

Dieter Hassenpflug, Nico Giersig, Bernhard Stratmann (Hrsg.)

# Reading the City

*Developing Urban Hermeneutics*

# Stadt lesen

*Beiträge zu einer urbanen Hermeneutik*

Bauhaus-Universität Weimar

Verlag

Dieter Hassenpflug, Nico Giersig, Bernhard Stratmann (Hrsg.)

Reading the City: Developing Urban Hermeneutics  
*Stadt lesen: Beiträge zu einer urbanen Hermeneutik*

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# Preface and Acknowledgement

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The original idea for this edited volume emanated from Dieter Hassenpflug's research on current urbanisation processes in China. His long-term studies on this issue have been led by a search for the main social and cultural forces which have fostered and steered the incredibly rapid urbanisation process in China that we have witnessed in recent years. Does the urbanisation of western countries serve as a model for the Chinese case, or can we also detect the continuing influence of earlier forms of urban space production? The pertinence of this research question grew with the knowledge that several urban development projects led by western architects and planners had often struggled to gain full acceptance or had ultimately even failed. Obviously, there has been a lack of understanding concerning the particularities of producing and utilising urban space in China. Moreover, as cities essentially represent a society's habitat and since they must be understood as spatialised societies, a failure to understand the city amounts to a failure to understand a society altogether.

In this way, the search for the main driving forces of Chinese hypermodernisation evolved

into a general interest in decoding the socio-cultural messages contained in – and conveyed by – urban spaces. Is it possible to read the city and, if the answer is yes, how can this be accomplished? In an attempt to address these questions, the search for concepts suitable for interpreting urban space, for developing an urban hermeneutics, came to the fore of urban research. In particular, the approach of urban semiotics – decisively informed by Roland Barthes, Henry Lefèbvre, Umberto Eco and Mark Gottdiener – has been shown to be a highly productive means of achieving urban readings of this kind. Such an approach appears all the more relevant because it can be understood as a method which conceptualises the city as a system of socio-culturally encoded signs, as a 'syntagma' (de Saussure).

The results which emerged from the lectures on the semiotics of the Chinese city were published in the book "The Urban Code of China" in 2010. The book illustrates the existence of significant, genuinely Chinese urban codes despite the evident influence of global trends. Obviously, these specific urban codes are the expression of practices and cultural traditions

4 deeply rooted in Chinese society. The striking and salient insights gained from this exploration of urbanisation processes in China inevitably led to thoughts about the prevailing practices of socio-cultural encodings in other countries and regions. It provoked questions concerning the impacts produced by the clash of differing socio-spatial encodings on the stage of a globalising world which is being shaped decisively by mass media and in which the abovementioned driving forces are often rendered ubiquitous by flows of fashions, styles, aesthetic schemes, discourses etc..

Beyond questions about the applicability of urban semiotics to existing forms of spatial production in other regions, cultural spheres and societies (from Europe, Africa and Latin America to the city fashioned by Muslim culture), urban readings following an urban hermeneutics raised crucial issues about disciplinarity: How is it possible to read the city in terms of both interdisciplinary commonality and in a comparative manner? In this context, ‘commonality’ implies widening the scope and deepening the analysis, whereas the term ‘comparative’ points to raising the awareness of cultural differences and inter-cultural complexity.

This brings us back to the idea which brought this edited volume into being in the first place. We, the editors, made a decision to organise a symposium to investigate the problem of the “readability” of cities and to develop illuminating approaches to urban hermeneutics. Under the title “Reading the City: Urban Semiology in Cultural Comparison” the symposium took place at the Institute for European Urban Studies (IfEU) of the Faculty of Architecture, Bauhaus-Universität Weimar on the 9th and 10th October 2009. The large number of valuable insights gained at the symposium gave rise to the idea to make these thoughts and findings

accessible to a wider audience: academics and students from various fields of urban studies, practitioners dealing with urban issues, as well as the general public. We therefore decided to ask all those who presented papers to rework them in the light of the discussions of their papers and the more general insights they gained from the symposium. The volume here is the result of this undertaking.

The editors are grateful to all participants in the symposium. Special thanks go, of course, to all those, who delivered a speech and rewrote it for publication in this volume. Many thanks also to the Volkswagen Foundation for funding the symposium, and especially to Dr. Gudrun Tegeder. We would also like to thank Ms Sylvia Kästner and Ms Viola Piegelbrock for their much appreciated assistance in organising the symposium. We thank the Board of Editors of the publisher, the Verlag der Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, for accepting the book for publication. We are indebted to Dr. Heidemarie Schirmer from the publisher for managing the publication and for the proofreading of the German language contributions to this volume, and to Dr. Ross Beveridge of Truly Translated for the proofreading of the English texts. All remaining mistakes are, however, the responsibility of the authors who reserved the right to a final revision of their papers. Michael Kraus, a student of architecture in his final year, produced the sophisticated layout of the book. Many thanks to him and to those we could not, or may have forgotten to, mention.

The editors

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# Vorwort und Danksagung

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Die Idee zu dem vorliegenden Band geht auf Dieter Hassenpflugs Forschungen zum gegenwärtigen chinesischen Urbanisierungsprozess zurück. Im Zentrum seiner langjährigen Untersuchungen steht die Frage, durch welche sozialen und kulturellen Gestaltungskräfte die sich in unerhörter Geschwindigkeit vollziehende Verstädterung Chinas informiert und orientiert wird. Folgt Chinas Urbanisierung westlichen Vorbildern oder erkennen wir auch die Einflüsse historisch überkommener Traditionen der urbanen Raumproduktion? Motiviert wurde diese Forschungsfrage nicht zuletzt durch die Beobachtung, dass manches städtebauliche Projekt vor allem westlicher Architekten und Stadtplaner mit erheblichen Akzeptanzproblemen zu kämpfen hatte und einige Projekte sogar scheiterten. Offenbar wurden chinesische Praktiken der Nutzung und Produktion des städtischen Raums nicht bzw. unzureichend verstanden. Stadt nicht verstehen bedeutet jedoch nichts anderes als die Gesellschaft, deren Habitat sie ist, nicht zu verstehen. Denn Stadt ist verräumlichte Gesellschaft.

So entwickelte sich aus der Frage nach den Gestaltungskräften, die der chinesischen Hypermodernisierung zugrunde liegen, das Interesse an der Dekodierung der soziokulturellen Botschaften

des Stadtraums allgemein – nicht allein des chinesischen. Kann man Stadt lesen – und wenn ja, wie? Mit dieser Frage rückte die Suche nach Deutungskonzepten für den städtischen Raum, nach einer urbanen Hermeneutik in das Blickfeld der Stadtforschung. Für die Stadtlektüre erwies sich die von Autoren wie Roland Barthes, Henry Lefebvre, Umberto Eco und Mark Gottdiener entscheidend geprägte urbane Semiotik als besonders ergiebig – insbesondere unter der Bedingung, dass sie als Methode verstanden wird, welche die Stadt als ein System von soziokulturell kodierten Zeichen, als ‚Syntagma‘ (de Saussure) konzeptionalisiert.

Die Ergebnisse der semiotisch angeleiteten Lektüre der chinesischen Stadt wurden 2009 in dem Buch „Der urbane Code Chinas“ publiziert. Im Ergebnis zeigte sich, dem Einfluss globaler Ströme zum Trotz, eine signifikante Eigenständigkeit des chinesischen urbanen Codes, die in tief in der Gesellschaft verwurzelten sozialen Praktiken und kulturellen Traditionen seine Ursache hat. Die Signifikanz der am Fall der aktuellen chinesischen Urbanisierung gewonnenen Resultate provozierte geradezu zwangsläufig die Frage nach den Praktiken soziokultureller Kodierungen in anderen Ländern und Regionen, nach den Auswirkungen des Aufeinanderprallens unterschiedlicher

6 stadträumlicher Kodierungen auf der Bühne einer medial globalisierten Welt, in welcher die erwähnten Gestaltungskräfte mittels Moden, Stilen, ästhetischen Schemata, Diskursen etc. als ubiquitär zu gelten haben.

Doch neben die Perspektive der Anwendbarkeit einer urbanen Semiotik auf die städtische Raumproduktion anderer Regionen, Kulturkreise, Gesellschaften – von Europa über Afrika und Lateinamerika bis zur muslimisch geprägten Stadt – schiebt sich als weitere Fragestellung diejenige nach den disziplinären Stadtlektüren bzw. urbanen Hermeneutiken. Wie können wir in interdisziplinärer Gemeinsamkeit Stadt vergleichend lesen? „Gemeinsam“ bedeutet dabei Erweiterung des Blickfeldes und Vertiefung der Analyse; „vergleichend“ bedeutet demgegenüber Schärfung des Bewusstseins der kulturellen Differenzen und der interkulturellen Komplexität.

Damit sind wir am Ursprung der Idee für diesen Band angelangt: Wir, die Herausgeber, entschieden uns, ein Symposium zu organisieren, das sich in interkultureller und zugleich interdisziplinärer Perspektive dem Problem der Lesbarkeit von Stadt und der Analyse exemplarischer Beispiele urbaner Hermeneutik widmet. Unter dem Titel „Stadt lesen: Urbane Semiologie im Kulturvergleich – *Reading the City: Urban Semiology in Cultural Comparison*“ fand das Symposium am 9. und 10. Oktober 2009 am Institut für Europäische Urbanistik (IfEU) der Fakultät Architektur an der Bauhaus-Universität Weimar statt. Die Vielzahl der wertvollen, auf dem Symposium gewonnenen Einsichten war ausschlaggebend dafür, diese Erkenntnisse und neuen Befunde einer weiteren Öffentlichkeit zugänglich zu machen: Lehrende und Studierende aus unterschiedlichen Disziplinen und Bereichen der Stadtforschung, Praktiker, die sich mit verschiedenen Themen und Problemen der Stadtentwicklung befassen, und

die interessierte Öffentlichkeit. Wir entschlossen uns daher, all diejenigen, die auf dem Symposium einen Vortrag gehalten haben, zu bitten, diesen zu überarbeiten und dabei auch die Diskussion ihres jeweiligen Beitrags sowie weitere Einsichten, die sie durch ihre Teilnahme am Symposium für ihr jeweiliges Forschungsfeld gewonnen haben, mit in die Überarbeitung einzubeziehen. Der vorliegende Band ist das Resultat dieser Bemühungen.

Die Herausgeber möchten allen Teilnehmern und Teilnehmerinnen des Symposiums danken. Ein besonderer Dank gilt all denen, die einen Vortrag gehalten haben und diesen für die Buchveröffentlichung im oben skizzierten Sinne überarbeitet haben. Ein herzlicher Dank geht auch an Dr. Gudrun Tegeder von der Volkswagen Stiftung. Der Stiftung sei gedankt für die finanzielle Förderung des Symposiums. Bei Sylvia Kästner und Viola Piegelbrock bedanken wir uns für die tatkräftige Unterstützung bei der Organisation und Durchführung des Symposiums. Dem Herausbergremium des Verlags der Bauhaus-Universität Weimar haben wir zu danken für die Aufnahme des Buches in ihr Verlagsprogramm. Dank schulden wir auch Dr. Heidemarie Schirmer vom Verlag für die hervorragende Betreuung des Buchprojekts und für das Korrekturlesen der deutschsprachigen Beiträge dieses Bandes. Dr. Ross Beveridge vom Büro Truly Translated gebührt unser Dank für das Korrekturlesen der englischsprachigen Beiträge. Alle noch verbliebenen Fehler liegen jedoch in der Verantwortung der Autoren, da diese Letztkorrekturen ihrer Beiträge vornehmen konnten. Michael Kraus, ein Architekturstudent im Abschlussjahr, hat das anspruchsvolle Layout des Buches wesentlich entwickelt und technisch umgesetzt. Auch ihm und allen, die wir hier nicht erwähnen konnten, ein herzliches Dankeschön.

Die Herausgeber







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# **Contents**

## *Inhalt*

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Preface and Acknowledgement/ Vorwort und Danksagung	3/ 5
Contributors and Abstracts	13
Introduction/ Einleitung	23/ 37
Once Again: Can Urban Space be Read? <i>Dieter Hassenpflug</i>	49
Stadt als Text, als Massenmedium oder als Event? Wandlungen in den Lesarten des Urbanen aus semiotischer Sicht <i>Claus Dreyer</i>	59
Zur visuellen Kommunikation von Urbanität: Schrift und Entschriftung des öffentlichen Raumes <i>Frank Hartmann</i>	69
Reading the urban through the rural: Comments on the significance of space-related distinctions and semantics <i>Marc Redepenning</i>	85
The City IS the Sustainable Development <i>Jacques Lévy</i>	103
Suburban Dreaming. A Social Semiotic Analysis of Suburban Life in Australia <i>Bernhard Stratmann</i>	113
Reading Mega-Urban Landscape – A Semiotic Sketch <i>Detlev Ipsen</i>	171
Urbane Semiologie im Feuilleton: Sigfried Kracauers Stadtlektüren <i>Jörg Döring</i>	181
Die Sichtbarkeit der Stadt. Moderne und gegenwärtige Konzepte des Stadtfilms <i>Oliver Fable</i>	199
Reading in Fragments. Toward an Urban Topology of Episodic Films <i>Laura Frahm</i>	207
(Mis)reading the City: Rethinking Urban Semiology <i>Donald Preziosi</i>	227



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# **Contributors and Abstracts**

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## Prof. Dr. Jörg Döring

*University of Siegen, Germany*

Jörg Döring is Professor for modern German philology, media studies and cultural studies at the University of Siegen. His studies mainly focus on classic modernism, literature and the “Third Reich”, post-war literature, contemporary literature, editing and editorial studies, media culture studies, cultural hermeneutics, cultural studies, the theory of screenplay studies and the geography of media. His most recent publications include *Mediengeographie. Theorie – Analyse – Diskussion* (co-edited with Tristan Thielmann), Bielefeld 2009; *Spatial Turn. Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften* (co-edited with Tristan Thielmann), Bielefeld 2008; *Benn als Reporter: “Wie Miss Cavell erschossen wurde”* (together with Erhard Schütz), Siegen 2007.

### *Urbane Semiologie im Feuilleton: Siegfried Kracauer's Stadtlektüren (Urban Semiology in the Feuilleton: Siegfried Kracauer's Urban Readings)*

This contribution introduces an exemplary series of texts written by Siegfried Kracauer which were first published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* during the 1920s. As an architect, urban planner, architecture critic and author of the Weimar Republic's urban feuilleton, Kracauer appears to be a promising exponent of context-sensitivity and the holistic approach, both of which can be found at the heart of this volume's interest.

For the urban feuilleton, which can be understood as a specific kind of text prospering

in the Weimar Republic due to a specific constellation in the history of media, the desire to overcome disciplinary fragmentations in urban discourses is not only historically documented, but inherently constitutive. Following a close reading of selected passages in Kracauer's writings, this contribution will introduce and contextualise three types of feuilleton-related urban readings: i) the model of “Flanerie”; ii) the model of “Vedute” and iii) the model of “in-situ sociographics”.

## Prof. Dr. Claus Dreyer

*Ostwestfalen-Lippe University of Applied Sciences*

Claus Dreyer was born in Bassum (Lower Saxony) in 1943. He studied philosophy, German language and literature, art history and art education in Marburg, Berlin and Stuttgart. He completed his PhD (“Semiotische Grundlagen der Architekturästhetik”) in 1979. He held a Professorship on foundations of designing, spatial design and design theory (1982–2009) at the department of architecture and interior design at Ostwestfalen-Lippe University of Applied Sciences, Detmold. He is member of the “Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ästhetik”; “Deutsche Gesellschaft für Semiotik”; “International Association for Semiotic Studies”; “Association Internationale de Semiotique de L'Espace”. He has published extensively on various research fields, focusing particularly on semiotics and aesthetics of architecture.

### *Stadt als Text, als Massenmedium oder als Event? Wandlungen in den Lesarten des Urbanen aus semiotischer*

*Sicht (City as a Text, a Mass Medium or as an Event? Shifting Readings of Urbanity from a Semiotical Point of View)*

Semioticians as well as scholars of literature and culture have long stated and illustrated that it is possible to read the city like a text. Such an approach implies that a rational and discursive structure forms the basis of this urban text, and that this structure is accessible and reconstructable by analytical methods which allow for continuative interpretations. Within the past few years these urban texts have become ever more overlain with more or less elaborately staged spectacles and events which are no longer to be “read“, but rather to be experienced and actively shaped by its visitors.

## Prof. Dr. Oliver Fahle

*Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany*

Oliver Fahle is Professor of film aesthetics and film theory at the University of Bochum. He is author of “Jenseits des Bildes. Poetik des französischen Films der zwanziger Jahre” (Mainz 2000) and “Der Film der Zweiten Moderne” (Weimar 2005). He was the editor of various books about film philosophy and media theory, such as “Das Kino bei Deleuze/Le cinéma selon Deleuze” (Paris/Weimar 1997, jointly with Lorenz Engell) and “Technobilder und Kommunikologie. Die Medientheorie Vilém Flussers” (Berlin 2009, jointly with Michael Hanke and Andreas Ziemann).

