Stadtgeschichte
by Monica Neve

Besprochene Sektionen:

„Die europäisch und die amerikanische Stadt seit dem späten 19. Jahrhundert: Geschichtsbilder-Trugbilder-Leitbilder"
„Stadt und Migration. Europäische Beispiele seit dem 20. Jahrhundert"

Urban spaces have often served as the stage on which people of the past enacted their dramas, be they large or small, intimate affairs or public displays. Cities are the places in which dreams and hopes are realised or denied, leaving powerful legacies on the urban landscape. While urban space is the most commonly experienced feature of the city, it possesses different meanings and serves various purposes for the individuals engaging with it. The urban landscape is thus a space moulded according to the influences of its inhabitants. As a dynamic space, it carries the narratives and symbolic meanings of the past, present, and future. The economic, social, and cultural uses of space create a visual tapestry which can be interpreted using different analytical categories. Under the umbrella theme *Geschichtsbilder*, a selection of these interpretative possibilities was presented in the session „Die europäische und die amerikanische Stadt seit dem späten 19. Jahrhundert: Geschichtsbilder-Leitbilder-Trugbilder", which examined the production and evolution of visual images in European and North American cities and in the session entitled „Stadt und Migration. Europäische Beispiele seit dem 20. Jahrhundert".

The subject of urban planning is one which raises important issues pertaining to the access to and use of public space. The models of the European and American cities, as discussed in the first part of the session, both present a range of urban planning issues which occupy town planners, architects, and historians in particular. Environmental problems such as pollution and the distribution of resources in densely populated European cities and, on the other end of the spectrum, the increasing demand for land and need to provide sufficient facilities in the sprawling urban periphery of the American city are only a few examples of problems which continually demand new, innovative solutions. Further, the urban sprawl of the American city raises the question of how the vitality of the city centre as a dynamic focus point for all residents can be maintained. The European city, by comparison, grapples with problems relating to the livability and sustainability of highly utilised urban space.

A comparative analysis of the European and North American cities in the first session focusing on urban history provided a useful approach with which to outline two very different modes of urban development. The European and American models of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries not only reflected certain elements of each other, but also shared common approaches to urban planning or a similar starting point, only to develop certain elements differently according to the needs and desires of the society in which they were implemented. Gisela Mettele's (Washington) transatlantic comparison of the Garden City movement provided a case in point. The desire for a healthy and natural living environment provided the backdrop for the international debates about the concept of the *Gartenstadt*, or Garden City, in the late nineteenth century. On both sides of the Atlantic the idea of a 'garden city' was a vision aimed at successfully creating carefully planned, low-density urban communities combined with wedges of open space. It was a concept which represented a primarily middle-class longing for the natural environment while not wanting to relinquish the possibility of engagement with the city. A flexible, experimental space, the garden city is an example of a project in which urban space was shaped to address the longings and dreams of its inhabitants. While the garden city has sometimes been described as a banal, socially and visually monotonous space characterised by indifference and homogeneity, newer research has shown that in the search for a different lifestyle, inhabitants were highly active in planning and moulding these spaces. In the German context in particular, the garden city not only attracted a broad cross-section of the middle-class, but

was a socially and politically heterogeneous constellation. According to Mettele, the garden city was a suburban space which was not necessarily anti-urban and which certainly displayed characteristics of civil society. The suitability of the concept of civil society is itself one which needs to be critically examined and which drew criticism in the subsequent discussion. While the term has a myriad of definitions and thus runs the danger of being too unspecific and all-encompassing, the elements of collective action and shared interests contained in the idea of civil society suggest that, when defined in the context of urban space shaped by a particular type of suburban ideal, the term is a useful theoretical concept with which to address the construction of purpose-built urban spaces.

