New Waterway near the Hook of Holland in the west of the Netherlands. Whereas this Waterway was planned in 1863 by the Dutch government as a new mouth of the transnational flow of the Rhine, by the turn of the century, the city of Rotterdam had appropriated it as an urban feat. For Rotterdam, the New Waterway not only preluded a new stage in the port city's development but also symbolized unprecedented economic growth. Reaching its 150th anniversary in 2022, this symbolic value is still strong: not only is the Waterway an economic artery with an ever-deeper draft to accommodate the newest container ships, it is also an icon of the city's success as the busiest port in Europe and of resilience in times of hardship.

We argue that these economic and cultural aspects of the Waterway are interconnected. This relationship between global trade and local urban culture is not unique for Rotterdam, and has gained attention from scholars in both the fields of history and social studies. Port cities in particular are what global historians Middell and Naumann call "portals of globalization:" «…places that have been centers of world trade or global communication [and] have served as entrance points for cultural transfer.»[1] The idea that this global connectedness has been affecting urban values and culture, is among others developed by sociologist Jerome Hodos. In his book on second-tier global cities, he attributes a stronger identification with global culture to these second cities than to their nation's capital counterparts: expressing their global connectedness is a way to compete with cities that are economically more diverse and politically more powerful.[2] Expressions of this global connectedness can be, according to social-historian Robert Lee, a "merchant ideology" in which independence, hard work, and an entrepreneurial spirit are highly valued, and artifacts, such as architecture, literature and (applied) works of art.[3]

This reciprocal process of shaping a culture can be captured by the concept of a 'social imaginary', in the words of philosopher Charles Taylor: «…the ways people imagine their social existence (…) the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations (…) it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society».[4] In other words: the social imagination of

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1 Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, "Global History and the Spatial Turn: From the Impact of Area Studies to the Study of Critical Junctures of Globalization," *Journal of Global History* 5, no. 1 (March 2010): 149–70, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022809990362.

2 Jerome I. Hodos, *Second Cities: Globalization and Local Politics in Manchester and Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

3 Robert Lee, "The Socio-Economic and Demographic Characteristics of Port Cities: A Typology for Comparative Analysis?," *Urban History* 25, no. 2 (August 1998): 147–72, https://doi.org/10.1017/S096392680000078X.

4 The social imaginary had its roots in French mid-century philosophy, but was theorized for social sciences by among others C. Castoriadis (1975) and C. Taylor (2002). Quote from Charles Taylor, "Modern Social Imaginaries," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (January 2002): 91–124, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-1-91.

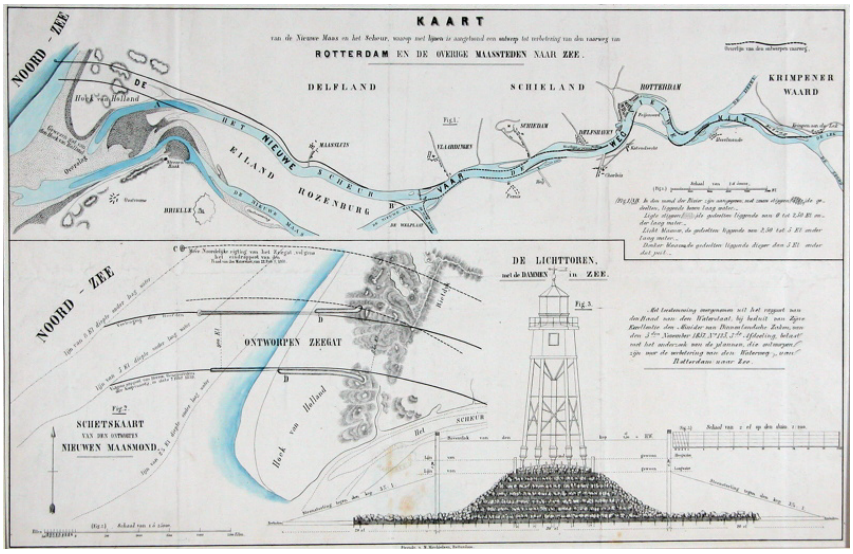

FIG. 1 Map from a report of the Department of the Interior, 5 November 1857, of the plans for the waterway from Rotterdam to the sea. City Archives Rotterdam, VI-26.