*Die Sichtbarkeit der Stadt. Moderne und gegenwärtige Konzepte des*

*Stadtfilms (The Visibility of Cities. Modern and Contemporary Concepts of Urban Cinema)*

Films have made an outstanding contribution to the visual knowledge and presentations of modern cities. Therefore, visions of the city are to be understood as a crucial characteristic of cinematic aesthetics – ranging from silent pictures (The Crowd, Metropolis, Man with a Movie Camera) through modern films (Neo-Realism, Film Noir, Nouvelle Vague) to the present (Short Cuts, Lola rennt, L.A. Crash).

This contribution addresses the aesthetic recreation of the city in contemporary films in terms of a semiotic of density. On the one hand, films point to a novel space interspersed with electronic media, which distances itself from the urban image which had prevailed until the 1960s. On the other hand, however, various cultural codifications of urban spaces (Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro, Berlin etc.) have become visible.

## Dr. Laura Frahm

*Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Germany*

Laura Frahm received her MA in theater, film, and television studies, history of art, and Romanic languages in 2004 from the University of Cologne. From 2005 to 2007 she was a Doctoral Fellow at the Transatlantic Graduate Research Program Berlin-New York, “History and Culture of the Metropolis in the 20th Century”. In Fall 2006 and Spring 2007 she was Visiting Scholar at Columbia University and New York University. She holds a PhD from Humboldt University Berlin (Dr. phil., 2008), and is currently a

postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at the International Research Institute for Cultural Technologies and Media Philosophy (IKKM) at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar. Her recent publications are: “Jenseits des Raums. Zur filmischen Topologie des Urbanen” (2010); “Bewegte Räume. Zur Konstruktion von Raum in Video-clips von Jonathan Glazer, Chris Cunningham, Mark Romanek und Michel Gondry” (2007). She is co-editor of the book series “Cultural Urban Studies” (since 2008) and has published several articles on cinema and the city, cinematic space and topology, cultural urban studies, new media art and music videos.

### *Reading in Fragments. Toward an Urban Topology of Episodic Films*

As the 1980s became the 1990s, it was possible to observe the rise of a series of episodic films that revealed a complex urban environment. These films reveal expansive urban worlds, where material, social, and symbolic spatial orders are overlapping, forming a dense spatial structure, while at the same time giving rise to a new concept of space – a fragmented, ephemeral space of transition. In their disjointed, multi-layered gaze on the city, episodic films like NIGHT ON EARTH (Jim Jarmusch, 1991), SHORT CUTS (Robert Altman, 1993), and MAGNOLIA (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999) imply a spatial dynamic that is oscillating between moving both inwards, in order to generate singular spatial fragments that fully contain the city’s complexity, and moving outwards, in order to stretch and to expand the city’s inherent boundaries. The episodic films of this period mark a significant shift within the development of the cinematic city in that they carry the relationality of spaces, characters, and storylines to extremes. In this process, they link their configurations of an

overly interrelated world to inwardly disintegrated urban environments that are only graspable and readable through their fragments. Yet the episodic films of this period significantly differ in the way in which they conceive of their urban fragments – be it a self-contained, unconnected fragment, be it an overly interconnected fragment, or be it a transformative, paradoxical fragment that exceeds the boundaries of space. In their different readings of the urban fragment, a trace of the cinematic history of the city always resonates. Moreover, in creating a consciousness toward their cities, the episodic films serve as a precise seismograph of urban transformations, allowing us to trace a shift in the spatial perception of the cities at the turn of the century.

## **Dr. Nico Giersig**

*University of Bamberg, Germany*

Nico Giersig holds a PhD in social sciences from Humboldt University, Berlin. His doctoral and postdoctoral studies focused mainly on interdisciplinary urban studies and the history of ideas. He has worked as a doctoral research fellow at the University of Helsinki, a researcher and lecturer at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar and has participated in a number of international, EU-funded scientific networks. Currently he is employed as a scientific coordinator at the University of Bamberg. He also works as a translator of academic texts (English-German).

### *Preface and Introduction*

Nico Giersig co-authored the preface and introduction to this volume (with Dieter



Hassenpflug and Bernhard Stratmann). He also wrote substantial parts of the research proposal for the international and interdisciplinary symposium “Reading the City: Urban Semiology in Cultural Comparison”, which took place at the Institute for European Urban Studies (IfEU) of the Faculty of Architecture, Bauhaus-Universität Weimar in early October 2009. The symposium lay the foundations to this book (see preface).

## Prof. Dr. Frank Hartmann

*Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Germany*

Frank Hartmann studied history of art, sociology, and philosophy at the University of Vienna, Austria, where he also completed his doctorate in Philosophy and his postdoctoral qualification (Habilitation) in the interdisciplinary field of Media Theory. Between 2000–2008 he taught courses in media philosophy at the Department of Communication, University of Vienna. He was Visiting Professor at Danube University Krems (2005), at the Faculty of Cultural & Social Sciences, Universität Salzburg (2007) and at the Faculty of Philosophy, Universität Erfurt (2008). Other professional activities include media consulting and features writing. In 2009, he was appointed Full Professor at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, where he now holds the Chair for History and Theory of Visual Communication at the Faculty of Art & Design. His book publications include: *Multimedia* (2008), *Medien und Kommunikation* (2008), *Globale Medienkultur. Technik, Geschichte, Theorien* (2006), *Bildersprache*. Otto Neurath, *Visualisierungen* (2006), *Medienphilosophie* (2000; Korean translation 2008).

## *Zur visuellen Kommunikation von Urbanität: Schrift und Entschriftung des öffentlichen Raumes (On Visual Communication of Urbanity: Scripts and “De-scripting” of Public Space)*

Scripts and captions are constitutive structural elements of urban spaces of communication – spaces which are particularly characterised by indirect and de-personalised contacts. However, with the notable exception of graffiti-research, these issues have hardly been tackled in communication research thus far. The language of urban signs condenses meaning in certain places, whereas the proliferation of visual communication (which is due to the technical improvement of presentations) rather tends to impair social acceptance. Given all the blow-ups on historical facades, it remains questionable whether it is possible to file a suit for visual integrity. This paper introduces artistically and politically motivated examples of a “de-scripting” of public space so as to pose the question whether semiotic manipulations have the potential to substantialise communication in public space.

## Prof. Dr. Dieter Hassenpflug

*Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Germany*

Dieter Hassenpflug, born 1946 in Harare, Zimbabwe, studied economics, sociology and philosophy at the Freie Universität Berlin, Technische Universität Berlin and University of Kasel, where he completed his Dr. phil. and “Habilitation”. He was a lecturer at the Technische

18 Universität Berlin, the Berlin College of Economics, the University of Kassel and the J. W. Goethe-University Frankfurt/Main. Since 1993 he has been the Chair of Urban Sociology, Faculty of Architecture at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar. From 2002–2007 he was a visiting scholar at Harbin Institute of Technology and Tongji-University Shanghai. At present he is a visiting scholar at University of Duisburg-Essen, Institute of Urban Planning. His main fields of research are currently Chinese urban development, European urban history and urban semiotics. His most recent publication is “The Urban Code of China” (Birkhäuser, Basel 2010).

### *Once again: Can Urban Space be Read?*

Physical urban space remains a weak spot of social scientific urban studies despite all the recent endeavour of scholars to address this shortcoming. In fact, urban sociology still finds itself in need of a hermeneutics which ultimately allows for the reading of the built environment as a social text in a productive manner. That said, the contribution “Once again: How to Read Urban Space” should be understood as an attempt to widen the epistemological foundations of existing concepts related to urban semiotics.

Our project draws upon a range of earlier, important work by Roland Barthes, Henri Lefebvre, Umberto Eco, Mark Gottdiener and other scholars. However, we would like to suggest that established ideas in the field need to be advanced in terms of both their methodological and their conceptual dimensions in three respects. Firstly, with recourse to Ferdinand de Saussure, we hold that the city is to be seen as a syntagma, i.e. a system of structurally interwoven signs. Secondly, drawing on Charles Peirce, we suggest the method

of abduction (a weak form of deduction) as a key approach for the constructive role ascribed to the observer of urban signs. Finally, we make use of Walter Benjamin’s technique of superposition, which understands the elements of our built environment as a socio-cultural memory. As a result, this semiotically strengthened urban sociology thus approaches perspectives of cultural geography from a structuralist angle.

## **Prof. Dr. Detlev Ipsen**

*University of Kassel, Germany*

Detlev Ipsen was born in 1945 in Innsbruck, Austria. He studied sociology and psychology in Munich, Vienna, Mannheim, Ann Arbor (USA) and Colchester (GB). He is now Professor for Urban and Regional Sociology at the University of Kassel (D), Guest Professor at the University of Porto Alegre (Brazil) and El Minia (Egypt). His main fields of interest are: the urban housing market and urban segregation, migration and urbanization, images and semiotics of cities and landscapes, space and ecology and regional development. He has conducted fieldwork in Austria, China, Bolivia, Ecuador, Egypt, Germany and Japan. Currently his research focuses on the dynamics of urban landscapes in China; the role of aesthetics of place and landscape for regional development.

### *Reading Mega-Urban Landscape – A Semiotic Sketch*

Not only is the number of urban and mega-urban regions growing, but the pattern of urbanization is changing substantially in most parts of

the world. In the 19th and the majority of the 20th century urbanization was characterised by the pattern of an urban core, a ring of suburbanization and finally a perurban area. This paper attempts to display the new development towards an urban landscape. This urban landscape develops a new spatial structure following the logic of spatial flows on the one hand and of islands on the other. The paper discusses the semiotics of urban landscapes in the case of the Pearl River Delta in Southchina which has, for the last three decades, and continues to be today, a case of high speed urbanization. The so-called urban villages play a special role in this case as active agents in producing these urban landscapes and its semiotic structure.

## Prof. Dr. Jacques Lévy

*École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Switzerland*

Jacques Lévy, born in 1952, is a geographer and an urbanist and Full Professor at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Lausanne (EPFL). He is the director of the Chôros Laboratory and co-director of the Collège des Humanités. He has been a Visiting Professor at various universities: UCLA, NYU, USP (São Paulo), L'Orientale (Naples), Macquarie (Sydney). He also held the Reclus Chair in Mexico City and has been a fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. His key interests are the social theory of space, urbanity, globalisation, cartography, spatial development and the epistemology of social sciences. He has more than 500 publications including: *Europe: une géographie* (Hachette, 1997; 2nd edition 1998), *Mondialisation: les mots et les choses* (with the 'Mondialisation'

group, Karthala, 1999), *Les sens du mouvement* (Belin, 2005, ed. with Sylvain Allemand & François Ascher), the special issue "Eine geographische Wende" (*Geographische Zeitschrift* 2005), *L'invention du Monde* (ed., Presses de Sciences Po, 2008), *The City* (Ashgate, 2008) and *Our Inhabited Space* (dir., FNRS, 2009).

### *The City Is the Sustainable Development*

The relationship between the concepts of "city" and "sustainable development" is probably simpler that we could have imagined. Such a statement emerges from an analysis of both notions. A city, when considered on its own, is a peculiar expression of the urban phenomenon. Sustainable development is a very specific expression of ecological awareness. When we explore and "purify" the meaning of both, a large degree of consubstantiality between the two notions can be observed. Models of urbanity and paradigms of nature/society relations are closely related in public debates. If it is accepted as the par excellence urbanity-oriented condition, the city ultimately appears as the spatial component of sustainable development.

## Prof. Dr. Donald Preziosi

*UCLA - University of California Los Angeles, Germany*

Donald Preziosi is Emeritus Professor of Art History and Critical Theory at UCLA and former Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford. He received his PhD at Harvard, has taught at several American universities including Yale and MIT, and has lectured widely in Europe, the U.S., and

Australia. He is the author of 12 books on art and architectural history, critical theory, and the historiography of cultural institutions, including *The Semiotics of the Built Environment*; *Architecture, Language and Meaning*; *Aegean Art & Architecture*; *Rethinking Art History*; and *The Art of Art History*. He is co-author with Claire Farago of *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*. His newest book, on relations between art and religion, *Enchanted Credulities: Art, Religion, and Amnesia*, is forthcoming in 2011.

*(Mis)reading the City: Rethinking Urban Semiology*

Any reading of cities is always doomed to be a mis-reading. Cities are neither texts nor material artifacts; nor are they spatial or visual languages, the concrete effects, reflections, expressions, or representations of behavioral events or performances. This paper argues for a critical rethinking of the foundational premises and paradigms of urban semiology, outlining possible bases for productively moving beyond the apparently irresolvable dilemmas and conundrums that have hampered the field's ability to advance upon traditional forms of disciplinary knowledge-production since its modern articulation in the immediate post-world-war-two period. The paper draws upon recent empirical research carried out on indigenous multimodal and multidimensional uses of space, language, gesture, dance, object-fabrication, and visual marking of various kinds among several Australian aboriginal groups in that country's central western desert. It concludes with a re-assessment of the current state and future prospects for urban semiology and related epistemological technologies.

## Dr. Marc Redepenning

*Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena, Germany*

Marc Redepenning is a researcher and lecturer at the Institute of Geography, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, Germany. He worked at the Department for Theory, Methodology and History of Regional Geography at the Leibniz-Institute for Regional Geography (Leipzig) and received his PhD from Leipzig University in 2004 for his work on systems theory, critical geopolitics and space-related semantics. Before moving into his current position he worked at the Institute of Geography, Leipzig University. His research is in the areas of social and cultural geography, geographies of the rural, the geography of boundaries and differences and sociological systems and form theory. His most recent publications include: *Die Komplexität des Landes – neue Bedeutungen des Ländlichen im Zuge der Counterurbanisierung*. In: *Zeitschrift für Agrargeschichte und Agrarsoziologie* 57 (2): 46–56 (2009); *Die Moral der critical geopolitics*. In: *Geographische Zeitschrift* 95 1+2: 91–04 (2009); *Eine selbst erzeugte Überraschung: Zur Renaissance von Raum als Selbstbeschreibungselmformel der Gesellschaft*. In: Döring, J., Thielmann, T., eds., *Spatial Turn* (Bielefeld 2008).

*Reading the Urban Through the Rural: Comments on the Significance of Space-Related Distinctions and Semantics*

This article tackles two apparently separate issues which need, nonetheless, to be interrelated. On the one hand, I introduce the concept of space-related semantics in an attempt to

develop an approach inspired by theoretical work on “difference”. Through this it becomes possible to display the increasing use of spatially relevant communication as well as spatially related self-descriptions in both science and everyday life and to scrutinize their societal functions. In turn, it is becomes possible to reveal the ways in which space-related semantics of the rural are conceptualised and applied as a corrective value for the urban. I will ask if, and in what sense, studying socio-cultural descriptions of the urban can reveal, *ex negativo*, insights about the urban condition.

I will emphasise that despite all the research findings (and terminologies) which suggest a disappearance of the urban-rural divide and a general urbanisation of all areas of life, the distinction between urban and rural remains a highly useful means of thinking about society. For such an endeavour it is deemed necessary to no longer regard “urban” and “rural” as distinct spatial units. Instead, both should be considered social categories or semantics which deploy the “spatialisation of the social”.

## Dr. Bernhard Stratmann

*Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Germany*

Bernhard Stratmann is a lecturer in urban sociology at the Faculty of Architecture, Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Germany. He studied sociology (Dipl.-Soz., 1993) at the University of Bielefeld, where he also worked as a research assistant in social sciences/public health. In 1998 he received his doctoral degree (Dr. phil.) from the Philipps-Universität Marburg, where he was a research assistant and junior lecturer in sociology. Prior to his current position at Weimar he was a researcher in the

field of social sciences for higher education at the Hochschul-Informations-System GmbH (HIS), Hanover. Twice he has been a visiting scholar at the Department of Sociology, Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia. His research interests are: globalization and urban development, sustainable development, the Healthy Cities project, mega cities, mega events and Australian cities.

### *Suburban Dreaming. A Social Semiotic Analysis of Suburban Life in Australia*

When looking at suburbs, people and planners tend to see something very different. Whereas the former dream of a better lifestyle, the latter often talk about urban sprawl and point to a long list of negative impacts that would result from this kind of urban form. Continuing trends towards global suburbanization have caused concerns, particularly in view of rising energy consumption, the depletion of natural resources (peak oil etc.) and possible climate change. However, more recently the “reading” of suburbs has changed. The prevailing critical discourse has been challenged by the assumption that suburbs – if designed, serviced and managed well – can be aligned with the overall goal of sustainability. The New Suburbanism is empirically backed and includes a reappraisal of “suburbanism as a way of life” that might offer a lot to a variety of different people. The paper reveals the international discourse through a lens of different perspectives and academic disciplines. In doing so, a multitude of national experiences with suburbs and (sub)urban life will be considered and decoded. For the purpose of an in-depth analysis a regional focus will be placed on Australian cities and their large suburban areas. It will be argued that the debate on suburbia is embedded in a much larger, underlying debate on the good life.



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# Introduction

## *Einleitung*

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# Challenges for Urban Hermeneutics in the 21st Century

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Many actors are involved in the process of constructing the city as a physical, social, economic, cultural and political entity. Apart from various professional groups (such as architects, investors, entrepreneurs, local politicians, members of municipal administrations, artists, etc.), it is the differing forms of citizens' collective action that contribute to shaping the physical and social appearance of urban spaces (Giersig 2008; Hassenpflug 2001; Short 1989). In the best-case scenario, a social system and urban environment made up of natural and architectural features corresponding to the needs and wishes of its inhabitants will emerge.