The transatlantic exchange of ideas on urban planning occurred through information collected by diplomatic, professional and government networks. As highlighted in the paper delivered by Pierre-Yves Saunier (Lyon), this dialog resulted in various forms of exchange including informal transfers, competitive mazes, and organised co-operation. Not only were ideas discussed and compared, but the exchange itself generated professions and institutions concerned with common transnational problems in the area of urban planning. Jan Behrends' (Berlin) example of the dialog between the Russian metropolis Moscow and Western Europe and America in the early twentieth century provided a particularly dramatic example of politically disparate systems engaged in transnational discourse in order to develop solutions for the rapidly expanding city of Moscow before 1917. Read by Friedrich Lenger (Gießen) due to Jan Behrends' unforeseen absence, the paper highlighted the challenge that rapid urban expansion posed to the autocratic Russian regime. Struggling with insufficient infrastructure and social problems – in particular the integration of migrants from rural regions – Russia began to look outside its boarders at solutions implemented in other countries seen to be battling with similar issues. Interesting was Behrend's outline of the Russian autocracy's comparison of its own social problems with those of the Unites

States. Large scale immigration in America was viewed as sharing parallels with the influx of migratory labourers from rural regions to Moscow. Problems such as criminality, poverty, and housing were seen by Russian observers as affecting both countries, thus making the North American city, in particular Chicago and New York, a model for Russian social reforms. However, as Behrends emphasised, the complexity of implementing US-style reforms in the tsardom should not be underestimated and raises the question of how, and to what extent, aspects of state intervention and commitment to ideas of civil society were employed in order to address the social problems of the ever-expanding Russian metropolis. Massive migration from rural to urban regions in Eastern European cities was a theme continued by Thomas Bohn (Munich/Jena) in the afternoon session focusing on the city and migration. The rapid shift from an agricultural to an industrial society resulted in the evolution of a specifically 'socialist' city. Common characteristics included the erection of monuments in public places, identical residential areas, and the migration of large populations from the surrounding rural regions. An urban environment presupposes a certain amount of knowledge necessary for life in the city. The Eastern European city thus provides a particularly interesting case study, which not only outlines the problems arising from rapid and uncontrolled urban growth, but also the difficulty of integrating of a large peasant population with little experience of urban life.

Both Saunier and Behrends' papers highlighted the way in which the transatlantic comparisons and observations of experts engaged in questions of urban planning created labels and categories used to describe the American and European cities, and how common ideas or new concepts were developed in order to manage what were considered to be mutual, transatlantic problems. In the immediate postwar period however, and despite strong American involvement in projects of European reconstruction, the stamp of US urban planning and design on the European city was not explicit. A careful second glance can nevertheless uncover more indirect US influences in the

reconstruction of cities in Europe, the topic of Axel Schild's (Hamburg) paper. The propagation of neighbourhood concepts and residential structures as well as the debate about rational construction, specifically ideas about prefabricated housing – accepted in America but viewed with scepticism in Europe – were stimulated through US involvement. As a forerunner in the area of domestic technology, the US also had an indirect but nonetheless influential effect on aspects of domestic life. While the American influence may initially be difficult to recognise, Schildt's comprehensive presentation highlighted the importance of taking into account less obvious signs as well as the complexity of the transatlantic transfer processes in the development of postwar urban lifestyles in Europe.

Concluding the morning session on urban history, Werner Sewing's (Berlin) paper examining New Urbanism and the European city brought us back to the central theme of the *Historikertag – Geschichts-bilder*. The built environment reflects historical trajectories which have evolved as the result of social or political shifts, or which have been planned for purposes of symbolic representation. A transatlantic exchange which, according to Sewing's reading, has undoubtedly been successful is the concept of New Urbanism. As an urban design movement, New Urbanism in America entailed the development of new suburbs which mimicked the characteristics – both aesthetic and structural – of a small historical city without actually providing these structures in reality. Sewing sees strong parallels between New Urbanism and urban planning projects in European cities in an effort to produce a sanitised, idyllic cityscape. New Urbanism thus attempts to construct an historical city or suburban landscape which has little or nothing to do with the historical background of the urban context to which it belongs. This is perhaps the most intriguing and undoubtedly contentious element of the New Urbanism movement. Somewhat more emphasis on the symbolic meaning of the pseudo-historicisation of suburban space for planners and inhabitants, as well as for the larger urban realm to which these suburbs belong, could allow for further

consideration about the role of history and visual representations of a certain nostalgic past in the visual landscape of the modern city.

The built environment provides perhaps the most immediate visual impression of a city. However, it is not only the physical structures, residential areas, and public spaces which shape a city, but also its inhabitants. City residents imprint their own mark on urban spaces through everyday interaction with the environment in which they live. Inextricably bound up with the changing face of the city is migration. Migrants bring with them own cultures, experiences, and histories through which they shape the new environment in which they settle. This important phenomenon, both from an historical and contemporary perspective, was the focus of the afternoon session „Stadt und Migration".