a certain group or era often takes shape in practices, policies, and the processes of sensemaking that accompany them. These practices can be as tangible as works of art of architecture, argues Maria Kaika: they are "icons" of the imaginary.[5] Icons, in this case, possess certain symbolic or aesthetic features recognizable to the general public and mediate the values underlying social narratives or the social imaginary. Sociologist Maciej Kowalewski underlines this idea in connection to port cities, in a paper in which he specifies the importance of iconographic representations of port cities and their often-mythical nature, expressing the man-made power over nature.[6]

Context: reframing the history of the New Waterway

It is generally agreed upon that the construction of the New Waterway has been the most important condition for the development of the transit port city of Rotterdam. However, the primary goal of the national initiative of the New Waterway, decided upon by national law in 1863 and engineered by engineer and national civil servant Pieter Caland (1826-1902), was not to offer shipping traffic better access to the port city of Rotterdam. Initially, it was proposed to improve Rhine navigation and water flow towards the North Sea **[Fig. 1]**. This example of transnational water management, endorsed by the Central Rhine Commission, coincided with an upcoming shipping regime, dominated by new steam shipping technologies, new transatlantic crossings, and imperial competition between the

5 Maria Kaika, "Autistic Architecture: The Fall of the Icon and the Rise of the Serial Object of Architecture," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 6 (December 2011): 968–92, https://doi.org/10.1068/d16110.

6 Maciej Kowalewski, "Images and Spaces of Port Cities in Transition," *Space and Culture* 24, no. 1 (2018): 53–65, https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331218783940.

major European powers. The industrialization of maritime activities, which accelerated after the construction started on the Suez Canal in 1859 (and opened in 1869), introduced a new stage in port development as well.[7]

Rotterdam was the second merchant city of the Netherlands and governed by a network of transnationally oriented entrepreneurs. It was not, however, to be expected that the city would benefit from these developments around 1850. Shipowner J. Hudig described the governance network of Rotterdam merchants as quite conservative: «One worked hard but in one direction, and, because this direction had been successful, one did not care about novelties.»[8] With these novelties, he meant steam over sail shipping and the possibility of a breakthrough at Hoek van Holland which had been discussed ever since engineer Pieter Caland presented his plans in 1858.[9] While a part of the merchant elite was afraid that new developments would jeopardize their positions, some of them were quick to embrace the opportunities a new waterway would offer. This was not, however, necessarily due to their innovative mindset, but because they realized that their traditional maritime trade methods would benefit from this new seaway as well.

The potential for the port city of Rotterdam could only be met if its port infrastructure would be modernized. New harbor facilities such as wharves, docks, and advanced cargo handling installations were needed to accommodate new transit functions. Much as other ports worldwide, Rotterdam had to adapt its maritime infrastructures to integrate them into a new global network. The national discourse on the New Waterway, therefore, introduced a new perspective for local stakeholders to push for Rotterdam's future. A new generation of port entrepreneurs came to the forefront and used their national and transnational networks to push Rotterdam's new infrastructure agenda.

On the national level, however, Rotterdam still faced competition with the nation's capital and foremost merchant city, Amsterdam, and the city of Vlissingen in the southern province of Zeeland. Amsterdam had a historic head start, using the Golden Age of the seventeenth century as the main narrative for ensuring its dominant status in a new shipping era. Around 1860, moreover, it was less evident that Rotterdam and not Vlissingen would be the ideal center of transit, as long as rail transport was preferred

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7 For references on port development and the spatial consequences of these developments, see for instance Carola Hein, "The Port Cityscape: Spatial and Institutional Approaches to Port City Relationships," *PORTUSplus* 8 (2019), https://portusplus.org/index.php/pp/article/view/190; Josef Konvitz, "Contemporary Urban History: What the Study of Port Cities Implies for Evidence, Methodology, and Conceptualization," *Journal of Urban History* 39, no. 4 (2013): 801–6, https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144212470248; Dirk Schubert, "Ports and Urban Waterfronts," in *The Routledge Handbook of Planning History*, ed. Carola Hein (New York: Routledge, 2018), 338–49.

8 Jan Hudig, "In memoriam L. Pincoffs," in *Rotterdamsch Jaarboekje*, vol. 10, 1 (Rotterdam: P.M. Bazendijk, 1912), 175–85.

