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# Asma Mehan about PortCityFutures, anthropology and Leiden

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Port cities are internationally connected. Decisions and changes occurring in one city have a direct impact on port cities in other parts of the world. Studying these areas provides insight into social and spatial processes in which local communities and urban development are interconnected with global processes. The PortCityFutures project researches various themes within port and urban areas. Asma Mehan is one of the researchers involved in this project since June 2020 and works at CADS. What exactly is PCF and why is research in port areas important? An introduction to Asma Mehan and PCF.

Mehan was born and raised in Tehran, Iran. She is trained as an architect and an urban historian. She conducted research in Tehran, Isfahan, Abu Dhabi, Istanbul, Dubai, Torino, Porto, Kuala Lumpur, Berlin, and Detroit. She also worked in Italy, where she was affiliated with the Politecnico di Torino, and in Portugal with the University of Porto. She has been living in Leiden since June. "I love Leiden. It's a small city but at the same time, I'm super close to everything. If I want the big city vibe, I can go to Amsterdam or The Hague. That's a new world for me, being so close to everything. I'm used to chaotic mega cities, like Teheran.

During the day there are 16 million people. So, Leiden seems very relaxed and has a nice atmosphere.” She also enjoys living with the other postdocs on campus. “It’s a weird time to move to a new place, but my neighbours helped me a lot. It’s like a little community where I felt at home very fast.



Asma Mehan

## PortCityFutures Project

The PortCityFutures project is part of LDE, a partnership between Leiden University, Delft University of Technology, and Erasmus University. Within PCF, researchers from different disciplines from these three universities try to develop a common dialogue. “It’s a young,

dynamic, and highly engaged research community. You can call PCF a roof that brings together scholars from social sciences, design, and humanities. It's a cross-disciplinary project. It aims to establish long-term methods and new prospective to connect different political, historical, social, and cultural dimensions of special use in port city regions.”

## Working with anthropologists

Mehan finds the interdisciplinary aspect of the research group very interesting. She works with professors from different disciplines: anthropology, sociology, spatial design, planning history, architecture and the broader humanities. Mehan herself has been associated with CADS since June. “I like to work with anthropologists and I want to get more familiar with the theoretical frameworks and debates developed within the discipline.” By working together, she hopes to gain and acquire this knowledge. “It's an ongoing learning process that I enjoy. Sometimes you find very nice overlaps which opens new horizons. Maybe I can be the glue to find a dialogue between different disciplines. I enjoy that place in between different disciplines, languages, timelines, and geographies.”

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## Finding bridges between institutions

“Complex regions like port cities can't be studied alone from one discipline. You need to zoom in and zoom out from different angles.” With her interdisciplinary interests and background, Mehan hopes to contribute additional value to the project. “I try to find bridges between

institutions and global challenges. As a post-doc in the PCF group, I work with different professors in completely different areas. But to tackle a complex problem like those of the port cities, you can't just go in one direction."

### **Importance of Port City Futures: the forefront of contemporary challenges**

To indicate the importance of the research project, Mehan uses the words of Carola Hein, the research leader of PCF, and Sabine Luning, associate professor of cultural anthropology. "If something is happening in Rotterdam, it can affect the processes in other parts of the world. For example, the extraction, and the oil export/import. They are not standing alone. They are multilayered and interrelated." The same applies, for example, to climate change, cultural heritage, or immigration. These problems are not isolated. "All these debates are starting in port cities. It matters because it's at the forefront of contemporary challenges." By studying the history, transitions, and spatial transitions of port cities, we try to co-create a toolbox with which researchers in similar areas of studies in other parts of the world can use. This theoretical framework created here in South Holland can be used in port cities in Australia or Asia for example.



### **Creating a shared language**

Mehan believes it is important to develop a shared definition and perspective for port areas and the future of those cities. “Every organization, every port authority, every city has their voice now. Not an integrated one. With the PortCityFutures, we work towards an integrated voice between those disciplines. It hopefully helps to avoid situations like the recent explosion in Beirut. We want to create a MOOC (Massive Online Open Course) to educate people, like professionals, port city authorities, young academics and students. It’s all interrelated. Working with different international port organisations, UN, policymakers. They need a common language.”

*The Leiden Anthropology blog and the PortCityFutures project will jointly publish blog articles. In the past, these blogs written by [Andrew Littlejohn](https://www.leidenanthropologyblog.nl/articles/the-color-of-protection-greening-port-cities-in-an-era-of-rising-tides) (<https://www.leidenanthropologyblog.nl/articles/the-color-of-protection-greening-port-cities-in-an-era-of-rising-tides>), [Sabine Luning](https://www.leidenanthropologyblog.nl/articles/port-cities-as-hubs-of-diversity-and-inclusivity-the-case-of-rotterdam) (<https://www.leidenanthropologyblog.nl/articles/port-cities-as-hubs-of-diversity-and-inclusivity-the-case-of-rotterdam>), and [Asma Mehan](https://www.leidenanthropologyblog.nl/articles/beirut-blast-a-port-city-in-crisis) (<https://www.leidenanthropologyblog.nl/articles/beirut-blast-a-port-city-in-crisis>) for PCF were also featured on the Leiden Anthropology Blog.*



**Port City Futures (<https://www.portcityfutures.nl/home>) is an initiative of the Leiden-Delft-Erasmus collaboration. The program investigates the evolving socio-spatial conditions, use, and design of port city regions. In particular, it explores areas where port and city activities occur simultaneously and may conflict with each other.**

The initiative comprises an interdisciplinary group whose members are concerned with the social and cultural dimensions of port cities and their technological and economic development. It brings together scholars from a variety of social and technical sciences and the humanities. The resulting conversations across disciplinary boundaries are fueled by many ‘turns’ characterizing the different fields. Urban geography and planning are undergoing a ‘cultural’ turn; there is a focus on arts and cultural production to study representations of port city life, and in planning there is a recognition of how shifts in cultural values influence professional practices. By contrast anthropologists, traditionally concerned with culture, are involved in a ‘spatial’ turn. They redefine the discipline by their growing interest in how global connections relate to localized practices, rethinking urban/rural divides, concern for the shifting politics of public spaces, and research on the social and cultural politics of infrastructure as both parts of planning futures and sites of resistance.

Port cities are ideal sites to work through these and other issues. They are global hubs, challenged by social inequalities and environmental issues, which require academic attention for socio-spatial dynamics with a key role for social sciences and the humanities. Anthropologists from CADS - notably Sabine Luning, Andrew

Littlejohn and Erik de Maaker – have been involved in the PCF programme since its beginning in January 2020. The group is proud and pleased that Asma Mehan has joined PCF as a Postdoc based at CADS Institute. Together, will develop this program further, aiming at long-term institutional connections between LDE partners.