While migration is often thought of in the context of the postwar era, it is by no means a phenomenon specific only to the second half of the twentieth century. Lars Amenda's (Hamburg) paper on Chinese migration to Europe beginning around 1900 offered a fresh and innovative perspective on the spatial concentration and perception of a specific minority group in Western European ports, particularly Hamburg, Rotterdam, and London. Amenda highlighted the way in which Chinese migration brought to the fore concepts of cultural difference and 'otherness', which challenged the ideas of social membership in the 'native' population of a city. While Chinese migrants were frequently perceived as a threat, the simultaneous fascination with Chinese culture led to the success of Chinese cuisine in Europe. A symbol of exoticism, Amenda's illustration of the culinary success of Chinese food in postwar Europe provided an excellent example of the mixed meanings and perceptions of foreign cultures in the city.

Synnøve Bendixsen (Berlin) approached the question of cultural difference and minority identity construction in an urban framework from an ethnographical perspective. Using contemporary Berlin as a case study, Bendixsen outlined the way in which the Muslim community has shaped the city's public spaces through cultural rituals

and religious practice. Mosques and businesses serving the particular needs of the Muslim community are examples of spaces in which minority groups feel accepted while not necessarily segregating themselves from the rest of the city. Bendixsen argued that rather than resort to ethnic and religious reductionism, these spaces must be considered within a broader understanding of social membership. Spaces in which ethnic and religious minorities groups live, work, or feel a sense of belonging, do not necessarily exist parallel to the majority society. Rather, members can move between minority and majority communities and spaces of representation. It is therefore possible to interpret the visualisation of an ethnic and religious minority – Islam in this case – as a cultural diversification of urban space rather than the creation of parallel worlds.

The concept of 'parallel universes' was the point of departure for Imke Sturm-Martin's (Berlin) paper on the discursive construction of ethnic urban space in British cities post 1945. A country with a long history of immigration, Britain experienced an influx of migrants in the postwar period and associated changes in the visual composition of the urban environment through the development of so-called parallel communities. For first generation migrants, these communities provided a certain level of security and sense of belonging, while the second generation increasingly distanced itself to form independent identities. Unfortunately, the public perception of migrant enclaves received only fleeting attention, the main message being the well-known fact that, as is the case in most countries, ethnic communities frequently suffer distrust and discrimination. By the 1960s multiculturalism – a term referred to, but not defined – became an increasingly relevant and slowly accepted concept in Britain. This aspect could have been discussed in somewhat more detail in order to consider to what, if any, extent the idea of a 'multicultural' British society was accepted and supported on a political level, and what impact this might have had in facilitating the successful integration of second generation migrants.

The problems of segregated communities belonging to the periphery of an urban metropolis, but disowned and rejected by urban planners and political decision-makers, was presented by Martin Baumeister (Munich) using the examples of Italy and Spain. The paper not only examined the development of urban slums on the periphery of the Italian cities Milan and Rome and in Spain, Barcelona and Madrid, but went a step further to address their pathological status as chaotic spaces of degradation and decay in the minds of politicians and urban planners. However, as central themes in film and literature of the 1950s and 1960s, these outer-suburban communities introduced new interpretations of urban space, allowing for a redefinition of the meaning of city centre and urban periphery. Uncovering the communities on the outskirts of these cities thus encouraged a re-evaluation of their role in the city proper and the society to which they belonged.

It can be difficult to conceive the multitudinous ways in which the urban landscape constantly adapts to the fluidity of dreams and aspirations of its inhabitants and creators. The sessions discussed above not only provided a range of vantage points from which to approach urban history, but also showed the way in which research questions posed can be enhanced through a comparative approach.

Particularly pertinent to the urban landscape are city suburbs – an aspect touched upon to a larger or smaller extent in several papers. In both the American and European cases, suburban living represented a desire to make private dreams and social autonomy a reality without relinquishing a connection to the city. A refuge from the hectic pace of the city, suburbs allow their residents to combine a desire for natural, spacious, and private surrounds with access to a certain amount of controlled doses of city life. The session on the European and American city addressed this question from a comparative perspective, highlighting both similarities but also distinct attitudes towards suburban living. One could go on to ask to what extent suburban sprawl means that suburbs further away from the inner city are by definition 'disconnected', and how these suburbs can develop own identities which together form a multilayered picture of the city to which they belong.