9 Johan Ringers, *Caland en de betekenis van zijn werk voor Rotterdam* (Rotterdam: Ad. Donker, 1953), https://repository.tudelft.nl/islandora/object/uuid%3A5afd7e94-73eb-4046-8e94-41f0e2ce3e67.

above Rhine shipping. Only after 1890, when Rhine navigation had finally replaced rail as the main transport unit for bulk goods, the New Waterway became a reliable seaway.[10]

The ambitious Rotterdam elite wanted to dethrone Amsterdam as the commercial center of the Netherlands, an ambition that was rooted in the eighteenth-century rivalry between both cities. Eighteenth-century Rotterdam had never been a serious threat to Amsterdam's domination. However, with the industrial development of the Ruhr area in the nineteenth century changing the hinterland, tables had turned. For the first time in its history, the Amsterdam commercial elite feared the ambitions of a Rotterdam merchant elite, as documented by travelers who visited both cities.[11] The New Waterway became the test case for new Dutch urban rivalries under new global conditions, shaped by new maritime industrial networks and major European powers. The rhetoric that was used in the discussions in both chambers of the national House of Representatives enlarged the differences, especially between Amsterdam and Rotterdam: according to representatives from the Rotterdam region, Amsterdam was illegitimately favored as the first city and Rotterdam, being the city of 'independent merchants' and 'hard workers', was left to its own devices. This context, in which both the New Waterway and Rotterdam's subsequent success were not self-evident, was even more reason for the Rotterdam merchant elite to glean a sense of pride from the New Waterway.

Four iconic representations of the New Waterway

Despite the hesitancy of the Rotterdam elites, the New Waterway became an important object of visual representation of Rotterdam's successes as a modern world port, in particular at the turn of the twentieth century. To make sense of this new era of success and progress, the city sought new representations: icons of a new imaginary taking shape. We analyze four iconic examples of this representation. The monument for Pieter Caland (1906) exemplified the successful transition of the old merchant town into the modern working city of the Netherlands. It was a monument for the people of Rotterdam, and its location in the city center connected the wealth of the port conclusively to the city. The Diorama of the New Waterway by Jaap Gidding (1930) accentuated Rotterdam's future in a European context, in which port cities like Antwerp and Hamburg were caught in fierce competition to determine which of them would be the first on the European continent. Lastly, two theatrical expressions (1941 and 1947) symbolize Rotterdam's narrative of resilience after the atrocities of

10 Paul van de Laar and Kim Zweerink, "De randstad: een vreemde metropool," *Holland : historisch tijdschrift*, no. 3 (2009): 187–206.

11 Paul van de Laar, *Stad van formaat: geschiedenis van Rotterdam in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2000).

World War II, in the context of a social-democratic emancipatory movement led by a progressive elite of business leaders.[12]

The Caland Monument (1907)

Although the New Waterway did not get the desired draft until 1909, shipping and trade grew at an unprecedented speed. The time of transport between the port of Rotterdam and the Ruhr area decreased from several months pre-steam, to 48 hours with a steam vessel through the New Waterway.[13] It catalyzed the potential that the city already had. Whereas Rotterdam's governance elite first was hesitant, in the first decades of the twentieth century, the elite embraced the Waterway unequivocally as part of the city's identity.

One of the main steps towards this appropriation of the New Waterway as an icon for the city was the revaluation of Pieter Caland. In 1874, the Dutch Steam Company NASM had already named one of its first ships the P. Caland.[14] Caland's death in 1902 was reported modestly in the national newspapers, but planted a seed in the mind of mayor s'Jacob. At his farewell from his post, a newspaper article noted that s'Jacob attributed the «the efflorescence of Rotterdam to the outstanding Waterway» and proposed to honor the designer of that Waterway with a memorial.[15] To this end, he wanted to use the money that was granted to him by the bourgeoisie, celebrating the end of his term as mayor. Indeed, Rotterdam owed a lot to Caland and the large transit ports would never have been developed without the quick dispatches the New Waterway had made possible. The New Waterway, however, remained a national project. Between 1863 and 1912 Rotterdam had only paid 5 percent of the total investments of around 40 million guilders.[16] Nevertheless, the local business community claimed Caland as a local hero, one of the key players of the successful port narrative.