Through their built environment, cities mirror the attitudes of past and present generations towards urban planning. At the same time, however, they reflect the increasingly diverse and often conflicting preferences of numerous (and unequally influential) social groups. Ultimately, cities are shaped by a complex interplay of local influences and developments on regional, national and global scales retroacting on the local level. In this sense, the reality of cities can be understood as a multi-layered and multi-dimensional "urban

palimpsest" (Pauwels 2009). The fact that each city has a unique character of its own is due to this complex configuration of layers and dimensions. Berking and Löw (2008) have stated that cities often possess an elusive "logic of their own". To a large extent, urban structures may result from the unintended side effects of everyday actions carried out by their inhabitants. For example, suburbanisation is often deemed to be a side effect of people's apparent desire to live close to nature. Over time, numerous individual decisions and actions have been productive of an outcome which contradicts the original objectives of individual agents, namely urban sprawl (for further explanations of the emergence of suburban spaces see Stratmann in this volume).

Scholars have reflected upon these forms of intervention in urban spaces in different ways and with different intentions. Approaches range from mere observation and the explanatory analysis of urban development processes to the production of new practical knowledge appropriate for urban planning. There are at least as many theoretical and empirical access points to "the city" as there are academic disciplines involved in these debates.

26 This is hardly surprising in the light of the complexity of urban issues. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the urban, one which is also suitable for shaping urban development in practical terms, urban scholars with differing disciplinary backgrounds have repeatedly pressed for an interdisciplinary dialogue (cf. Waldheim 2010). Inter-, trans-, or postdisciplinary approaches are applied as a means of coming to terms with the complex fabric of the city.<sup>1</sup> In view of threatening developments (such as climate change, the foreseeable depletion of many natural resources and global population growth), the questions concerning the future viability of our cities pose a significant challenge for both the theory and practice of urban development and call for sustainable and comprehensive collaborative efforts. At

the same time, they serve as a useful theoretical “anchor”: a leading issue which may guide and instruct these required forms of cooperation. In this context, urban semiotics can be understood as an interdisciplinary field of action and research which asks whether it is possible to draw conclusions on social relations and cultural practices on the basis of observing cities as built environments and the elements of which they are made. Is it possible to decode the city? Can cities be read? If the answer is yes and if this decoding of the urban is an empirically viable method, the insights thus gained would help to advance urban analysis as much as our understanding of the urban as such. Moreover, they would also enhance the practical use of urban research.

### *Hermeneutical approaches to the city of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: targets and challenges*

<sup>1</sup> In particular, US-American scholar Neil Brenner has repeatedly pointed to the necessity of pursuing urban studies in a “postdisciplinary” way today if it is to explain increasingly complex socio-economic, socio-spatial and political urban contexts and constellations in an appropriate manner (cf. e.g. Brenner 2004: 23ff.). In doing so, postdisciplinarity needs to be clearly distinguished from codisciplinarity: whereas codisciplinarity implies a cooperation of distinct academic disciplines, the concept of postdisciplinarity points to a paradigm which rejects methods and theories as obsolete if constrained by particular disciplinary paradigms or peculiarities. Similar to the related concept of transdisciplinarity, it defies specialisation and the subject-specific formation of sub-systems. However, it has been shown to be extremely difficult to draw an unambiguous distinction between the concepts of transdisciplinarity and postdisciplinarity. However, in view of the accentuation of the transdisciplinary character of the practical world, it can be assumed that the concept of transdisciplinarity is still based upon an intact foundation of various disciplinary logics – which is nonetheless transferred and integrated into super- or non-disciplinary concepts by means of practically oriented and thus transdisciplinary methods. In contrast, postdisciplinarity appears to altogether reject the very idea of such an intact foundation of discrete disciplines and instead devotes itself to ontological observations.

Urban semiotics provides the integrative analytical framework of this edited volume. It views urban spaces as systems of signs which are charged with varied social and cultural meanings which can be accessed and interpreted. Thus far spatially oriented semiotics has remained highly fragmented in character. Moreover, it is hard to identify a common framework of analysis which could serve as a basis for a systematic cross-country and cross-cultural comparison of urban sign systems. Against this background, this edited volume attempts to make urban semiotics a more comprehensive and systematic approach. In doing so, we find ourselves confronted with two principal challenges. First, despite the fact that social scientists, architects, geographers, literary scholars and cultural scientists have become increasingly inclined to adopt semiotic perspectives

to urban issues over the last few decades, cooperation transcending disciplinary boundaries remains the exception. As such the potential benefits of synthesizing approaches has rarely been exploited. On the other hand, a consensus is gradually emerging that any attempt to successfully decode the city as a complex system of social, cultural and political signs can only be considered productive if existing disciplinary fragmentations can be successfully replaced by an interdisciplinary (or at least co-disciplinary) approach to urban semiology (cf. table 1). As this volume brings together representatives of various disciplines with a multitude of subject-specific approaches, concepts and analytical instruments, it contributes to the launching of a rigorous dialogue on the multi-faceted character of research in the broad field of urban semiotics. At the same time, it aims to identify common ground and thus aims to foster a discussion which transgresses disciplinary boundaries. In this manner, experts with differing professional backgrounds come into contact with diverging or even contradictory approaches. This allows them to analyse and interpret their own topic from different analytical, methodological and theoretical angles, whilst staying within the confines of a shared “language” of urban signs. By this means, we wish to provide readers with an overview of the diverse, multi-faceted approaches to urban issues.

Second, however, we wish to highlight the fact that seemingly identical or comparable elements of urban space are encoded with very different meanings in different cultural spheres and that this provides a key challenge for all research related to urban semiotics (cf. Abu-Lughod 1990; Bartetzky/Schalenberg 2009). Urban space as such as well as objects in urban space need to be interpreted in the light of their respective historical, societal, cultural and political context – only

then will it be possible to “decode” them in a meaningful way, i.e. to draw conclusions from a certain carrier of meaning (“signifier”) in order to understand the content of its meaning (“signified”).

Ultimately, a convincing, systematic and culturally comparative interdisciplinary approach to urban semiotics is possible only if attention is paid to the specificities of context and the demanding (yet not unattainable) theoretical requirements of our research. The contributions to this volume introduce cases drawn from European, East Asian, Australian and Northern American experiences and reflect upon the implications of adopting a context-sensitive approach for their case studies. In this way, these key challenges are always kept in view.

The “insights into urban issues” represented in this book also reveal that urban semiotics wrongly leads a somewhat marginal, shadowy existence within the rich landscape of social theory. Despite the attempt by Bernd Hamm (1982) to attract attention to what he calls a “spatial semiotics” (“räumliche Semiotik”) and those authors who have followed suit with their introductions to architectural or urban sociology (cf. e.g. Bounds 2004; Gottdiener/Hutchison 2010; Schäfers 2006), contributions to urban semiotics have, to date, remained restricted to sketches and infrequent single case studies (at least in the German-speaking world).

A number of textbooks which aim to provide an overview of theories in the fields of urban sociology or urban geography have even neglected urban semiotics altogether. This is despite the fact that interpretive approaches such as (social) constructivist positions or techniques related to discourse analysis (as developed by Foucault and others) are repeatedly represented in textbooks and research practice. Moreover, hermeneutical

28 or anthropological (or ethnological) approaches which fall back upon different varieties of “thick descriptions” (Geertz 2007), have been refined and adopted, especially by qualitative urban studies (Döring/Thielmann 2009; Kokot/Bommer 1991; Sturm 2000). There are, however, a range of different methodological principles which tend to overlap in these semiotic approaches and some authors have consciously aimed for synthesis. Partial and more implicit references to semiotics, drawing on stand-alone assumptions or concepts from the field, can also be observed. Nonetheless, obtaining a targeted application of semiotic methods and concepts within the frame of empirical and applied research in the future requires a considerable improvement of its general analytical apparatus.

2 For an overview on issues which could not be considered here, see the website of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Semiotik ([www.semiose.de](http://www.semiose.de)) as well as various articles in the relevant journals such as *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* (which is the organ of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Semiotik e.V. (DGS) and published in cooperation with the Österreichische Gesellschaft für Semiotik (ÖGS) and the Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Semiotik (SGS/ASS)) or *Semiotica*, the “Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies”.

Such work does not, however, aim to add to the complexity of semiotic concepts, as this would only impair their accessibility and applicability for concrete research. Similarly, the development of overly simplistic models which suggest a dull and mechanic handling of predefined research categories is also not desirable. We can assume that the latter option is likely to yield interesting results on only very rare occasions. Instead, the contributions in this volume indicate that the prior challenge lies in clarifying the meaning and

range of semiosis for spatially oriented (urban) research: how does the process of constituting and assigning meaning work in the case of spatial, physically built signifiers? Once we pose this question about semiosis, it becomes obvious that it is not only the signifier (or transmitter) and the corresponding states and formats of transmission (denotation, connotation, primary and secondary meanings) that play a role. Instead, the processes related to a subjective construction of sense and an assignation of meaning are highly relevant – a fact which has remained epistemologically undervalued thus far. It is a huge challenge to produce credible results through semiological and hermeneutical analyses rather than merely plausible chains of reasoning (Chandler 2007: 221ff.). Without ignoring the still unanswered questions and desiderata of semiotically oriented analyses, the volume at hand illustrates the potential of hermeneutical and especially semiological (or semiotic) approaches through bringing together different studies from the interdisciplinary field of urban research.<sup>2</sup> In the following sections we list some examples and highlight generalisable findings which can be drawn from the individual contributions to this edited volume.

### *The multi-dimensional character of the built environment*

Urban analyses will necessarily remain one-sided if work (research, architectural drafts and planning concepts) does not give sufficient consideration to the functional, aesthetic and semiotically determined qualities of our cities’ built environment. This is a crucial insight which is repeatedly emphasised in the contributions to this volume. Urban buildings, streets, squares and green spaces exert a significant influence on

Form	Side-by-side research	Transfer of a method	Division of labour plus exchange	Integrated cooperation	Synthesis or modification	Integration of other sectors and actors
<b>Functioning</b>	Two or more disciplines observe an issue or respective aspects thereof; additive presentation of results (in edited volumes, research reports, etc.); synopsis provided by readership	A particular method is transferred from one discipline and applied to examine research issues related to another discipline; this transfer of method may or may not in turn exert influence the original discipline	One research topic taken from the disciplines involved is approached by means of repeated exchange of partial and intermediate results (hypotheses, data, conclusions, etc.); process is regulated via input-output steering	One shared research goal is pursued on the basis of refining the definition of the problem studied and by agreeing on approaches and concepts as well as on methods and the ways of their application	Modification of initial theories, concepts and methods with repercussions for the original disciplines or emergence of new disciplines with concepts, approaches and methods transcending existing disciplinary boundaries; both is possible as a result of intense forms of research cooperation	Cooperation with subject-specific relevant practical sectors or collective actors (affected groups, municipalities, planners, private companies, etc.) in defining research problems and suggesting shared targets and solutions; science itself becomes an actor or agent of change in this case
<b>Participants</b>	Academic disciplines	Academic disciplines	Academic disciplines	Academic disciplines	Academic disciplines	Academic disciplines and practice-related sectors or actors
<b>Goals</b>	Specialisation, consolidation of subject-specific knowledge	Extension or consolidation of particular analyses within one discipline	Innovation	Innovation	Innovation with regard to disciplines, methods, and theories	Relevance to practice, direct implementation of research results, transformation of sciences
<b>Other designations</b>	Multidisciplinarity	n/a	n/a	Codisciplinarity	Postdisciplinarity	Transdisciplinarity, Mode-2-science, Post-normal-science

Tab. 1: Forms of interdisciplinary research (a typology); Source: Stratmann, 2007: 100 (slightly modified and translated into English)

30 urban action patterns, since they allow and encourage certain actions whilst rendering others impossible. At the same time, however, the urban built environment is charged with various symbols which may also shape actions (e.g. whether polite and respectful or bold and lively behaviour appears more appropriate in a certain room depends on whether this room has a sacred air or rather a more casual and relaxed atmosphere). Taken together, these circumstances reveal the multi-dimensional character of the “materiality of the urban” (Prigge 1987).

Naturally, doors are needed in order to pass through a wall or a mural. At the same time, the symbolic substance connected to this wall or mural contributes to whether a person eventually feels invited to walk through this door or not. These statements are all but trivial, since numerous “calls for action” arise from our everyday environment – and individual agents ultimately comply with instructions without consciously reflecting on them in specific cases. Even the material condensate of urban lifestyles (which can become manifest in consumption patterns such as furnishings, fashion, cars, etc.) can be investigated in terms of its multi-dimension character, as Aida Bosch (2010) has revealed in her study of consumption and exclusion.

A city’s atmosphere, which becomes apparent to visitors quite quickly, if often in a subconscious manner, partly depends upon the self-staging of inhabitants and the forms this takes. It is not so much the things themselves, but their symbolic content which contributes to the production or maintenance of a certain urban image. On these grounds authors like Richard Florida (2003) or those dealing with the interrelationships between urban development and culture (e.g. the contributors to the volume edited by Gudrun Quenzel 2009) have repeatedly

pointed to the enormous significance of culture for the development of the urban economy. The city is the place where the production of symbols occurs and, thus, where new options for the creative ascription of meanings are continuously fashioned.

The football stadiums which were built for the Football World Cup in South Africa 2010 serve as a striking example of the multi-dimensional character of the built environment. This World Cup was a media event for more than just football-related reasons. The stadiums underline the importance of the symbolic power of built environments. According to the German broadsheet “Süddeutsche Zeitung” (4th February, 2010, page 40), the stadiums built exclusively for the World Cup represent much more than just a material addition to established urban sports venues. Instead, the stadiums’ architecture is potent in semiotic terms, as is their location within the city as a whole and the questions about the ways black workers were involved in the construction process. In all these ways, the stadiums indicate that Black Africa has re-discovered itself. They symbolise confidence, high performance, integration and hope for a better future. In this way, we can speak of the “multiple character” of the artefacts produced by human labour: at any one time, they are functional shells (houses, factories, schools, etc.), objects of utility, expressions of aesthetic (mis-)understandings and spatially condensed power relations as well as indicators of membership or techniques of exclusion. Finally, they serve as a (frequently ambiguous) symbol for “abstract” messages that can only be decoded precisely by reference to the relevant contextual (historical, political or cultural) knowledge.

## *Levels of semiotic analysis*

Another conclusion can be drawn from the contributions to this volume and from what has been said so far: semiotic analyses possess a “double character”. They may refer to two levels of urban analysis. On the one hand, the objects which together constitute the city in its material form can be analysed in a semiotic way. In this case, the aim is to understand and read the immediately visible and concrete elements of the city. This poses a particular challenge to comparative international urban studies because researchers must decrypt the specific codes which have emerged from particular geographical settings, historical contexts and cultures and become manifest in urban space. Only on this basis can we hope to begin to explain tangible urban processes and structures in a meaningful way (Abu-Lughod 1990; Bartetzky/Schalenberg 2009). This is not only of importance to forecasting, but for every kind of applied research which deals with the shifting dynamics of urban conditions and the experiences of urban residents.

Conversely, it is clear that serious mistakes in urban planning often result from urban analyses uninterested in semiotic approaches. This is true of interventions by urban planners in their own cities or familiar contexts as well as those conducted in foreign or unfamiliar urban contexts, since urban ways of life have become increasingly differentiated through the ever-progressing process of individualisation. The increasing heterogeneity of the urban population (also known as the pluralisation of lifestyles) enhances the complexity of urban planning. This complexity is further intensified by globalisation processes which have brought about an increase in urban tourism and migration. In this setting, spatial imageries tend to overlap with competing

claims for urban space often expressed in a symbolic way (think of the debates on the construction of mosques in some Western countries or the controversies on the call to prayer of the muezzin in some places).

In the light of these complexities, decoding becomes a highly demanding task and it is easy to become disorientated. Thus both the people involved in these urban processes and “outside” observers have often felt anxious and insecure while dealing with or discussing such issues (Reicher et al. 2010). Planning-related solutions often hover between an attempt to reduce complexity (e.g. by erecting symbolically charged urban gates or landmarks which are supposed to compensate for the perceived lack of a demarcation between the urban and the rural) and offering strategies which are meant to help people come to terms with the specific requirements generated by this increased complexity (e.g. orientation guides of all kinds).

However, a semiotic analysis should not be confined to dealing with the immediate materiality and objects of the urban. Instead, it also needs to take into consideration the equally important sphere where the urban expresses itself by means of literature, paintings and movies. The contributions in this volume which relate to these fields point to another crucial differentiation. On the one hand, a semiotic analysis, with respect to urban hermeneutics of textual, pictorial or cinematic self-expressions of the urban, aim to work out its interpretive value (What is said about cities? What kind of picture is being generated?). On the other hand, there is the attempt to discover the way in which, for example, movies themselves can be utilised as a tool of semiosis, as a method of hermeneutical or semiotic analysis of the urban and by this means pursues the goal of broadening the analytical apparatus of urban semiotics.

