A city is a spatial and an economic reality, but also something more esoteric: an agglomeration of values, of mentalities – even of spirituality. Joel Kotkin has stated that great cities foster three elements: personal safety, economic possibilities and sacredness. In port-cities, it is shipping that taints this sacredness and gives port-cities their special nature: more entrepreneurial, cosmopolitan and free-minded.

The port links the city to a larger context. "*The unknown streets bear the names of rivers and of countries*" ... is one of the lines of the Flemish poet Paul van Ostaijen. The traditional port-city is open and cosmopolitan. She is the world in a city. In "Wanderlight" a novel by Willem Elschot, another Flemish writer, the main character wanders through the city of Antwerp with three Afghan sailors, looking for a mysterious woman. They never find the woman, but the connection with the exotic is made. The port-city brings in new faces, new ideas and new activity.

The port-city is dynamic, a place of trades, a place that knows no fatigue. It is no coincidence that almost none of the large world port-cities is the seat of a national government. Think of fiercest rivalries in soccer: often between nation's capital and the nation's main port. Real Madrid and FC Barcelona; Paris Saint Germain and Olympique Marseille.

The port-city is not elegant; quite the contrary: she shows the essence of the real, rough life. Countless are the cultural references to crime, murder and all kind of murky businesses in ports. The older generations will remember Marlon Brando in the Waterfront; the millennials are more likely to bring up The Wire, Season 2.

In many cities it is also the maritime heritage that provides the most visible and durable link with past generations – docks, ships, shipyards, their workers, their stories, their histories; this sacred link between generations that provides the identity of the place.

Modern ports have complicated this spirituality. At the core of this is the fundamental difference between urban agglomeration effects and the port-industrial

logic: an open and closed system.

One of the big advantages of being in a city is agglomeration. The agglomeration of people leads to larger pools of workers, of consumers, of amenities. That is why you will find specialised lawyers and well-sorted antique bookshops in cities, but not in the countryside. And there are plenty of bars and coffee ships: the person drinking a *café latte* sitting next to you could be the person giving you a valuable piece of information, a connection to a new network – or even a new idea. And these new ideas could be the drivers of urban innovation and activity. The better a city is at attracting people with new ideas, or creating opportunities for them to meet by accident, the more new ideas it will generate – and the more prosperity. This is in essence what urban thinkers such as Jane Jacobs postulated, popularised by Richard Florida with his books on the creative class in cities.

Now, the logic of modern port is completely different. In ports, there are also cluster effects, but these are more selective. There are barriers to access, the port is closed and clustering of people is a concern rather than a source of prosperity. For the newer generations, it is difficult to imagine that ports were once lively city areas where one could be *sitting at the dock of the bay, watching the ships roll in*, as Otis Redding has it. Those times are gone. Modern cargo ports are now closed-off areas, club goods, only open to members of the club, who have invested heavily in physical capital and local real estate. The reason for clustering is minimising transport and transaction costs between firms. Knowledge spillovers are to be avoided, as that would mean loss of competitive advantage to their industrial rivals. This is especially the case for ports with large industrial areas.

The main challenge for many port-cities is to square these two logics – urban agglomeration and port-industrial club goods. This is partly an economic issue. A trade and services cluster can be combined with a waterfront economy, because these could provide urban amenities that make the city more attractive. A large port-industrial areas could be considered largely incompatible with these other two sectors: the creative class might want to live in a reconverted warehouse, appreciate the local fish market and even the maritime museum, but generally does not appreciate the fumes of a series of oil refineries – or the fumes of big cargo

ships, for that matter.

There is a spiritual dimension to this. The closeness of modern ports means that the city is less likely to sustain the maritime and trade-related values that made it special in the first place. This dynamic is ongoing in many port-cities, but unfortunately not very often acknowledged.

Head image: The APM terminal on Maasvlakte II, Rotterdam.