Initially, the statue was planned to stand «amidst busy shipping movements» on the Prinsenhoofd, part of an island in the Nieuwe Maas.[17] In 1907, the monument for Caland was unveiled, albeit in a different location: on the new Coolsingel boulevard right in the center of Rotterdam. The Coolsingel was the new representative center of the city of Rotterdam and

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12 See, for example, Hilde Sennema, "Voor stad en haven: Jan Backx en de wederopbouw van Rotterdam," in *Rotterdams Jaarboekje* (Rotterdam: Historische Publicaties Roterodamum, 2016), 248–71.

13 Auke van der Woud, *Een nieuwe wereld: het ontstaan van het moderne Nederland* (Amsterdam: B. Bakker, 2006), 236.

14 Len de Klerk, *Frédéric en Antoine Plate 1802-1927: Rotterdamse kooplieden, reders en bestuurders* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren BV, 2019), 144–45.

15 "Installatie van Mr. A.R. Zimmerman als burgemeester van Rotterdam," *Algemeen Handelsblad*, May 2, 1906.

16 "Overzicht van de ontwikkeling van de nieuwe waterweg 1858-1958," *Stadsarchief Rotterdam*, No. XVIIIE65 1958.

17 "Installatie"

FIG. 2 Porcelain plate showing two monuments: Caland's and Flour Mill The Hope, on the Coolsingel. Collection: Museum Rotterdam, 7130.

FIG. 3 Glass slide, ca 1920, showing the obelisk with the statue on top of it. City Archives Rotterdam, Collection BKOR.

fitted in the new mayor Zimmerman's large-scale ambitions for Rotterdam as a world port with a modern urban image. By the time the monument was placed, however, it was still a relatively modest street, and together with *Molen de Hoop*, a large flour mill, the monument was the eyecatcher on the new boulevard [Figs. 2-3].

The monument was designed by architect H.J. Evers and applied artist A. Odé, and appears rather eclectic: it consists of an architectural fountain

base and an obelisk, which is adorned with both classical and stylized decorations. The four sides of the obelisk contain texts and images, evoking the sea and the heraldry of the city of Rotterdam, the province of Zuid-Holland, and the Netherlands. When viewing the whole, it immediately strikes that the monument is only partly about Caland: at the base of the obelisk is a copper plaque with an *en profil* relief of Caland's face, surrounded by a laurel in stone. Above this profile is Caland's family weapon with its motto *stella duce*, a Christian maritime reference to the guiding star of Bethlehem.

A winged female figure on top of the obelisk catches the eye. In her right hand, she holds a *caduceus*, the attribute of the Greek god Hermes and the Roman god Mercury, consisting of two snakes intertwined around a staff, with wings on top, symbolizing trade and commerce. Despite the prominent placing of Caland's profile, it is rather small in the context of the whole statue. The texts on the sides, moreover, emphasize the national law and the urban importance of the New Waterway, suggesting that the monument is as much a tribute to the man as to his work, and to the meaning the Waterway had as a catalyst for Rotterdam's wealth.

The statue did not conjure much awe within the local population. A song from 1911 suggested that, despite the monument, Caland was not much revered. In the song, when a police officer is asked who Caland was, he answers: «One doesn't care about Caland, it's none of my business. Caland is a monument, on the Caland Square, in a stone bowl of water on top of a fountain.»[18] At the end of the 1930s, Caland's monument was displaced for a major infrastructural transformation. The replacement of the monument kickstarted a discussion in the press on the meaning of this monument. A hero like Caland – was the general opinion – deserved a better location, preferable at the entrance of the Waalhaven, then the biggest traffic bulk dock of the world. The local Catholic newspaper disregarded this idea: the monument was too urban, not even capable for shipping crews to "attach a cable to it».[19]

1930: The Gidding Diorama at the World Expo in Antwerp

Whereas the Caland monument was still a traditional edifice, the 1920s saw a new appreciation of the New Waterway as the catalyst of the new social imaginary. Modernist artists created new imaginaries of the city from the 1920s onwards: in avant-garde film and photography, atonal music of the modern city symphony and experimental literature. Ben

18 "…Als je vraagt wie Caland was, Zegt de goede man: "Caland regardeert men niet, Dat gaat mij niet an. Caland is een monument, Op het Calandplein, In een waterkom van steen, Boven een fontein!'" J.H. Speenhof, *De Diender van Het Calandmonument*, 1911. Accessed June 9, 2021, https://seniorplaza.nl/liedjes/de-diender-van-het-calandmonument/.