## 32 *Power – planning – semiotic enlightenment*

Some of the chapters in this book clearly illustrate that power relations must not be underestimated when it comes to debates on multilevel urban planning. Spatial planning is fundamentally based on values. It is therefore impossible to strive for a “neutral” way of planning which exclusively draws upon technical and logical reasoning (Allmendinger 2009; Short 1989). However, actual values and goals which are connected to concrete forms of urban planning are frequently not made transparent by the actors involved in these processes. Therefore, a semiotic (or, to put it in more general terms, hermeneutic) analysis can be utilised in order to create transparency and to decipher and disclose hidden codes and constructions of meaning. In this way, it can be demonstrated how alterations to diction can serve to alter fears and prejudices (whether they are justified or not). Sometimes these changes in diction even result from international agreements among actors who have an interest in these alterations. By this means, “insecticides” are known as “plant protection products” and “peripheral urban areas” can become “semi-rural paradises”.

In a similar sense, urban hermeneutics can make a contribution to societal progress by revealing how social change produces ways of thinking and speaking which lead to a stigmatisation of certain socio-economic or ethnic groups – even if these processes are not consciously conducted by certain interests. In an article entitled “Schneller Wohnen” (“Living Faster”), Schmoll (1990) demonstrated that the shift from Fordism to Post-Fordism, which brought about a gradual rejection of mass products, first made itself felt in West Germany by means of a growing rejection of prefabricated housing estates built in the

1960s and 1970s. Subsequently, it became directed against the lifestyles of those people who inhabited these prefabricated housing estates. Through a form of psychological transference, further enhanced by the media, the rejection of prefabricated housing estates thus generated a rejection of people who lived there, which, in turn, intensified processes of social exclusion. The numerous prefabricated housing estates which were erected in the former GDR became exposed to these processes of devaluation only after German reunification. Since that time, moving to these residential areas has become seen as a less attractive proposition – and many inhabitants find themselves stigmatized by being labelled as “those who continue living there” (Großmann 2007; Rietdorf/Liebmann/Haller 2001).

In an essay for which he received the “Edward W. Soja Prize for Critical Thinking in Urban and Regional Research”, Alex Schafran highlighted similar processes of shifting meanings and problem-definition through the example of inhabitants of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the United States. Due to “imprecise language use”, we can observe a significant shift in emphasis in debates on urban poverty. Instead of focusing on the poor physical condition of buildings, insufficient provision of infrastructure and the poverty of those living in these districts, the urban poor themselves are increasingly assumed to be the problem. As a result, the spatial displacement of these heterogeneous groups from their homes has been frequently suggested as a “solution” to this “problem” (Schafran 2009). This is another research field where urban hermeneutics can contribute to a better understanding of such processes.

As a basic principle and in accordance with our theoretical frame of reference, we can conclude that urban hermeneutics (and, hence,



urban semiotics) needs to be substantially integrated with data, concepts and theories drawn from social sciences and cultural studies in order to provide clear, insightful findings on urban development processes. This may also serve as an explanation for the (aforementioned) fact that many studies contain “a little bit” of semiotics. For many researchers, semiotic analysis certainly yields supplementary insights and hypotheses, yet it is seen as being ill-equipped to fully explore and comprehend research issues.

At the same time, the lack of a concrete set of assumptions, statements and arguments about urban issues can also be seen as an advantage of urban semiotics. Unlike other theories and approaches, it is not confined to a particular set of basic assumptions on how cities “work”. This is exactly why a conjunction of semiotic approaches with more extensive scientific theories and approaches appears to be particularly promising. It broadens our perspective, permits the development of new hypotheses and allows us to critically question many a “tenet” or “dogma” which has made its way into urban sociology. In this way, it might shed new light on well-established concepts in urban analysis, many of which have become somewhat worn and tired and in need of revitalization.

With this edited volume, based on our interdisciplinary symposium, “Reading the City: Urban Semiology in Cultural Comparison” (held at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar in October 2009), we are convinced that we can play a role in bridging existing disciplinary gaps and realising interdisciplinary synergies. Through their contributions, the authors in this book provide insights on urban semiotics and urban hermeneutics from very different and specific disciplinary angles. Apart from sociologists and geographers, philosophers of contemporary media, linguists,

literary scholars and art historians are represented in this book. This volume can therefore be located at the point of intersection between social sciences and cultural studies. At the same time, it mirrors those debates on image and imagery, which analyse image-based processes of cognition in a transdisciplinary manner and scrutinise pictures and the roles they play for the processes of scientific representational processes (for the concept of representation, see Webb 2009).

The editors are particularly pleased by the fact that the differing disciplinary approaches to the issue of urban hermeneutics, the varying epistemological interests and the diverse conceptual and analytic “toolkits” have not prevented a fruitful and productive debate. On the contrary, with an outlook based on mutual curiosity and respect, the authors have striven to define the shared foundations which allow for a penetrative analysis and sophisticated understanding of urban sign systems.

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# Herausforderungen einer urbanen Hermeneutik für das 21. Jahrhundert

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An einer Stadt – im baulichen, sozialen, wirtschaftlichen, kulturellen und politischen Sinne – bauen viele mit. Neben zahlreichen Berufsgruppen (Architekten, Investoren, Unternehmer, Lokalpolitiker, Mitarbeiter der Stadtverwaltung, Künstler etc.) sind es vor allem die mannigfaltigen Handlungen der Bürgerinnen und Bürger, die zu Eingriffen unterschiedlichster Art in den physischen und sozialen Stadtraum führen (Giersig 2008; Hassenpflug 2001; Short 1989). Im Idealfall entsteht dabei ein soziales System und baulich-naturräumliches Gefüge, das den Bedürfnissen seiner Bevölkerung weitestgehend gerecht wird. In einer Stadt überlagern sich jedoch sowohl die (städte-)baulich umgesetzten Erwartungen vergangener und heutiger Generationen als auch die zunehmend ausdifferenzierten, oftmals konfligierenden Präferenzen zahlreicher (und unterschiedlich einflussreicher) sozialer Gruppierungen. Zudem überlagern sich lokale Einflüsse mit solchen, die von der regionalen, nationalen und globalen Ebene auf die Städte zurückwirken. Die städtische Realität kann daher als ein vielschichtiges und mehrdimensionales „urbanes Palimpsest“ begriffen werden (Pauwels 2009). Das

Konglomerat aus diesen Schichten und Dimensionen lässt jede Stadt anders aussehen, macht sie zu einem Unikat: „New York [ist] nicht Wanne-Eickel“ (Berking/Löw 2005). Städte haben eine – mitunter schwer fassbare – „Eigenlogik“ (Berking/Löw 2008). Stadtstrukturen können sich zudem in erheblichem Umfang aus nicht-intendierten Nebenfolgen alltäglicher Handlungen der Bevölkerung ergeben. Beispielsweise wird Suburbanisierung mitunter als Nebenwirkung des Wunsches vieler Stadtbewohner nach einem vermeintlich naturnahen „Leben im Grünen“ erklärt. Massenhaft realisierte Einzelentscheidungen führen so – von den einzelnen unbeabsichtigt – zur eigentlich nicht gewollten Zersiedlung der Landschaft (zu dieser und weiteren Erklärungen der Entstehung suburbane Räume vgl. Stratmann in diesem Band).

Auf wissenschaftlicher Ebene erfahren diese von unterschiedlichen Akteuren und Handlungsebenen ausgehenden Eingriffe in den Stadtraum eine Analyse und Reflexion, deren Intentionen von der reinen Beobachtung über das Verstehen und Erklären von Stadtentwicklungsprozessen bis zur Produktion neuen Praxiswissens für die

38 Stadtplanung reichen. Die theoretischen und empirischen Zugriffe auf das „Thema Stadt“ sind dabei mindestens so zahlreich wie die beteiligten Disziplinen. Dies ist auch angesichts der Komplexität des Phänomens Stadt nicht verwunderlich. Im Interesse eines urbanistischen, umfassenden Stadtverständnisses, das auch geeignet ist, die Praxis der Stadtentwicklung zu informieren, wird von Stadtforschern und Stadtforscherinnen unterschiedlicher disziplinärer Herkunft jedoch immer wieder auf den interdisziplinären Dialog gedrängt (vgl. Waldheim 2010). Inter-, Trans-, oder Postdisziplinarität<sup>1</sup> sollen helfen, das komplexe Gebilde Stadt in den Griff zu bekommen.

<sup>1</sup> Insbesondere der US-Amerikaner Neil Brenner hat in seinen Veröffentlichungen wiederholt betont, Stadtforschung müsse heute notwendigerweise „postdisziplinär“ angelegt sein, wenn sie auch weiterhin ernsthaft das Anliegen verfolgen wolle, die zunehmend komplexen sozioökonomischen, sozialräumlichen und politischen Zusammenhänge, in die Städte und Stadtregionen eingebettet sind, angemessen zu erklären (vgl. dazu z.B. Brenner 2004: 23ff.). Postdisziplinarität muss dabei klar von Kodisziplinarität unterschieden werden: Während Kodisziplinarität von einer Kooperation eigenständiger Disziplinen ausgeht, verweist das Konzept der Postdisziplinarität auf ein Paradigma, welches eindeutig disziplinär ausgerichtete Methoden und Theorien als obsolet zurückweist. Es widersetzt sich so in ganz ähnlicher Weise wie der verwandte Begriff der Transdisziplinarität einer Spezialisierung bzw. fachlichen Subsystembildung. Eine trennscharfe und eindeutige Abgrenzung der Begriffe Trans- und Postdisziplinarität gestaltet sich – vor allem angesichts der Vielschichtigkeit und insgesamt uneinheitlichen Definition beider Begriffe – außerordentlich schwierig. Wegen der Akzentuierung von Praxis als transdisziplinärem Handlungsbereich ist anzunehmen, dass das Konzept der Transdisziplinarität noch von einem intakten Fundament disziplinärer Logiken ausgeht, die vermittels praxisbezogener, mithin transdisziplinärer Methoden, in einen nicht mehr disziplinär beschreibbaren Ansatz „integriert“ und überführt werden. Demgegenüber scheint Postdisziplinarität selbst dieses Bestehen eines Fundaments eigenständiger Disziplinen als Ausgangspunkt von Analysen per se zurückzuweisen, um sich letztlich eher ontologischen Betrachtungen hinzugeben.

Insbesondere die aktuellen Fragen der Zukunftsfähigkeit unserer Städte stellen – angesichts drohenden Klimawandels, abzusehender Erschöpfung vieler natürlicher Ressourcen und globalen Bevölkerungswachstums – sowohl eine große, Zusammenarbeit einfordernde Herausforderung für die Theorie und Praxis der Stadtentwicklung dar als auch einen geeigneten theoretischen Anker, ein Leitthema für die Organisation eben dieser Kooperation. Die urbane Semiotik lässt sich in diesem Zusammenhang als ein interdisziplinäres Handlungs- und Forschungsfeld begreifen, das danach fragt, ob man aus gebauten städtischen Räumen und den Elementen, aus denen diese geschaffen sind, Rückschlüsse auf soziale Verhältnisse und kulturelle Praktiken ziehen kann. Lässt sich Stadt dekodieren? Ist Stadt lesbar? Wenn dem so ist, wenn also die Dekodierungen empirisch belastbar sind, dann können die gewonnenen Erkenntnisse die Stadtanalyse vertiefen, das Verständnis von Stadt verbessern sowie den Nutzen der Forschung für die Praxis erhöhen.

### *Ziele und Probleme hermeneutischer Näherungen an die Stadt des 21. Jahrhunderts*

Die urbane Semiotik beschreibt und analysiert städtische Räume als Systeme von Zeichen, die mit vielfältigen sozialen und kulturellen Bedeutungen aufgeladen sind. Die Betrachtung der Stadt als interpretierbares Zeichensystem bildet dabei den integrierenden Rahmen für die Anlage dieses Buches. Bei der raumbezogenen Semiotik handelt es sich insgesamt bisher jedoch noch um ein disziplinär höchst fragmentiertes Forschungsfeld. Auch ein gemeinsamer Analyse-rahmen, der eine Grundbedingung für einen systematischen Vergleich urbaner Zeichensysteme

in unterschiedlichen Ländern und Kulturen darstellt, ist bislang nicht erkennbar. Mit dem vorliegenden Band soll vor diesem Hintergrund ein Schritt zur Entwicklung eines ganzheitlicheren und systematischeren Ansatzes urbaner Semiotik geleistet werden. Dabei sehen wir uns mit zwei zentralen Herausforderungen konfrontiert:

Zum einen hat die Tatsache, dass sich Sozialwissenschaftler, Architekten, Geografen, Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaftler in den letzten Jahrzehnten vermehrt um einen semiotischen Blick auf den Gegenstand „Stadt“ bemühten, bislang erst in Ansätzen zu fachübergreifenden Kooperationen geführt. Das Potenzial möglicher und erwartbarer Synergieeffekte konnte bisher noch nicht ausgeschöpft werden. Andererseits bildet sich allmählich ein Konsens heraus, dass der Versuch, die Stadt als sozial, kulturell, gesellschaftlich und politisch bedeutsames Zeichensystem in all seiner Komplexität zu entschlüsseln, letztlich nur dann Erfolg versprechend ist, wenn die noch bestehenden wissenschaftlichen Fragmentierungen zugunsten eines interdisziplinären, mindestens jedoch eines kodisziplinären Ansatzes stadtsemilogischer Forschung überwunden werden (vgl. Tab. 1). Der Band leistet insofern einen Beitrag zum gewünschten fachübergreifenden Dialog, als er Vertreter und Vertreterinnen unterschiedlicher Disziplinen mit einer Vielfalt disziplinär je spezifischer Herangehensweisen, Begrifflichkeiten und analytischen Instrumentarien konfrontiert und so einen intensiven Dialog über diese Diversität, aber auch die gemeinsamen Grundlagen der Erforschung des Themenbereichs „urbane Semiotik“ ermöglicht. Die – hier weit aufgefasste – Fachwelt wird auf diese Weise mit sich ergänzenden, voneinander abweichenden oder gar konträren Ansätzen in Berührung gebracht, welche es ebenfalls erlauben, das jeweils selbst behandelte Thema mithilfe

anderer Analyseformen, Methoden und Begriffsbildungen – aber gleichwohl im gemeinsamen Rahmen einer urbanen Zeichensprache – zu interpretieren und zu analysieren. Der interessierten Leserschaft wird dabei zugleich ein Überblick über den Facettenreichtum der „Zugänge zur Stadt“ geboten.

Zum anderen wird auch die Tatsache, dass identische oder vergleichbare Elemente des urbanen Raumes in unterschiedlichen Kulturen in ganz verschiedener Weise mit Sinn aufgeladen (kodierte) werden, als eine wesentliche Herausforderung an die semiotische Stadtforschung begriffen (vgl. auch Abu-Lughod 1990; Bartetzky/Schalenberg 2009). Objekte des städtischen Raums – wie auch dieser im Ganzen – sind demnach im Rahmen ihres jeweiligen historischen, gesellschaftlichen, kulturellen und politischen Kontextes zu interpretieren. Nur so ist ihre „Dekodierung“ – also das Schließen von einem Bedeutungsträger („signifier“) auf dessen Bedeutungsinhalt („signified“) – sinnvoll möglich.

In diesem Zusammenhang geht es darum, das Bewusstsein für die Notwendigkeit einer „kontext-sensiblen“ Forschung und für die weitreichenden und anspruchsvollen (jedoch keinesfalls unerreichbaren) Bedingungen zu schärfen, an die eine aussagekräftige, systematische und kulturvergleichende urbane Semiotik jenseits rigider disziplinärer Grenzen letzten Endes gebunden ist. Die Beiträge dieses Bandes, die Fallbeispiele aus dem europäischen, ostasiatischen, australischen und nordamerikanischen Raum behandeln und die die Frage nach der Tragweite der Folgen und Implikationen stellen, die eine kontext-sensitive Betrachtung des jeweiligen Fallbeispiels im je konkreten Fall mit sich bringt, behalten diese zentrale Herausforderungen stets im Blick.

Die in diesem Band zusammengeführten „Einsichten in die Stadt“ belegen auch, dass

40 die urbane Semiotik gegenwärtig noch zu Unrecht ein Schattendasein innerhalb der sozialwissenschaftlichen Theorienlandschaft führt. Zwar hat bereits Bernd Hamm in seiner „Einführung in die Siedlungssoziologie“ (1982) der „räumlichen Semiotik“, wie es bei ihm heißt, ein eigenes Buchkapitel gewidmet – und auch andere Autoren sind in ihren Einführungen zur Architektur- und Stadtsoziologie diesem Beispiel gefolgt (vgl. z.B. Bounds 2004; Gottdiener/Hutchison 2010; Schäfers 2006). Dennoch ist es bisher – zumindest im deutschsprachigen Raum – bei solchen Skizzen der wesentlichen Annahmen semiotischer Ansätze sowie bei einzelnen Studien, die auf deren Basis empirische Stadtforschung betreiben, geblieben. In so mancher Überblicksdarstellung zu stadtgeografischen oder stadtsoziologischen Theorien fehlt eine Darstellung der urbanen Semiotik gänzlich. Dabei findet in Lehrbüchern und in der Forschungspraxis durchaus eine Auseinandersetzung mit interpretativen Ansätzen wie etwa (sozial-)konstruktivistischen Positionen oder diskursanalytischen Verfahren (nach Foucault oder anderen) statt. Besonders in der qualitativ orientierten Stadtforschung kommen darüber hinaus weitere hermeneutische und auf Varianten der „dichten Beschreibung“ (Geertz 2007) zurückgreifende anthropologische bzw. ethnologische Ansätze zum Tragen (Döring/Thielmann 2009; Kokot/Bommer 1991; Sturm 2000). Da zahlreiche Spielarten methodologischer Zugriffe bestehen, sich nicht alle Ansätze eindeutig voneinander abgrenzen lassen oder bewusst ein Methodenmix angestrebt wird, finden sich in Studien, die auf den eben genannten Ansätzen basieren, jedoch immer wieder semiotische Anleihen im Sinne partieller, teils auch impliziter Rückgriffe auf die Semiotik bzw. einzelner ihrer Annahmen und Begriffe.