Suburban living is often associated with negative aspects of urban life, with private dreams disappearing in the homogeneity, mediocrity, and isolation of the suburban jungle. However, both film and literature have taken the subject of suburban life as their central theme and, while not necessarily espousing the benefits of the suburban lifestyle, portray the way in which everyday life and the visual form of suburbs can take on their own specific shape, thereby contributing to the diversity of city itself.[1]

Lars Amenda's statement that urban history needs also to be considered in the context of immigration history, and vice versa, indicated the way in which access to urban space, and language and culture as a constituent of the active social being are inextricably linked. The act of migration entails leaving one place for another and necessarily adapting to new cultural surroundings. Feelings of isolation and foreignness are sometimes eased through the construction of spaces within the urban environment – where the majority of migrants at least initially reside – which allow for the possibility of speaking or acting differently. Furthermore, in moving to a new country, migrants bring with them not only their own cultures and languages, but their own histories. Immigration offers new and alternative interpretations of the past and of historical narratives. The city can therefore be read as space in which narrative construction transgresses the built, planned environment to embrace both individual and collective experiences, as well as the perspectives on and visual manifestations of life in a new city.

A perhaps unsurprising omission in the discussion about comparative research on urban structures, suburban sprawl, and migration in the city was reference to Australian studies dealing with similar questions. The frame for the sessions was clearly stipulated, however as a highly urbanised and suburbanised country in which urban sprawl, garden city movements, the gentrification of inner city slums, and immigration have all been the topics of much research, a very brief mention of the Australian case when discussing comparative research would provide those studying the European or North American cities with a further, fertile comparative perspective.[2]

The impact of global forces, local agency, and the internal morphology of cities creates a complexity and energy in urban centres. The papers discussed were presented within a thematic framework defined not only by the question of how cities are designed, but also how they are experienced to produce a specific visual profile, a conglomeration of influences from the past and present. Through a range of approaches, the sessions addressed the production of and interaction between economic, cultural, and social spaces in the city from an historical, but also contemporary perspective. Further categories such as ethnicity, class, and gender were incorporated to provide what was a well-rounded, comprehensive insight into the range of research areas occupying academics in the area of urban history and urban studies. The subsequent discussions – while sometimes somewhat compressed due to time constraints – showed the interest in the research presented, sparking debates and raising new and alternative perspectives for

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[1]See for example the film *Three Dollars* (directed by Robert Connolly, 2005) based on the novel of the same name by Elliot Pearlman (Sydney 1998) depicting the seemingly monotonous, but essentially complex, uncertain, often fragile nature of middle-class suburban life; Andrew Lachlan McCann's glum portrayal of suburban life in: Subtopia, Carlton North, Vic. 2005, or John Berger's recent book: Here is Where We Meet, London 2005 the storyline of which weaves across the urban centres of Europe.

[2]I mention this omission not only because of my own obvious bias in that I would have liked to have heard brief mention of the relevant research from my own country of origin, but because very relevant studies by Australian scholars indeed belong to the corpus of work in the area of urban history and urban studies. See for example Davison, Graeme, Car Wars. How the Car Won Our Hearts and Conquered Our Cities, Crows Nest 2004 and, edited with Tony Dingle and Seamus O'Hanlon, The Cream Brick Frontier. Histories of Australian Suburbia, Melbourne 1995; Brown-May, Andrew, Melbourne Street Life. The Itinerary of Our Days, Melbourne 1998; Peel, Mark, Good Times, Hard Times: the Past and the Future in Elizabeth, Melbourne 1995; Lozanovska, Mirjana, Emigration/Immigration. Maps, Myths Origins, in: Cairns, Stephen (ed.), Drifting. Migrancy and the Limits to Architecture, London 2004 and Low, Nicholas; Gleeson, Brendan, Australian Urban Planning. New Challenges, New Agendas, Sydney 2000 amongst others, the work of whom has most certainly contributed to the body of academic writing on twentieth century urban history, including the questions of suburbanisation and immigration.

further scholarly work.

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