19 "Over Monumenten En Standbeelden," *De Maasbode*, December 4, 1938.

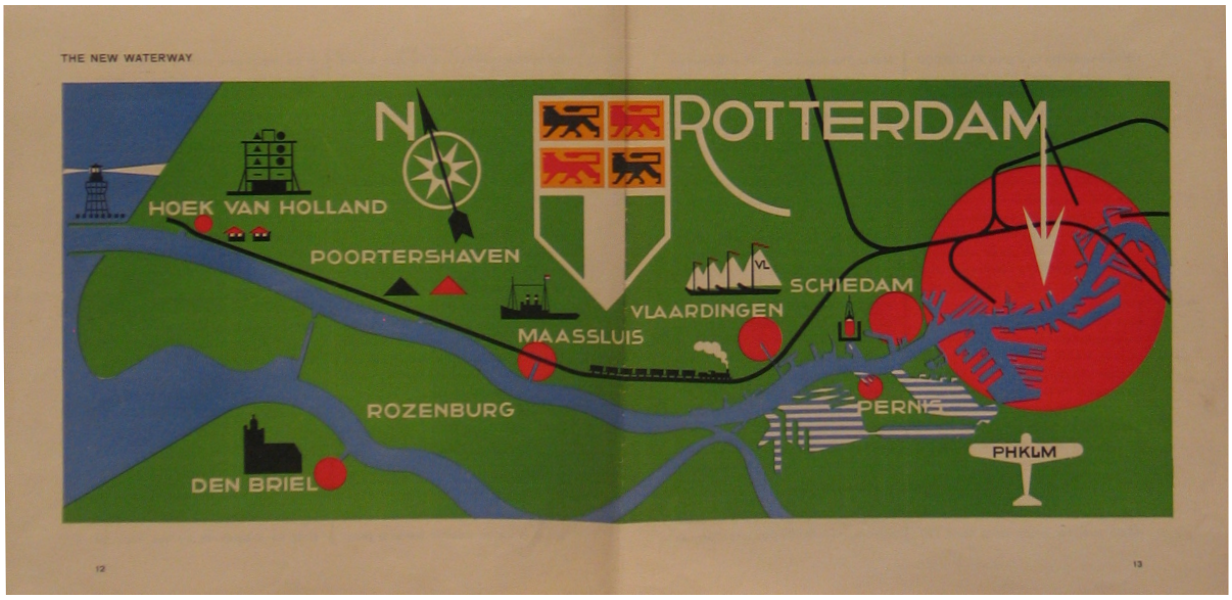

FIG. 4 N.P. de Koo, «The New Waterway», collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1929. TYP 10124 (1).

Stroman's novel Stad (City), for example, explored a new modernist prose. These expressions framed Rotterdam as the city of modern large-scale port activities, where grain elevators and loading bridges for coal and ore transhipment symbolized an era of new port technologies and innovations. These modern imaginaries not only became apparent in artistic expressions, but in applied art as well: increasingly brochures of firms, the municipality, the Chamber of Commerce, and the new port city institutions that were established in the early 1930s all carried the distinct visual language of the new era. Alongside new imagery inspired by the industriousness and modernity of the port, writers and architects were explicitly experimenting with design concepts from the United States, such as skyscrapers.

Besides these futurist images, the economic success of the Waterway emphasized the historic connection of the city to the water. That this new imaginary was already rooted in society, is illustrated by the children's history book *Van Visschersdorp tot Wereldstad* (from fisherman's town to global city), by the historian J.M. Droogendijk. He frames the New Waterway as an object that helped Rotterdam regain its wealth after the French domination in the nineteenth century and honors the plans by Caland. He states that without the Waterway, the «thousands and thousands, who made a living in or near the port, would have had to look out for different employment.»[20]

An example of how the historic connection to the water was visualized in the modernist port city promotional materials was the work of artist J. Thorn Prikker. His contribution to a contest for murals in the newly built City Hall in 1917 depicted the strong connection between port and city

20 Jan Marie Droogendijk, *Van visschersdorp tot wereldstad: het 600-jarig bestaan der stad Rotterdam herdacht* (Rotterdam: J.M. Bredée's U.M, 1928).

through the water. Thorn Prikker described these works himself, lending a mythical connotation: «Rotterdam has grown out of light and water.»[21] A more practical representation of this link is a brochure designed by graphic designer N.P. de Koo in 1929, in which he depicts the growth of the New Waterway since its inception in 1872 [Fig. 4]. While a map shows the whole surrounding area of the Waterway, including Vlaardingen and Maassluis, the imagery is explicitly linked to the city of Rotterdam, even depicting the city's coat of arms.