Es bedarf jedoch einer weiteren Schärfung des semiotischen Instrumentariums, damit es in der empirischen und angewandten Forschung in Zukunft leichter wird, zielführend mithilfe der Semiotik zu arbeiten. Bei dieser Schärfung geht es weder um eine weitere Komplexitätssteigerung semiotischer Begrifflichkeiten, die die Zugänglichkeit bzw. Anwendbarkeit der Methodik für konkrete Forschung nur reduzieren würde, noch um die Entwicklung übersimplifizierter Handreichungen, die die Möglichkeit eines stumpfen, mechanischen Abarbeitens von Forschungsschritten suggerierten. Letzteres Verfahren dürfte wohl nur in Ausnahmefällen zu interessanten neuen Erkenntnissen führen. Die vorrangige Herausforderung, so wird aus der Zusammenschau der einzelnen Beiträge dieses Bandes deutlich, besteht in einer Klärung dessen, was Semiose in den raum- bzw. stadtorientierten Wissenschaften bedeutet, wie also der Prozess der Sinnzuweisung bzw. Sinnkonstitution im Falle räumlicher, gebauter, physischer Signifikanten funktioniert. Es wird ersichtlich, dass in Beantwortung der Frage nach der Semiose nicht allein der Signifikant bzw. Sender und die entsprechenden Sendeformate, Sendestati (Denotation, Konnotation, primäre und sekundäre Bedeutungen etc.) eine Rolle spielen, sondern auch, und dies wurde erkenntnistheoretisch bislang unterschätzt, der Prozess subjektiver Sinnkonstruktion bzw. Bedeutungszuweisung. Die Herausforderung dabei ist, dass am Ende hermeneutisch oder semiologisch angelegten Untersuchungen nicht mehr nur „plausible“ Argumentationsketten stehen, sondern zugleich belastbare Resultate (Chandler 2007: 221ff.).

Ohne die noch offenen Fragen und desiderate semiotischer Forschung zu ignorieren, dokumentiert der vorliegende Band anhand einer Fülle unterschiedlicher Studien aus der



Form	Nebeneinander der Disziplinen	Transfer einer Methode	Arbeitsteilung mit Austausch	Integrierte Zusammenarbeit	Synthese oder Modifikation	Einbeziehung der Praxis
<b>Arbeitsweise</b>	zwei oder mehrere Disziplinen bearbeiten ein Thema oder jeweils relevante Aspekte davon; additive Darstellung der Ergebnisse; Zusammenschau erfolgt durch Leser des Forschungsberichts	bestimmte Methode aus einer Disziplin wird in einer anderen Disziplin genutzt, um dort eigene Forschungsgegenstände zu behandeln; Methodentransfer kann, muss aber nicht in die „Quelldisziplin“ zurückwirken	unter Austausch von Teilergebnissen (Aussagen, Daten) wird ein Thema von den beteiligten Disziplinen bearbeitet; Regelung des Prozesses über Input-Output-Steuerung	Bearbeitung eines gemeinsamen Forschungsziels durch Abstimmung über Problemdefinition und Konzepte (theoretische Ansätze) sowie über Methoden und deren Einsatz	Veränderung der Ausgangstheorien, -konzepte und -methoden von Disziplinen mit Rückwirkung auf die Stammdisziplinen oder Entstehung neuer Disziplinen mit fächerübergreifenden Konzepten, Ansätzen und Methoden; beides als mögliches Ergebnis intensiver Forschungs-kooperation	Zusammenarbeit mit themenspezifisch relevanten Praxis-sektoren bzw. gesell. Akteuren (Betroffene, Kommunen, Planer, private Unternehmen) bei der Bestimmung der Problemdefinition und Zielsetzung sowie der Entwicklung von Lösungsvorschlägen; Wissenschaft wird dabei selbst zum Akteur
<b>Beteiligte</b>	wissenschaftliche Disziplinen	wissenschaftliche Disziplinen	wissenschaftliche Disziplinen	wissenschaftliche Disziplinen	wissenschaftliche Disziplinen	wissenschaftliche Disziplinen und Praxis-sektoren
<b>Ziel</b>	Spezialisierung, Vertiefung des Fachwissens	Erweiterung, Vertiefung der Gegenstandsanalyse innerhalb einer Disziplin	Innovation	Innovation	Innovation in Bezug auf Disziplinen, Methoden und Theorien	Praxis, direkte Umsetzung von Forschungsergebnissen, Veränderung der Wissenschaft
<b>weitere Bezeichnung</b>	Multidisziplinarität	keine	keine	Kodisziplinarität	Postdisziplinarität	Transdisziplinarität, Mode 2-Wissenschaft, Post-normal-science

Tab. 1: Formen interdisziplinären Forschens (Typologie); Quelle: Stratmann, 2007: 100 (leicht modifiziert)

42 interdisziplinären Stadtforschung die bestehende Leistungsfähigkeit hermeneutischer, insbesondere semiologischer bzw. semiotischer Betrachtungen.<sup>2</sup> Nachfolgend werden dafür einige Beispiele und weitere generalisierbare Befunde angeführt, die sich aus den Einzelbeiträgen herausdestillieren lassen.

2 Zu Themengebieten, die wegen ihrer Fülle hier keine Berücksichtigung finden konnten, sowie zu weiteren Entwicklungen vgl. die Webpräsenz der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Semiotik ([www.semiose.de](http://www.semiose.de)) sowie die Veröffentlichungen in den einschlägigen Fachzeitschriften wie z.B. der Zeitschrift für Semiotik, „dem Organ der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Semiotik e.V. (DGS) in Kooperation mit der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Semiotik (ÖGS) und der Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Semiotik (SGS/ASS)“ oder *Semiotica*, dem „Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies.“

### *Der mehrdimensionale Charakter der gebauten Umwelt*

Dass Stadtanalysen notwendig einseitig bleiben, wenn die Mehrdimensionalität der nicht nur funktional und ästhetisch, sondern zugleich semiotisch determinierten gebauten Umwelt in Forschungsarbeiten, Entwürfen und Planungskonzepten nicht hinreichend Berücksichtigung findet, ist ein weiterer Befund, den dieser Band belegt. Die Mehrdimensionalität der „Materialität des Städtischen“ (Prigge 1987) ist darin zu sehen, dass die Gebäude, Straßen, Plätze und Grünflächen einer Stadt eine eigene Handlungsrelevanz besitzen, da ihre physische Struktur bestimmte Handlungsweisen zulässt oder verunmöglicht, zugleich aber die gebaute Umwelt mit Symbolen aufgeladen ist, die wiederum Handlungen beeinflussen können (z.B. eher pietätvolles, bedächtiges oder eher ausgelassenes Verhalten je nachdem, ob der Raum, vor oder in dem

sich eine Person befindet, durch seine Symbolik Sakralität, Erhabenheit oder Freizeitatmosphäre ausstrahlt). Eine Mauer oder Wand bedarf also zum Durchschreiten zum einen Türen, zum anderen legt der mit dieser Mauer oder Wand verbundene Symbolgehalt jedoch mit fest, ob eine Person sich zum Durchschreiten aufgefordert fühlt oder nicht. Diese Feststellungen sind keineswegs trivial, da von unserer Umwelt zahlreiche Handlungsaufforderungen ausgehen, denen die Akteure letztlich folgen, ohne sie sich im konkreten Fall explizit bewusst zu machen.

Selbst das materielle Kondensat der Lebensstile der Stadtbewohner, das beispielsweise in den Dingen, die sie kaufen (Wohnungseinrichtung, Kleidung, Auto etc.), sichtbar wird, lässt sich auf diese bedeutungsvolle Mehrdimensionalität hin untersuchen, wie dies Aida Bosch in ihrem unlängst erschienenen Buch „Konsum und Exklusion. Eine Kulturosoziologie der Dinge“ (2010) getan hat. Die Atmosphäre einer Stadt, wie sich Besuchern meist rasch und unbewusst erschließt, hängt unter anderem mit Art und Ausmaß der Selbstinszenierung ihrer Bewohner zusammen. Nicht so sehr die Dinge selbst, sondern ihr Symbolgehalt wirkt stadtimagine-pflegend oder -produzierend. Auch deshalb wird von Autoren wie Richard Florida (2003) oder in dem von Gudrun Quenzel (2009) herausgegebenen Sammelband „Entwicklungsfaktor Kultur“ immer wieder auf die enorme Bedeutung der Kultur für die wirtschaftliche Weiterentwicklung einer Stadt hingewiesen. Denn sie ist „Ort“ der Symbolproduktion – und damit auch der kreativen Schöpfung neuer Deutungsangebote.

Ein Beispiel für die angesprochene Mehrdimensionalität der gebauten Umwelt sind die neuen Fußballstadien, die anlässlich der Weltmeisterschaft 2010 in südafrikanischen Städten errichtet wurden. Aus einer ganzen Reihe von

Gründen war die Fußball-Weltmeisterschaft in Südafrika ein Medienereignis – samt der neu gebauten Stadien. Letztere unterstreichen die Bedeutung der Symbolkraft der gebauten Umwelt. Einem Bericht der Süddeutschen Zeitung vom 4. Februar 2010 (S. 40) zufolge sind die eigens für die WM errichteten Fußballstadien nämlich weit mehr als nur eine materielle Ergänzung von Sportstätten im Stadtraum. Von semiotischer Bedeutung sind die Architektur der Stadien, ihre räumliche Lage in den Städten und die Art und Weise der Beteiligung schwarzer Bauarbeiter am Konstruktionsprozess. Durch all dies signalisieren die Stadien, dass das schwarze Afrika wieder bei sich angekommen ist. Sie stehen für Zuversicht, Leistungsstärke, Integration und Hoffnung auf eine bessere Zukunft. Man kann also stets von einem „Mehrfachcharakter“ der Artefakte menschlicher Arbeit ausgehen: Sie sind zugleich und zumeist funktionale Hülle (Haus, Fabrik, Schule etc.) oder Gebrauchsgegenstand, Ausdruck ästhetischen (Un-)Verständnisses, räumlich gewordener Machtkonstellationen und Zugehörigkeitsdemonstrationen (bzw. Ausgrenzungspraktiken) sowie ein – häufig mehrdeutiges – Symbol für „abstrakte“ Botschaften, die sich meist nur mit je spezifischem historischen, politischen oder kulturellen Hintergrundwissen präzise entschlüsseln lassen.

### *Ebenen der semiotischen Stadtanalyse*

Aus dem bisher Gesagten folgt unmittelbar ein weiterer Schluss, der aus den Beiträgen dieses Sammelbandes gezogen werden kann, dass nämlich semiotische Analysen insofern über einen „Doppelcharakter“ verfügen, als sie auf zwei unterschiedliche Ebenen der Stadtanalyse abstellen können:

Zum einen können mit Mitteln der Semiotik unmittelbar die Dinge der Stadt – das, was ihre Materialität ausmacht – untersucht werden. Ziel der Forschung ist dann das Verstehen bzw. Lesen dessen, was in einer Stadt an Gegenständlichem unmittelbar sichtbar ist. Insbesondere für die komparative, international vergleichende Stadtforschung stellt dies eine große Herausforderung dar, denn es gilt, die aus der Lage, Geschichte und Kultur einer Region erwachsenen und im Stadtraum verwandten Codes zu entziffern. Erst wenn dies gelungen ist, ist es möglich, sich an das Erklären städtischer Prozesse und Strukturen in einem Untersuchungsgebiet heranzuwagen (Abu-Lughod 1990; Bartetzky/Schalenberg 2009). Dies wiederum ist nicht nur von Bedeutung für Prognosen, sondern auch für jede Art von anwendungsorientierter Forschung, die auf eine Veränderung konkreter städtischer Situationen bzw. der Lebensbedingungen von Stadtbewohnern abzielt.

Umgekehrt sind folgenschwere Planungsfehler oftmals das Ergebnis einer unzureichenden – semiotisch uninspirierten – Stadtanalyse. Dies gilt im Übrigen auch für das planende Handeln oder Eingreifen im eigenen kulturellen Raum. Denn im Zuge der voranschreitenden Individualisierung kommt es zu einer weiteren Ausdifferenzierung urbaner Lebensformen. Die wachsende Heterogenität der Stadtbewohner, die auch als Pluralisierung der Lebensstile beschrieben wird, erhöht die Komplexität planerischen Handelns. Die Globalisierung, die mit einer Zunahme des internationalen Städtetourismus und der Migration einhergeht, trägt überdies zur weiteren Komplexitätssteigerung bei. Raumsymboliken überlagern sich dabei leicht mit konkurrierenden, auch symbolisch zum Ausdruck gebrachten Raumansprüchen (man denke z.B. an den Moscheenstreit oder die Auseinandersetzung um den Ruf des Muezzins).

Orientierung bzw. Dechiffrierung wird dabei zu einer zunehmend schwierigeren Aufgabe, was mitunter zu Unsicherheiten bei vielen am Geschehen Beteiligten, aber auch bei „außenstehenden“ Interpreten führt (Reicher et al. 2010). Planerische Lösungen schwanken oftmals zwischen dem Versuch einer Komplexitätsreduktion (z.B. durch das Errichten symbolischer Stadttore oder Landmarken, die eine als fehlend empfundene Grenzziehung zwischen Stadt und Land wiederherstellen sollen) oder dem Angebot von Strategien im Umgang mit erhöhten Komplexitätsanforderungen (Orientierungshilfen jedweder Art).

Zum anderen kann sich die semiotische Analyse nicht nur unmittelbar auf die Materialität des Städtischen bzw. die Dinge der Stadt beziehen, sondern auch auf die ebenso wichtige Ebene der Stadtdarstellung in Literatur, Bild und Film. Die diesbezüglichen Beiträge des Bandes lassen die Relevanz einer weiteren Unterscheidung hervortreten, nämlich zwischen einer semiotischen Analyse bzw. einer urbanistischen Hermeneutik von textlichen, bildlichen oder filmischen Stadtdarstellungen mit dem Ziel, ihren interpretativen Gehalt herauszuarbeiten (Was wird über Städte ausgesagt? Welches Bild wird erzeugt?), und eines Versuches herauszufinden, inwiefern zum Beispiel der Film selbst Mittel (Werkzeug) der Semiose sein kann. Bei dem letztgenannten Ansatz würde es dementsprechend darum gehen, Filme als Methode einer hermeneutischen oder semiotischen Stadtanalyse einzusetzen. Hierbei wäre das Ziel also eine Erweiterung des Instrumentariums der urbanen Semiotik.

### *Macht – Planung – semiotische Aufklärung*

Aus einigen Beiträgen wird auch die nicht zu unterschätzende Bedeutung von Machtfragen, wie sie sich in der Stadtplanung und auf übergeordneten Handlungsebenen stellen, ersichtlich. Räumliche Planung basiert grundsätzlich auf Werten und kann daher gar nicht rein sachlich, neutral-technisch oder ausschließlich logisch herleitend vollzogen werden (Allmendinger 2009; Short 1989). Die tatsächlichen Werte oder Ziele jedoch, die mit einzelnen Planungen verbunden sind, werden oftmals von interessierten Akteuren bewusst nicht transparent gemacht. Eine semiotische bzw. – allgemeiner – hermeneutische Analyse kann daher dazu genutzt werden, Transparenz zu schaffen, indem verdeckte Codes und Sinnkonstruktionen dechiffriert und offengelegt werden. Verdeutlicht werden kann dabei auch, wie über propagierte Änderungen der Wortwahl Ängste und Vorurteile (seien sie nun berechtigt oder nicht) gezielt verändert werden sollen. Über – teils sogar internationale – Absprachen interessierter Akteure werden zum Beispiel aus Schädlingsbekämpfungsmitteln Pflanzenschutzmittel, aus Atomkraftwerken Kernkraftwerke und aus suburbanen Stadtrandlagen kleine Paradiese.