It was the time that the world, specifically the world of global trade, was shaken by the Wall Street crash of 1929 and the subsequent financial and economic crisis. Rotterdam suffered heavily, which came as no surprise to some: already in the 1920s, several economists addressed the vulnerable position of the port city of Rotterdam that almost entirely relied on its vast hinterland, and much less on the industry. What was necessary, they argued, was to modernize general cargo handling and industrial development, but they also pleaded for modernization of government, a stronger urban industry, and the marketing of Rotterdam as an important global seaport.[22]

This marketing argument was central to the decision of the Rotterdam authorities to take part in the World Exhibition in Antwerp in April 1930. The decision came rather late, on November 24th, 1929, when Amsterdam and Vlissingen had already agreed to take part. The argument was that the city council deemed it «…necessary to draw attention to Rotterdam, as one of the pre-eminent port cities on the continent», and was willing to spend 69.000 guilders on the decoration of a pavilion.[23]

The Waterway was the centerpiece of the pavilion of Rotterdam, which was the effort of a committee that consisted of representatives from both local authorities and businesses.[24] The pavilion became the business card of Rotterdam, outperforming its closest competitors Amsterdam and Antwerp. The Rotterdam part showcased 3.000 ship models, and a decorative frieze, *Achterland*, an elegant transnational figuration of Rotterdam's connected cities on the Rhine, in combination with a silver diorama of the New Waterway, both made by decorative painter Jaap Gidding (1887-1955). It was probably laid down in a basement-like structure, 22 meters long, so the visitors had to look at the diorama from a height of about 3,5

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21 Paul van de Laar, *Coolsingel: 700 jaar Rotterdammers en hun stad* (Amsterdam: Bas Lubberhuizen, 2017), 109.

22 Johannes Philippus Backx, *De haven van Rotterdam: onderzoek naar de oorzaken van haar economische betekenis in vergelijking met Hamburg en Antwerpen* (Rotterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditmar, 1929); Johannes Philippus Backx, "Commercieel havenbeheer," in *Beschouwingen over de haven van Rotterdam : zes lezingen gehouden voor het Departement Rotterdam van de Nederlandsche Maatschappij voor Nijverheid en Handel in den winter 1931-1932* (Rotterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditmar, 1932), 23–50.

23 "De Wereldtentoonstelling Te Antwerpen. De Deelneming van Rotterdam," *Tilburgsche Courant*, November 25, 1929.

24 Stadsarchief Rotterdam, 271-01: Archieven van de firma Hudig en Blokhuyzen, vanaf 1903 Hudig & Veder N.V. te Rotterdam en van dochtermaatschappijen.

FIG. 5 Diorama Nieuwe Waterweg: mural with overview of the Waterway area with the port of Rotterdam. Bird's eye view from the South. Collection: Museum Rotterdam, 78609, CC BY-SA 3.0 NL.

meters. Because aerial photography was already invented, his bird's eye view perspective is quite common in the imagery of port cities, for example in postcards. It showcases the New Waterway in silver tones, emphasizing the vast area that the port of Rotterdam contains **[Fig. 5]**.

This growing interest in the Waterway as a symbol of Rotterdam's ambitions led to new links between the history of the city of Rotterdam and the history of the Waterway. A key figure was entrepreneur and president of the Chamber of Commerce W.A. Engelbrecht, who was a mapping enthusiast in his spare time. For the city yearbook of 1934, he wrote a history of the mouth at Hoek van Holland, in which he states that for at least 'two hundred centuries' there had been a flow of sweet into the saltwater marshes to the west of Rotterdam.[25] A year later, Engelbrecht used the narrative of the supposed millennial river mouth in his effort to ask for national help during the Great Depression. Here, the independence of Rotterdam as a port city clashed with the realization that Rotterdam would not be able to face the crisis alone. Engelbrecht emphasized this point in a speech for the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the first spadework for the New Waterway.[26] The anniversary represented the heroic story of the Waterway to historically mirror a resilient port city, while also insisting on national investments in the port to counter the effects of the Great Depression.

According to Engelbrecht, the meaning of the New Waterway for the city was in the first place a «…strengthening of civic power and confidence in times of adversity, moreover, an ever more deeply rooted awareness of the tight bond of our port city with our country in its global relations.»[27] Explicitly, Engelbrecht turned the narrative towards local actors and their agency. He even connected Caland's insightfulness to Rotterdam's trade mentality: «…especially this instinctive conviction of how to think of a good solution to a difficult problem, is so well developed in a trade city, in which

25 Willem Anton Engelbrecht, "Het ontstaan van den Hoek van Holland," in *Rotterdams Jaarboekje*, vol. 2, 4 (Rotterdam: W.L. & J. Brusse, 1934), 55–64.

26 Willem Anton Engelbrecht, *Rede ter gelegenheid van den aanvang van het werk* (Rotterdam: Kamer van Koophandel en Fabrieken, 1936), 9.

27 Ibid., 3.

the whole bourgeoisie has a deep awareness of the foundations on which its existence and development rest.»[28]

This rationale, along with the rapid development of modern port infrastructures, paved the way for the modernization of the city and had a major effect on urban planning during the interwar period. This did not stop at the borders of the port city of Rotterdam. Underlining the narrative that Rotterdam was the 'working horse' of the Dutch economy, local elites pushed the national government to support regional developments. The diorama of Gidding, therefore, was the iconic representation of Rotterdam's ambitions on the global stage.

The New Waterway as a symbol of wartime and post-war resilience (1941, 1947)

During and after the Second World War, the iconification and appropriation of the New Waterway went even further. While port entrepreneurs and prominent businessmen put their imprint on the reconstruction of the port city during and after the war, they were also involved in the cultural reconstruction of the port city. Books, artworks in the public space, and various theatre plays were made to commemorate the bombings and to boost the morale of citizens in the arduous (post-)war era.

By this time, the Waterway had become a self-evident part of the narrative of the city. Building on the discourse of resilience that was used in the 1930s, the Waterway was considered to be both the icon of resilience and the agent to recover from attacks, suppression, and the consequent economic downturn. Whereas most books on the war and the liberation have the city itself as the main topic, two plays that were produced during and right after the war are specifically about the New Waterway and mention it, implicitly or explicitly, in their title: *De Weg naar Zee* (the way to sea) in 1941, and 'De Waterweg Heroverd (the Waterway reconquered) in 1947.

De Weg naar Zee was written by journalist and novelist Herman Besselaar, a contemporary and friend of the aforementioned avant-garde writer Ben Stroman.[29] The play starts on the beach of Hoek van Holland in 1866, with a prophecy by Neptune who tells a beach scavenger (*strandjutter*) that grand things are about to happen. The scavenger is sceptical: «Concoctions from the city, a new waterway.» Neptune answers that this plan «…by Rotterdam is not so bad. I have to say: I love Rotterdam… it is a feisty city.»[30]

In a later dialogue, scavenger Storm and a helmsman named Stoer (literally: sturdy, stalwart), discuss the plans for a Waterway:

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28 Ibid., 8.

29 "Censuur," in *Rotterdamsch Jaarboekje*, vol. 3, 5 (Rotterdam: W.L. & J. Brusse, 1945), 219–21.

30 Herman Besselaar, "De weg naar zee," *Stadsarchief Rotterdam*, 1941.

> Stoer: «…Rotterdam has to live, my dear man. A new waterway is necessary. (…) The sluices are too narrow, it's all too slow.»-Storm: «Why so fast, why so impatient? Is eighteen hours of travel so excessive?»Stoer: «It is. It could be a fifth. What Caland, the great engineer, wants, is a short, free waterway, that connects Rotterdam to the open sea. One straight line. The Maas mouth is clotted, the spade has to go in the sand, for the benefit of Rotterdam and our Fatherland (…).»

A group of students of the nautical school agrees and chants: «Hip hip hurray for Caland!»[31]

A young lady, Amalia Maas, from the city, personifies the city, as a cast description indicates: «resolute, open-minded and practical.» She is consequently referred to as «juffer Maas», young lady Maas. Up until the third act, however, Storm is unconvinced about the urban "conceitedness" of digging a new waterway. Even at a festive event, celebrating the first spade, he urges his son (who has come to love the city and its inhabitants) to stay away. The son, however, answers: «Without shipping no trade, and without trade no Holland, father! Not only Rotterdam, but the whole nation awaits the new waterway. Once it has been dug, a heyday will come like never before!»