In einem ganz ähnlichen Sinne kann die urbane Hermeneutik zur gesellschaftlichen Aufklärung beitragen, indem sie aufdeckt, wie der gesellschaftliche Wandel Redens- und mithin Denkweisen produziert, die – ohne dass der Prozess interessengeleitet wäre – zur Stigmatisierung bestimmter sozio-ökonomischer oder ethnischer Gruppen führen. Bereits in seinem Buchbeitrag „Schneller Wohnen“ konnte Schmoll (1990) zeigen, dass im Zuge des Wandels vom Fordismus zum Postfordismus es zu einer allmählichen Ablehnung von Massenware kam, die in

Westdeutschland zunächst auf die in Massenausbauweise erstellten Großwohnsiedlungen der 1960er- und 1970er-Jahre übertragen wurde, um anschließend auch auf die Lebensweise der Bewohner dieser Hochhaussiedlungen zu zielen. Die Ablehnung des Massenwohnungsbaus bewirkte demnach über – psychologische und medial forcierte – Übertragungsprozesse auch eine Ablehnung der Menschen, die dort leben, sodass der sozialen Ausgrenzung der Bewohner der in Hochhaus- und Fertigbauweise errichteten Stadtteile Vorschub geleistet wurde. Die im Städtebau der DDR häufigen Plattenbausiedlungen durchliefen erst im Zuge der deutschen Wiedervereinigung seit 1990 einen solchen Abwertungsprozess, der sowohl den Zuzug in solche Wohngebiete für viele unattraktiv erscheinen ließ (und lässt) als auch mit einer Stigmatisierung der dort jetzt oder „immer noch“ Wohnenden einhergeht (Großmann 2007; Rietdorf/Liebmann/Haller 2001).

Alex Schafran weist in einem mit dem „Edward W. Soja Prize for Critical Thinking in Urban and Regional Research“ ausgezeichneten Artikel auf ähnliche Prozesse der Bedeutungs- bzw. Problemverschiebung hin. Betroffene sind in seinem Beispiel die Bewohner von ärmeren Stadtvierteln in den USA. „Unpräziser Sprachgebrauch“ hat dazu beigetragen, dass ganz allmählich nicht mehr die schlechten baulichen Zustände, die mangelnden Infrastrukturangebote oder die Armut der Bewohner dieser Viertel Gegenstand der Diskussion waren, sondern die Armen selbst zunehmend als Problem begriffen wurden. „Lösungen“ des „Problems“ bestanden in der Folge nicht selten in einer räumlichen Verdrängung dieser heterogen zusammengesetzten Bevölkerungsgruppen aus ihren angestammten Wohnvierteln (Schafran 2009). Auch hier kann die urbane Hermeneutik zu einer Präzisierung der Analyse

beitragen, um dem Verstehen solcher Prozesse noch ein weiteres Stück näherzukommen. Ganz grundsätzlich kann man abschließend feststellen – und dies spricht nicht gegen den hier vorgestellten theoretischen Bezugsrahmen –, dass die urbane Hermeneutik – und damit auch die urbane Semiotik – einer substanzwissenschaftlichen Ergänzung durch sozial-, geistes- und kulturwissenschaftliche Daten, Konzepte und Theorien bedarf, soll sie zu konkreten Aussagen zur Stadtentwicklung gelangen. Dies erklärt sicherlich auch, warum in mancher Studie, wie weiter oben bereits erwähnt, „ein wenig“ Semiotik vorkommt. Eine semiotische Analyse liefert zusätzliche Einsichten und Hypothesen, doch scheint sie vielen Forschern nicht auszureichen, um ihren Forschungsgegenstand angemessen zu erfassen. In diesem Fehlen konkreter Aussagen zu Städten liegt zugleich eine Chance der urbanen Semiotik: Anders als andere Theorien und Ansätze ist sie nicht festgelegt auf ein bestimmtes Set von Grundannahmen darüber, wie Städte funktionieren. Eine Verbindung semiotischer Zugänge zu Fragen der Stadtanalyse mit substanzwissenschaftlich ausgerichteten Theorien und Ansätzen erscheint daher besonders vielversprechend. Sie erweitert die Perspektive, erlaubt so die Generierung neuer Hypothesen und auch ein kritisches Hinterfragen so mancher „Glaubenssätze“, die in die stadtsoziologische Modellbildung im Laufe der Zeit eingeflossen sind. In diesem Sinne könnte sie ein neues, helles Licht auf bewährte sozialwissenschaftliche Konzepte der Stadtanalyse werfen, die inzwischen jedoch etwas angestaubt und blass wirken und dringend einer Auffrischung bedürfen.

Wir sind der Überzeugung, dass der vorliegende Band und das ihm vorausgegangene internationale und interdisziplinäre Symposium „Stadt lesen: Urbane Semiologie im

46 Kulturvergleich“, das im Oktober 2009 an der Bauhaus-Universität Weimar stattgefunden hat, dazu beitragen werden, bestehende disziplinäre Gräben zu überbrücken und interdisziplinäre Synergien zu realisieren. Selbstverständlich beleuchten die in diesem Band vertretenen Autoren das Thema „urbane Semiotik“ bzw. „urbane Hermeneutik“ dabei aus sehr unterschiedlichen, disziplinär je spezifischen Blickwinkeln: Neben Soziologen und Geografen sind unter den Autoren auch Medienphilosophen, Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaftler und Kunsthistoriker vertreten. Der Band lässt sich daher zum einen an der Schnittstelle zwischen Sozial- und Kulturwissenschaften verorten. Zum anderen findet sich in dem Buch aber auch die Debatte um Bild und Bildlichkeit wieder, in dessen Zentrum die transdisziplinäre Analyse bildlicher Erkenntnisvorgänge und die Rolle des Bildes im Repräsentationsprozess der Wissenschaften stehen (zum Repräsentationsbegriff vgl. Webb 2009). Besonders erfreulich für die Herausgeber ist, dass die unterschiedlichen disziplinären Herangehensweisen an das Thema „urbane Hermeneutik“, das je unterschiedliche Erkenntnisinteresse und die diversen begrifflich-analytischen Instrumentarien einer lebendigen und fruchtbaren Debatte nicht abträglich sind. Im Gegenteil: Mit Respekt und großer Neugier an der Position des jeweils anderen sind die Autoren bestrebt, auf konstruktive Weise gemeinsame Grundlagen für eine Analyse und ein Verständnis urbaner Zeichensysteme auszuloten.

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# Once Again: Can Urban Space be Read?

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Let me start with the answer to the question in the title: Yes, cities are readable. They are constructed essays informing their readers about society and the respective culture which have inhabited them. The art of decoding urban space is, however, far from straightforward.

Urban space is composed of three main dimensions: functional, aesthetic and symbolic. Taken together, these structures or layers are intrinsically related to the society which inhabits and produces urban space. Therefore the important question is not so much if cities are readable or not. Rather, the real question is how to read a city. Indeed, there has been a long discussion on the city's readability, influenced by famous linguists, anthropologists, philosophers or sociologists like Barthes, Lefèbvre, Eco and Gottdiener.

However the answers to the question of how to decipher the symbolic landscape of cities remain unsatisfactory. In this respect the situation has not significantly changed since Gottdiener mentioned that urban semiotic analysis is 'an unfinished project' (Gottdiener 1994). Although Barthes provides a truly universal definition of what the 'city' means (a space of communication,

a place to meet), he underestimates the signifying strength of urban centrality when the centre is seen as the place of most intensive communication, i.e. 'erotic space' (Barthes 1988: 204ff.). Although Lefèbvre offers us the deepest, most comprehensive understanding of the urban in the past and the present, he provides us with political semantics, assuming that all urban space is political, that the city is constituted by ideologies. His prioritisation of the political in decoding and recoding the city tends to hide both the cultural and universal dimension of the urban (cf. Lefèbvre 1974/91). Although Eco offers a variety of highly effective semiotical tools for reading the city, and although his semiotical analysis of Brasilia presents a very convincing example of how real life is able to undermine, even destroy and replace a planned signifier (Costas and Niemeyers city of equality), he underestimates the notions of difference (cultural difference and social inequality) in urban semantics (Eco 1972: 355ff.). Gottdiener may have pushed open the doors for a sociological understanding of urban semiotics, in that he helps us to make use of spatial analysis to understand social forces, structures, and conflicts.

50 Nonetheless, he tends (like Lefebvre) to neglect the urban hermeneutics of cultural and social difference (which is different from ‘social inequality’ or ‘social injustice’) in favour of a spatial semantics of materialised ideologies. How can we explain this continuing flaw in the debate? What is the problem here?

A little more than two years have passed since I challenged myself to convey the spatial specificities of the Chinese City to a professional audience unfamiliar with China. I wanted to find out what it is that makes a city in China a Chinese City in terms of its spatial characteristics. I did not aim to explore the reasons behind the uniqueness of Beijing, Shanghai, Xi’an or other Chinese cities. Instead, I was interested in extracting the shared features that make them Chinese cities and thus distinguishable from cities in culturally different parts of the world.

This ambition is necessarily based on two fundamental assumptions. First, we have to assume that something like the Chinese City really does exist and that some specific shared traits are observable beyond the empirical singularity of Chinese cities. Second, we have to assume that it is possible to read the city in terms of culture; that there exists a cultural hermeneutics of urban space, an art of urban interpretation that allows identifying something like the ‘sinity’ of Chinese cities.

Let us briefly turn to the first assumption. Admittedly, in the first instance urban studies always deal with individual cities, with their peculiarity, uniqueness and distinctiveness. In extreme cases, they even tend to label cities as deficient as soon as they appear to lack characteristics which make them unique. In times of inter-urban competition increasingly staged by the media and boosted in times of ubiquitous information, these cities’ capacity for development is often deemed to be

constrained by an absence of unique features. It is no coincidence that ‘urban exceptionalism’ plays a great role for those branches of urban research which are mainly preoccupied with topics such as strategic urban development and city-marketing. Similarly it is no surprise that the real pressure for ‘urban exceptionalism’ fosters corresponding urban theories: notions that cities are something like unmistakable (and in this respect incomparable) spatial ‘personalities’. Note, for example, the discourse about the ‘specific logic’ (‘Eigenlogik’) of cities (Berking and Löw 2008).

This is fine up to a point. However, theories like this run the risk of becoming ideologies, i.e. a universalistic understanding of the urban, once regarded as the only existing way to approach cities scientifically. According to such a universal interpretation of urban exceptionalism, it is not helpful -in terms of scientific understanding- to assign cities to certain cultural categories, orders or typologies. If the only *raison d’être* of a city is to set itself apart from any other, the question about shared characteristics has to be taken as less relevant or even superfluous. In the end individual difference constitutes the only characteristic cities really share with each other. Such a conclusion leads to the very universalism this theory attempts to avoid: a universalism of uniqueness.

By this means, those forms of urban research which attempt to understand cities by exploring their affiliations to certain cultural geographies (by assigning cities to cultural typologies, for example) tend to be overlooked. As a consequence research strategies which strive for a socio-cultural reading of the city are apt to fall by the wayside. Thus the decoding of shared elements, of common structures and patterns seems to be something researchers can do without.

Cities should not, either from a diachronic or a synchronic perspective, be understood as

only 'urban individuals'. Rather, we are always confronted by particular cultural – and therefore also geographical – types of cities: with both historical and contemporary urban collectives not only representing societal circumstances, but also cultural practices. Take the example of the German city Weimar. It is not only different to other German cities. Nor is it only different to other European cities or even from a Canadian or Chinese city. Instead, it constitutes something entirely different, since it belongs to another cultural urban archipelago, a different urban species than the Chinese or the Northern American city. It is not only unique in terms of being an urban entity, but also in terms of being a German – and – European city. However, regarded as a European city, it is a specimen sharing a number of urban codes with other European cities.

Having said this, we need to concede that issues such as 'difference', 'singularity', 'uniqueness' are vital for the discipline of urban studies. We are certainly concerned with identity and identities, but our concern involves an attempt to avoid one-sided universalism. More precisely, this means introducing a third layer between one which understands the city as a mere universal term (e.g. city as a 'superstructure', 'civilisation machine' or the like) and another for which the city constitutes a distinctive spatially defined individual (Berlin, Cape Town, Los Angeles, Beijing, Tokyo, Weimar). With the aid of the third layer, the city can be identified and analysed as a cultural phenomenon and thus also as a social sculpture. A Chinese city is of course a city. Each and every Chinese city is a distinct urban entity in itself. But in addition to this, it is a Chinese city as well.

What we need for a cultural urban analysis is a structural understanding of the city which goes beyond almost ontological assignments of reason

to cities (city as 'civilization machine' or 'creative milieu') or assessments based merely on routines or fashion. For this purpose it will be sufficient to accept a socio-cultural notion of the city as a hypothesis. This hypothesis could then be examined against the background of empirical facts. But how can this be achieved – especially in view of the fact that it remains unclear exactly how we are to identify socio-cultural differences. By what means is it possible to systematically differentiate between cities which belong to different socio-cultural geographies? In this context I found myself confronted with the question of how it is possible to read the city. At present, my particular concern is: How can the asserted sinicity of the Chinese city be proven?

In order to answer this question, urban semiotics offers itself as an appropriate method. After all, many of its proponents – from Roland Barthes (1988) and Henry Lefèbvre (1991) to Umberto Eco (1972), Mark Gottdiener and Alexandros Lagopolous (1986) – have claimed that natural or artificial, animate and inanimate components of our urban environment are able to generate communication and, as a consequence, can be regarded as signs (signifiers). This leads us to the question of whether we can physically detect built signs in and of Chinese cities which communicate 'in Chinese', which transmit Chinese messages.

I can very well understand if this question is rejected on the grounds that it is inappropriate. Once we observe a Chinese city, we start noticing streets, squares, residential buildings, retail shops, factories, parking lots, train stations and other kinds of functionally determined spaces. We observe urban elements which are not solely found in other Chinese cities, but in cities all around the globe. Since every city's spatial structure is composed of functional elements like streets, squares, residential buildings and so on or of basic elements

such as paths, edges, quarters, nodes, and landmark as pointed out by Kevin Lynch (1960), one might fear that nothing much is gained by trying to comprehend the Chinese case. Instead, it may be deemed more expedient to observe the Chinese city Beijing or Shanghai or Shenzhen and to assemble all the characteristics that make each of these cities a unique place in China and the world. One might also contemplate what these cities could or should do in order to sharpen their profiles, to enhance their singularity. Despite all these concerns, we will not abandon our project. Instead, let us cling to the idea that Chinese cities offer spatial elements which transmit Chinese messages – contents which can be recognised and understood in other Chinese cities, yet not in European, American or African ones.

Nonetheless, it is quite evident that urban elements are unable to transmit messages like written text or speech. If we follow the common classification of transmission types as proposed by the pioneer of semiotics, Charles Peirce, the format those urban signs use to transmit their messages is of an iconic nature where an affinity or similarity between sign and meaning (signifier and signified) is present; it might also be of an indicative nature if a natural connection between them exists; finally, this format can also be of a symbolic kind if the relationship between sign and meaning appears to be mainly arbitrary or conventional (Volli 2002). Perhaps there are even more formats of transmission. What is most important to note, however, is that urban elements constantly speak to us in a language which we cannot simply understand, a language which we first need to decipher – be it iconic, indicative or symbolic.

Spatially oriented semioticians have not failed to notice that the recipient – in our case the observer of the Chinese city – assigns meaning or sense to the signal he/she receives. It is

only through this assignment that the signals are transformed into meaningful messages. Thus, the recipient is partly involved in the construction of messages. But what is it that protects the observer or recipient from carrying out mere projections or arbitrary assignments of sense and meaning? It may be possible that a particular urban sign already reveals parts of its secret by means of its (iconic, indicative or symbolic) format of transmission. Perhaps it includes a kind of instruction sheet, to borrow Ugo Volli's interpretation of the method of reasoning Charles S. Peirce's termed *abduction*. In contrast to induction or deduction, abduction constitutes a 'weak', semi-logical kind of reasoning, what Peirce called an 'explanatory hypothesis'. This allows for a plausible (hypothetical) access to the meaning of transmitted codes. Thus we can assume that each specific transmission format of urban signs has its own specific way of providing bridges of meaning – bridges which we should have the heart to step on. It is in this quest for sense and meaning that the 'fundamental semiotic act' is made (Volli 2002: 13).

Apart from the variety of possibilities provided by hypothetical, associative and semi-logical forms of reasoning, I personally believe that Walter Benjamin's outline of the technique of superposition is of particular value in this quest to grasp the sense of urban signifiers. According to Benjamin, superposition refers to the ability to remember the new – for instance by regarding present urban elements as elements of a spatialised memory and, in so doing, as anticipations of prospective urban realities (Benjamin 1991, V1: 493, 576; V2: 1023f.). The technique of superposition points to history which is preserved in the elements of cities. In order to be able to assign sense in a meaningful, non-extrinsic and non-projective way, we need to take possession of this history which has always been inscribed in animate and inanimate things.

Let us take a look at an urban housing estate in China. We notice that it is enclosed by walls, fences and often also commercial perimeter block developments. Moreover, it possesses at least one gate with a gatehouse, guards, ground beams, rolling grills or barriers and sometimes archways are present as well. What, then, is the message of this spatial arrangement? What is denoted? Security problems? American lifestyle ('gated community')? Exclusiveness of specific social groups? (fig. 1)

A more thorough analysis of Chinese housing estates reveals that almost all of them tend to seclude themselves from their environment. Corresponding to this, considerably more than 90% of all Chinese urban residents reside in

such compounds. Are we dealing with a powerful temporary fashion here? Is it because of security problems?