The play is concluded by yet another contemplation by Neptune: «The way to sea… no, no, it is no vain illusion of Rotterdam; it is its future, its mere existence. (…) She will yet again become a city on the sea, and see to all horizons, to the farthest places on earth.» This hopeful note explicitly drew a paralleled resilience between the start of the New Waterway in 1868 and war-torn Rotterdam in 1941.

This parallel was also evident in the 1947 play *De Waterweg Heroverd*, [Fig. 6] although it took an entirely different approach. It was staged in the football stadium of Feyenoord, on the south bank of the Maas, and emphasized events during the war: the battle to capture the bridges, the capitulation of the city to the Nazis, razzias (for which, eerily, the same stadium was used) and the eventual liberation. Instead of a small-scale historical play that was heavy on parallels, this play was a very literal depiction of what had happened, including planes flying over the stadium to depict the bombing. Here, the Waterway serves as a metaphor that transcends Rotterdam during wartime, and comes to stand for freedom and free trade.

Compared to traditional parades that were held during this era, for instance in Britain where the tradition of historical pageantry was used as part of a local remembrance culture with a strong sense of nostalgia,

31 Ibid., 5.

FIG. 6 Cover of the programme booklet of *The Waterway Reconquered*. Scan by Albert Koevoet, CC BY-NC 2.0, https://flic.kr/p/5zSDrm.

the stage setting in Rotterdam was different.[32] Rotterdam post-war celebrations were part of a narrative of progress rather than of remembrance of old glories: they were cultural productions in service of the new welfare city, expressing a local vibrancy for a new future. Historical developments were used to showcase the resilience of the working classes.

Conclusion

The New Waterway was not only a national plan that pushed Rotterdam into a new era of technological progress and economic efflorescence, it also gave the city a new identity. It illustrates one of the key values of

32 See for instance Tom Hulme, "'A Nation of Town Criers': Civic Publicity and Historical Pageantry in Inter-War Britain," *Urban History* 44, no. 2 (2017): 270–92, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926816000262.

port cities according to Kowalewski: their man-made power over nature. The New Waterway illustrates this, and furthermore shows that culture in port cities often involves infrastructures and work-related objects being reappropriated into cultural icons, thus creating a distinct sort of port city culture.

The cultural meaning of an infrastructure such as the New Waterway was especially linked to the development of the port city as a hybrid, that was connected to the global market and yet of vital importance to the national economy. It spurred local actors to urge the national government to invest in the port. Its role as a sense-making vehicle in the case of contingencies and external events sometimes even took on mythical proportions: all four cases showed aspects of the New Waterway acting as a founding myth of the modern port city of Rotterdam.

Different levels of governance were actively involved with these narratives and subsequent policies, using it both as a vehicle of sense-making of external events and as the catalyst for wealth. We can therefore consider the Waterway as an important aspect in initiating and instituting a new social imaginary for Rotterdam, but also to maintain it. The story of the Waterway underlined the importance of investing in modern infrastructure in times of crisis, to boost morale, to justify growth-oriented policies, and to convince policymakers to invest in infrastructure, and does so up until this day.

Further research can explicate the values that were needed to maintain this imaginary, and to see to which extent they were exclusive for the elites in power or collectively shared. This rings especially true in the subsequent period, in which the narrative of progress was questioned, and the New Waterway became a symbol of polluting industries. A cultural example is the children's book *Kinderen van de Waterweg* from 1971, in which children growing up near the Waterway get sick and protest the increasing pollution near their houses.

This counter-narrative, however, never gained the status of a full-fledged counterpart to the mythical narrative of progress which is still going strong. In October 2016, 150 years after prince Willem of Orange dug the first, mayor of Rotterdam Ahmed Aboutaleb opened an exhibition about the «artery of the Netherlands.» Whether it is the first plan of engineer Caland in 1858, the anniversary of the signing of the law for the New Waterway in 1863, the first spade in 1866, or the first ship that entered in 1872: the port city keeps celebrating its founding infrastructure. Yet again in 2022, we may expect that the Port Authority of Rotterdam and other local stakeholders will use anniversary celebrations to strengthen the social imaginary of a port city region being able to maintain its position as the busiest port of Europe.

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