This is hardly likely to be the case, since history has shown that Chinese urban dwellers have lived in spatially secluded neighbourhoods as long as anyone can remember. As we can conclude with recourse to the method of abduction, we are in fact dealing with something that is characteristically Chinese.

Let us now enter the residential area through the gate. We are struck by the fact that the residential buildings are without exception ribbon developments which flow in an east-west direction and hence are aligned

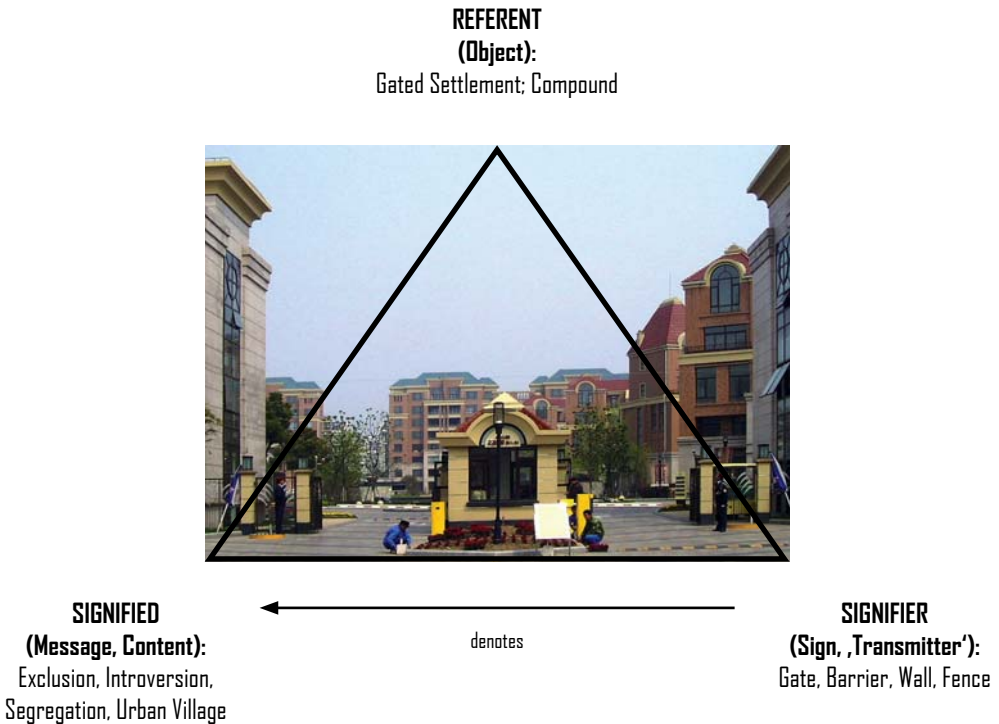


Figure 1 Entrance to compound in Shanghai

54 southwards (fig.2). Have the rules of modern urban construction (the Athens Charter, for example) influenced this orientation to the south? After all, the migration of the Fordistic (Bauhaus) Style can be traced from Western Europe via Leninist Russia through to Maoist China.

However, a closer, abductive look at Chinese history guides us to an appropriate explanatory hypothesis: this south orientation has existed for millennia. It was established due to climatic conditions: the desire to avoid the overheating of apartments when the sun is low in the west or east. In the course of time, this climatic advantage then became incorporated with the privileging of a particular family subgroup. In the case of the classic courtyard houses (Siheyuan), the main building aligned to the south was reserved for the highest-ranking family members, the elderly.

In the present, this privilege has been taken over and transformed into a symbol of social status by the rapidly growing middle and upper classes (Hassenpflug 2009: 47ff.). Since it is difficult to assess the significance of the rules

of Feng Shui (which have regained popularity recently) in this context, we regard our method of reasoning as abductive rather than inductive.

Finally, entering the settlement's centre, we find ourselves in an inner yard which is more or less designed to details. Also in this case, thorough analysis has shown that most housing estates dispose of such 'neighbourhood courtyards'. In combination with the gate and their enclosed character, Chinese housing estates speak a clearly introverted spatial language. Is there a message here – and if the answer is yes: what does it denote? (fig. 3)

I would like to offer the following explanatory hypothesis: neighbourhood courtyards constitute a symbolic space which connotes a primacy of the collective, the neighbourhood (and within that, the family) and in this respect a prioritisation of the *Gemeinschaft* (the 'community' in terms of the notion coined by Ferdinand Tönnies). This sociological assignment of sense can be further reinforced by, for example, referring to the Chinese phenomenon of upper middle class and luxury class housing estates featuring serial villa ensembles. In contrast each prosperous European villa owner would insist on attaching strong value to the singularity or distinctiveness of his luxurious premises. From this we can conclude that European villa suburbs denote strong individualism. In other words: They convey the prioritisation of the *Gesellschaft* ('society' or 'association, i.e. a society based on contracts, abstract, public driven institutions, market economy etc.; fig. 4).

The notion that compounds denote 'community', 'collective', 'family' or even 'urban village' could also be reinforced by referring to the opposing, markedly extroverted spatial language of the historical European city, which is epitomised by the cult of façades being enabled by the perimeter block arrangements. It is in this cult



Figure 2 Middle class neighbourhood with southward oriented lines

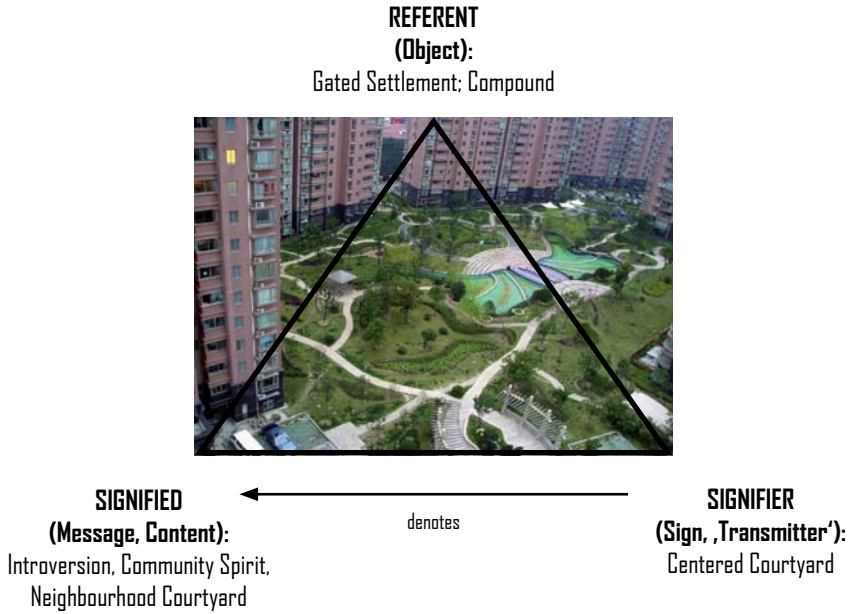


Figure 3 Neighbourhood courtyard (Shanghai)

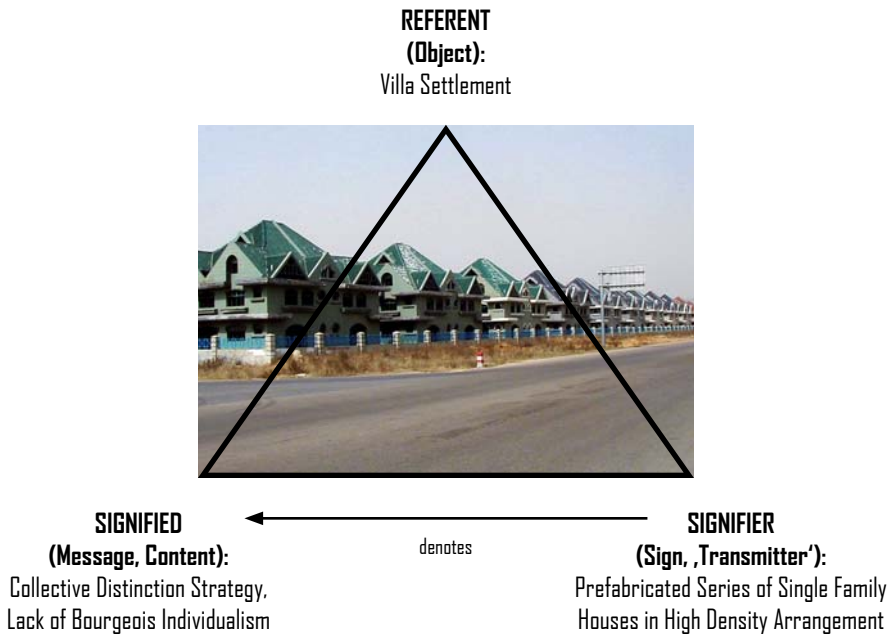


Figure 4 Serial arrangement of villas in compound (Qingdao)

56 that the spatial production of an individualising bourgeois society becomes manifest.

Additionally, once we take into account the enclosed character of Chinese housing estates, it becomes plausible (in terms of a spatially oriented sociological approach) to define the Chinese housing estate as an urban village. Hence, the introverted housing estate can be understood as an element of the Chinese city, one which rejects urban



Figure 5 Open space with commercial perimeter lines framing compound

openness, and civic extroversion. Consequently it turns the Chinese city into a cellular, bolted and barred landscape of urban villages, the buildings of which tend to align themselves – just like magnetised cuttings – in an east-west direction (fig. 6).

In contrast, commercial utilisations represent the pillars of Chinese urbanity, since they enrich its cities with flexibly oriented and open perimeter block structures. As a result, the open space – which is otherwise purely defined in functional terms – becomes vitalised, thus obtaining genuine urban qualities. This is, however, another story.

One to be told with reference to the comprehensive book of Chinese urban history, drawing on narratives surrounding linear centrality (symbolising a hierarchically organised society by a strongly structured sequence of space) or the dualism of ‘wide street and vertical block’, i. e. Campanella’s ‘superblocks’, which support the typical process of ‘compact urban growth’ (fig. 5 and 7).

Using the example of Chinese urban housing estates, we attempted to demonstrate how it is possible to read the city as a socio-cultural text or – to put it differently – how we are to identify and to interpret elements of urban space as meaningful socio-cultural signs. Amazingly these signs and their messages are not isolated or separated from each other. While the gate or fence refers to the neighbourhood courtyard, the yard refers to open space (not to be confused with ‘public space’). In turn, the open space then refers to the closed space of the neighbourhood, while the latter refers to linear centres, the linear centres refer to different kinds of urban villages (‘villages’ based on rural land use rights and closed neighbourhoods), and so on.

Obviously there exists a kind of syntagmatical (de Saussure 1931) or structural urban super code which indicates a close interrelation of all these signifiers and messages. The code we are thinking of is ‘community’ (family, collective, neighbourhood, *guanxi*) and its dominant role in the Chinese society. In terms of urban semiotics this super code provides a syntagmatical integration of heterogeneous urban signs in one decisive message: It is the spirit or rather the culture of ‘community’ which makes up what Barthes called the ‘sinity’ of Chinese urban space and its modes of production.

However, while collecting the messages and discovering their syntagmatical or paradigmatic status we should never forget to consider that



**REFERENT  
(Object):**  
Village in Shenzhen



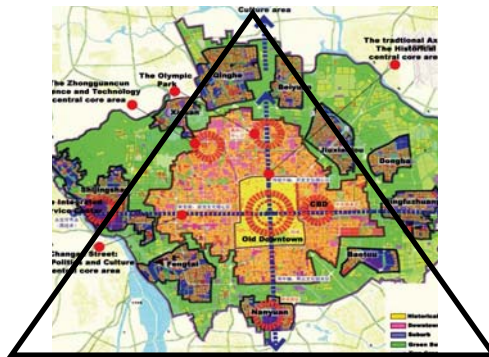
**SIGNIFIED  
(Message, Content):**  
Persistant Village Community;  
Informal Quarter; Labour Migrant Location

denotes

**SIGNIFIER  
(Sign, Transmitter'):**  
High Density Vertical Settlement; Hetero-  
topic Structure Surrounded by New City

Figure 6 'Village' in the centre of Shenzhen: These 'villages' derive from former rural villages the labour units of which were allowed to keep their rural (i.e. collective) land use rights. Over time business turned from agriculture to renting space for labour migrants amongst others.

**REFERENT  
(Object):**  
Beijing



**SIGNIFIED  
(Message, Content):**  
Social Hierarchy;  
Hierarchical Sequence of Meaning

denotes

**SIGNIFIER  
(Sign, Transmitter'):**  
North-South Axis (Dragon-Axis);  
East-West Axis

Figure 7 Linear centrality – historical axis and present linear centers of Beijing

sociological and cultural findings should initially only claim to be explanatory hypotheses which need to be secured by further hermeneutical efforts. Obviously the biggest challenge of decoding urban spaces seems to be the art of assigning relevant social and cultural meaning to messages transmitted by physical urban elements. This challenge of completing the act of semiosis by transferring often illegible, undecipherable, diffuse, unclear, incomplete, fragmented or even 'speechless' spatial messages into relevant knowledge is identical to those problems of understanding which the practice of hermeneutics has grappled with since its very beginnings.

However, the more profound the observer's knowledge of the history and culture of a particular country or region is, the more lucidity and clarity will be added to the assignment of sense and meaning. As Walter Benjamin put it: Urban elements wish to be remembered. From this point of view urban semiotics could be taken as an art of rescuing urban memory. And as memory holds the key to the future, the sphere of signs and symbols has to be regarded as an indispensable dimension of the urban, as one of the three dimensions to be considered in urban space production: the functional, the aesthetic and the semiotic dimension.

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# Stadt als Text, als Massenmedium oder als Event?

## *Wandlungen in den Lesarten des Urbanen aus semiotischer Sicht*

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Dass man die Stadt wie einen Text lesen kann, ist seit längerer Zeit von Semiotikern, Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaftlern festgestellt und beispielhaft gezeigt worden. Dieser Ansatz unterstellt dem städtischen Text eine rationale und diskursive Struktur, die einer analytischen Methodik zugänglich ist und so rekonstruiert werden kann, dass anschließende Interpretationen möglich sind. In den letzten Jahren werden die städtischen Texte durch mehr oder weniger aufwendig inszenierte Spektakel und Events überlagert, die nicht mehr „gelesen“, sondern erlebt werden sollen und an denen sich die Besucher aktiv beteiligen können.

Die Stadt wird zu einem Massenmedium, das zusammen mit anderen Medien um die Informations-, Kommunikations- und Unterhaltungshoheit in ihrem Einzugsbereich konkurriert. Dabei werden städtische Texte zu „Skripten“, die Rollenangebote für Bewohner und Besucher enthalten, nach denen ein urbanes „Schauspiel“ aufgeführt und gemeinsam interpretiert werden kann. Städte müssen Bühnen und Kulissen für dieses Theater anbieten, wenn sie nicht der Bedeutungslosigkeit

anheim fallen wollen. Den Wandlungen in den Lesarten des Urbanen entsprechen Wandlungen im Stadtbild, die einen veränderten urbanen Text konstituieren. Der Beitrag soll diese Entwicklung untersuchen und verdeutlichen.

### *Stadt lesen*

Wenn man davon spricht, dass eine Stadt „gelesen“ werden kann, sind unterschiedliche Bedeutungen von „Lesen“ im Spiel, die folgendermaßen unterschieden werden können:

a. in eine metaphorische Bedeutung, nach der alles Wahrnehmen und Beobachten von Welt eine Art von Lesen ist, bei der Zeichen und Texte identifiziert und gedeutet werden können; in poetischer Sicht ist in diesem Zusammenhang sogar von einem „Buch der Welt“ die Rede, dessen Text aufgeschlagen vor uns liegt, das ständig fortgeschrieben wird und das gelesen und verstanden werden muss, wenn man die Welt verstehen will (vgl. Blumenberg 1981);

b. in eine wortwörtliche Bedeutung, in der die Strukturen urbaner Systeme mit den Strukturen sprachlicher oder anderer kommunikativer Systeme verglichen und soweit parallelisiert werden, dass gleichsam analoge „Textsorten“ einer universellen Kommunikation identifiziert werden können, deren jeweils spezifischer Informationsgehalt sich mit anderen ergänzt und in komplexen Bedeutungsschichten überlagert (Beispiele in Gottdiener / Lagopoulos 1986); unter dem Einfluss medientheoretischer Ansätze, die „Architektur als Massenmedium“ (vgl. de Fusco 1967) oder als digitales interaktives Netzwerk begreifen (vgl. Rötzer 1995), wird das „Lesen“ durch medienspezifische Rezeptionsmethoden erweitert (z.B. durch digitale „Telekommunikation“) oder sogar in körperpraktischen Aneignungsformen von Nutzern urbaner Räume wiedergefunden (vgl. Dreyer / Führ 2002);

c. in eine „konzeptionelle“ Bedeutung, die, vergleichbar einem „experimentellen“ Ansatz in der empirischen Forschung, das „Lesen“ auf dem Hintergrund eines theoretischen Konzepts so definiert und operationalisiert, dass ein Rahmen und ein Instrumentarium für spezielle Untersuchungen mit genau eingegrenztem Horizont entstehen, innerhalb dessen konkrete Fragestellungen untersucht werden können; einen solchen Rahmen und ein entsprechendes Instrumentarium liefert z. B. die Semiotik, die verschiedene Zeichenarten und -charaktere, Zeichenverbindungen und -prozesse, Codierungen und Transformationen, Präsentationen und Repräsentationen, oft sogar in einem systematischen Zusammenhang (vgl. Kiefer 1970, Bense 1975, Dreyer 2003 und Hassenpflug 2009), bereitstellt; die Ergebnisse einer solchen „konzeptuellen Lektüre“ sind nur vor dem Hintergrund ihres fundierenden theoretischen Konzepts interpretierbar und erhalten dadurch ihr epistemologisches Gewicht.

Allen drei Bedeutungen von „Lesen“, die einzeln oder vermischt im weiten Kontext von „Stadt lesen“ vorkommen, haben gemeinsam, dass es darum geht, die Botschaften und Informationen, die die gebaute Umwelt vermittelt, zu verstehen und zu interpretieren; aufgrund der unterschiedlichen Zugangsweisen ergeben sich aber auch unterschiedliche Auffassungen und Sichtweisen darüber, was als Inhalt und Sinn urbaner Kommunikation angesehen werden kann. Neben der methodisch bedingten Divergenz gibt es auch noch einen historisch bedingten Umbruch, den man generell in dem kulturellen Übergang von der Moderne zur Postmoderne fundiert sehen könnte, der mit der Erweiterung der Uniformität zur Pluralität, der Homogenität zur Heterogenität und der Kontinuität zur Diskontinuität des Denkens und Wissens verbunden ist (vgl. Welsch 1987). Der „Wandel in den Lesarten des Urbanen“ wird im Folgenden in der Dominanz bestimmter Lektürewesen in bestimmten historischen Perioden gesehen, die auch Auswirkungen auf die Gestaltung der Stadt als „Produktion urbaner Texte“ hat. Auch wenn die Rollen der „Stadtleser“ und der „Stadtdichter“ ungleich verteilt sind, wird eine Wechselwirkung unterstellt, die sich aus den jeweiligen kulturellen Gemeinsamkeiten der „Lesarten des Urbanen“ ergibt. Als methodischer Hintergrund wird das theoretische Konzept der „Architektursemiotik“ zugrunde gelegt, das hier nicht weiter ausgeführt werden kann (vgl. dazu ausführlich Dreyer 2003).

## *Stadt als Text*

Die Auffassung von Stadt als einem „Text“, den man „lesen“ kann, ist eng verknüpft mit dem Denken der Moderne, insbesondere mit dem Strukturalismus der 1950er- und 1960er-Jahre (Vorläufer reichen über Walther Benjamins „Passagenwerk“ bis zur Romantik, besonders Victor Hugos „Sprache der Steine“, vgl. Hugo 1832: Kap. V.2). Dabei muss eine architektonische „Sprache“ vorausgesetzt werden, die aus Zeichen, Relationen und Regeln besteht, mit denen man bedeutungsvolle Äußerungen hervorbringen, vermitteln und apperzipieren kann. Solche Zeichen sind etwa Räume aller Art, Gebäudeformen und -typen, Bauteile und Materialien, Straßen und Plätze, Ornamente und Dekor; Regeln ergeben sich aus der Bau- und Planungstechnik, den Funktionen, der Stilistik und dem soziokulturellen Umfeld (vgl. Hesselgren 1967 und Luning Prak 1968). Diese Sprache der Architektur ist eng verknüpft mit der „Schrift“, in der sie dargestellt und vermittelt wird: die materielle und technische Realisation der Architektur, die allerdings ergänzt wird durch weitere Schriftsysteme der Information, der Werbung, der Stadtmöblierung und -begrünung sowie der „Kunst im öffentliche Raum“, die sich mit der architektonischen Primärschrift verbinden und diese überlagern (dass auch die Verbildlichung von Architektur durch Foto, Film und Video eine solche „Schrift“ sein könnte, muss hier außer Acht bleiben; vgl. Vetter 2009). Aus strukturalistischer Sicht sind es besonders die Strukturen der internen Funktionen, die architektonische Gebilde zu komplexen Texten machen und die mit Texten anderer Textsorten und -klassen kompatibel sind. Unter Rückgriff auf Barthes' Theorie der strukturalen Analyse von Erzählungen (Barthes 1966) hat Scalvini zu zeigen versucht,

wie literarische Strukturen ein Analogon zu architektonischen Strukturen finden: in der Beziehung zwischen Haupt- und Nebenräumen, im Gefüge der räumlichen Anordnungen oder in der Positionierung von räumlichen Elementen zwischen unterschiedlichen Strukturebenen wie Technik und Stil (Scalvini 1980). Die Fokussierung auf die internen Funktionen des architektonischen Textes hat natürlich eine Verbindung zu den externen architektonischen Funktionen, die als Arten und Weisen des Gebrauchs von Architektur aufgefasst und als wesentlicher Inhalt der architektonischen Botschaften verstanden werden können. Diese Verbindung zwischen Strukturalismus und Funktionalismus darf als ein charakteristisches Merkmal des Architekturverständnisses der Moderne angesehen werden, bei dem das „Lesenkönnen“ der internen Strukturen des architektonischen Textes zu einem „Verstehenkönnen“ der externen Funktionen führen soll. Die regelrechten „grammatikalen“ Strukturen des architektonischen Textes sollen die „Logik“ der funktionalen Organisation der Architektur aufzeigen und die prinzipielle „Rationalität“ des Gesamtkonzepts verbürgen. Die angestrebte Entsprechung von „grammatikalisch“ regelrechter Struktur und funktionaler Logik der Architektur folgt einem Ideal von Rationalität, das dann erreicht wird, wenn das menschliche Leben (vorwiegend als Gebrauch oder „Nutzung“ verstanden) in der geplanten und gebauten Umwelt ein genaues Spiegelbild erhält (z. B. als „strukturelle Ähnlichkeit“ bei Norberg-Schulz 1963/1968: 173 ff.). Dem entspricht architektonisch die perfekt geplante verkehrsgerechte Stadt, in der die Bereiche von Arbeit, Wohnen, Verwaltung und Unterhaltung sauber getrennt und deutlich markiert sind. Der tiefere Sinn dieser Architektur findet in der spiegelbildlichen Entsprechung von gebauter und funktionaler

62 Struktur seinen Ausdruck und kann nach eingehender „Lektüre“ von urbanen und räumlichen „Texten“ ermittelt und gedeutet werden.

### *Stadt als Massenmedium*

Mit dem zunehmenden Interesse für die Rolle der Medien in der Massenkommunikation der Spätmoderne (vgl. McLuhan 1964 und 1967) verändert sich auch die Auffassung von Architektur als Sprache oder Text. Architektur wird zunehmend als ein „Massenmedium“ begriffen, das vielfältige Informationen und Botschaften im Konnex mit den anderen Massenmedien übermittelt und verbreitet (bes. de Fusco 1967, Venturi 1972 und Dreyer 1997). Dadurch erhält auch das „Lesenkönnen“ einen anderen Status: Es geht zunehmend weniger um die ausschließliche Beschäftigung mit Sprache und Schrift (zu den Konsequenzen vgl. bes. McLuhan 1964 und Postman 1985) als vielmehr um die Auseinandersetzung mit komplexen Mischungen von Bildern, Grafiken, Texten und Installationen, die eine erweiterte Lesefähigkeit erfordern. Mit der zunehmenden Digitalisierung der Kommunikation durch elektronische Medien erhält diese Mischung eine weitere Dimension, die die Materialität mit der Virtualität der Zeichen und Texte ebenso vermengt wie die Unterscheidungen zwischen historischer Zeit und Echtzeit, Stillstand und Beschleunigung, Realität und Imagination. Es entstehen komplexe „Hypertexte“, die in einem multimedialen Netzwerk von analogen und digitalen Medien fungieren und eine andere Lesefähigkeit erfordern: Zeichen und Symbole aus völlig heterogenen Repertoires müssen so gelesen und verstanden werden, dass sie eine konsistente Botschaft ergeben können.

Dabei tritt an die Stelle des vertrauten „logischen“ Nacheinanders der Zeichen und Texte ein Neben- und Miteinander, das sich zu dynamischen und hybriden Konfigurationen aus Bildern, Texten, Grafiken und Installationen überlagert. Für ihre Zusammensetzung gibt es keine etablierten „Grammatiken“, sondern vielfältige Gewohnheiten und Konventionen, die im ständigen Wandel begriffen sind und dabei auch immer wieder auf vertraute Muster und Motive zurückgreifen. Für de Fusco und Venturi sind es besonders die Welten der Reklame, der Freizeit- und Unterhaltungsindustrie und des Kommerzes, die die Seh- und Lesegewohnheiten ebenso prägen wie die aktuelle Produktion architektonischer Zeichen. In der digitalen Transformation der gegenwärtigen Architekturentwicklung bekommen diese Zeichenwelten eine zusätzliche neue Dimension, die der „Virtualität“, die dem „Leser“ ein immenses Vorstellung- und Unterscheidungsvermögen abverlangt, um den architektonischen „Hypertext“ zu verstehen. Ebenso wie am heimischen Bildschirm wird das „Lesen“ im urbanen Kontext zu einem „Checken“ und „Navigieren“, um interessante Situationen und Informationen zu finden, die „heruntergeladen“ und gespeichert und erst im Nachhinein (wenn überhaupt) analysiert und interpretiert werden können. Dabei bleibt es oft bei diffusen Mischungen aus Erinnerungen, Dokumentationen und Assoziationen, oft ergänzt um Foto-, Film- und Videoaufnahmen sowie digitale Visualisierungen, die das Ergebnis einer solchen Stadtlektüre darstellen. Das kann poetisch-literarisch sehr reizvoll sein (vgl. Brinkmann 1979), ist aber für den urbanistischen Diskurs erst in Ansätzen zu dechiffrieren (z. B. Rötzer 1995).

Hier kommt ein zentrales Thema in den Blick, das schon in längerer Tradition der Anwendung

kommunikationstheoretischer Positionen auf architektonische und städtebauliche Sachverhalte steht: das der architektonischen Codes (vgl. Eco 1968). Unter einem „Code“ versteht man in der Semiotik ein jeweils besonderes und im Prinzip formalisiertes Zeichensystem, dessen „Ausdruckselemente“ zu einem ebenfalls prinzipiell formalisierten System von „Inhaltselementen“ in einer „konventionalisierten und sozialisierten Korrespondenz“ stehen (Eco 1973/1977: 170), sodass bei Auftauchen einer codierten Botschaft mit Kenntnis des Codes der Inhalt entschlüsselt und gedeutet werden kann. Neben Codes wie den Verkehrszeichen, Geheimsprachen, Morsezeichen, genetischen Codes, Moden und Ritualen hat man auch seit Langem architektonische Codes identifiziert und interpretiert (vgl. Eco 1968, Jencks 1977). Dabei sind sowohl formale wie funktionale, historische wie typologische, soziale wie regionale, populäre wie artifizielle und neuerdings auch digitale und mediale Codes identifiziert und analysiert worden (vgl. dazu Dreyer 2003 und 2010). Obwohl es keine konsistente Terminologie und Methodik gibt, scheint die Codeanalyse ein fruchtbarer Ansatz zur „Lektüre“ architektonischer und urbaner „Hypertexte“ zu sein, der besonders für das Verständnis spät- und postmoderner Architektur geeignet ist. Dabei ist es wichtig zu beachten, dass dem analytischen Ansatz auch eine produktive Komponente gegenübersteht: Den Prozessen der Decodierung entspricht der Vorgang der aktiven Encodierung, der als postmoderne Entwurfsstrategie zwar in Verruf gekommen ist (vgl. Dreyer 2009), aber im weitesten Verständnis als anthropologische Konstante des menschlichen Zeichengebrauchs ein unumgänglicher Bestandteil sozialer Kommunikation zu sein scheint. Deshalb kann man sagen, dass die Kompetenz zum Identifizieren, Lesen, Deuten und Interpretieren

von architektonischen Codes eine wesentliche Voraussetzung zum Verständnis spätmoderner und – bei einem weiten Codeverständnis – aller Architektur und Urbanistik ist (vgl. die umfassenden Untersuchungen zum gegenwärtigen Städtebau in China von Hassenpflug 2009).

### *Stadt als Event*

Ein auffallendes Phänomen der gegenwärtigen Architektur ist die Gestaltung und Nutzung der „Stadt als Bühne“ für vielfältige Veranstaltungen und Ereignisse des öffentlichen Lebens. Neben die traditionellen kirchlichen, sportlichen und volkstümlichen Festen, die ihren unverrückbaren Platz im Jahresablauf und in der städtischen Topografie haben, sind zahlreiche Events getreten, die nur manchmal an historische Gegebenheiten anknüpfen, oft aber einer aufwendig geplanten polit-ökonomischen Strategie zur permanenten Bespielung innerstädtischer Areale folgen. Die jeweiligen Ereignisse werden wie theatralische Aufführungen organisiert, mit „Skripten“, „Rollen“ und „Choreografien“ für die Aus- und Darsteller und kulissenartigen Einrichtungen für die Gestaltung räumlicher Situationen (für die Folgen amerikanischer Stadtplanungen vgl. Sewing 2003). Die Programme und Akteure solcher Veranstaltungen folgen einer eigenen Dramaturgie, die auf Mobilisierung, Aktivierung und Partizipation der Teilnehmer zielt, dabei allerdings oft nur passive Anteilnahme und konventionelles Konsumverhalten erreicht. Die massenhafte Beteiligung von Besuchern an urbanen „Spektakeln“ (Debord 1967) aller Art lässt allerdings auf ein tiefverankertes Bedürfnis nach besonderen Erlebnissen schließen, das ein zentrales Charakteristikum der gegenwärtigen „Erlebnisgesellschaft“ (Schulze 1992) zu sein scheint.

64 Die urbane Architektur versucht, diesen Anforderungen mit ihren Mitteln gerecht zu werden, indem sie die städtische Bühne einrichtet und nach thematischen Motiven gestaltet. In den Straßen, auf den Plätzen, in den Parks, in den Foyers öffentlicher Gebäude und manchmal mit ganzen Gebäudegruppen werden „Geschichten“ erzählt, die einem besonderen Anlass entsprechen (der auch sehr willkürlich sein kann), aber auch kollektive Träume und Fantasien verkörpern (nach dem Motto: „Unter dem Pflaster liegt der Strand“) und oft in kaum verhülltes Stadtmarketing übergehen (vgl. dazu Löw 2008). Im Wettbewerb der Städte um mediale Aufmerksamkeit, Investoren und Besucher sind solche Veranstaltungen zu einem beinahe unverzichtbaren Bestandteil kommunaler Politik geworden, die es vor allem auch erfordern, möglichst spektakuläre und singuläre architektonische Objekte von Stararchitekten als „Kulissen des Glücks“ (Schulze 1999) zu realisieren oder, falls im Bestand vorhanden, zu restaurieren und zu revitalisieren.

Als gemeinsamer Nenner für alle diese Maßnahmen und Prozesse hat sich der Begriff der „Inszenierung“ eingebürgert (vgl. Dreyer 1996 und Janson / Jäkel 2007), der eigentlich ein komplexes theatralisches Geschehen bezeichnet, das erforderlich ist, um ein literarisch oder musikalisch dramatisches Werk auf einer Bühne zur Aufführung zu bringen und die zugehörigen Rollen, Räume, Requisiten, Kostüme und Beleuchtungen zu gestalten. Auch wenn der Architektur vorwiegend die Aufgabe zukommt, die Räume szenisch so zu gestalten, dass das „städtische Raumtheater“ (Hassenpflug 2009: 15) möglich wird (und möglichst viele verschiedene „Stücke“ zur Aufführung kommen können), muss der gesamte Kontext einer Inszenierung mitbedacht und gestalterisch mitbehandelt werden. Es geht schließlich darum, dass sowohl die Veranstalter

(„Autoren“) und Darsteller als auch die Teilnehmer und Besucher sich in dem Spektakel wiedererkennen und darin ihren aktiven oder passiven Platz finden können, wobei die Rollen zwischen Darsteller und Zuschauer idealerweise austauschbar sein und einem ständigen Wechsel unterliegen sollen.

Diese „Stadt zum Mitmachen“ erfordert von allen Teilnehmern eine erweiterte Lesefähigkeit urbaner Zeichen, wenn sie über den bloßen Konsum hinausgehen soll: Bilder, Texte, Gesten, Handlungen, Installationen und Atmosphären (Böhme 2006) müssen simultan wahrgenommen, analysiert und gedeutet werden können, um daraus Impulse für eigenes Verhalten ableiten zu können. Das „Lesenkönnen“ umfasst hier neben der Rezeption konventioneller visueller, grafischer, situativer und aktionistischer Informationen auch körperhafte Aneignungsmethoden, z.B. durch sportliche oder spielerische Aktivitäten (vgl. Dreyer / Führ 2002), sowie zunehmend auch das mobile mediengestützte Navigierenkönnen in digitalen Netzwerken, die den urbanen Text überlagern. Damit wird das „Lesen“ von aktuellen Stadtinszenierungen zu einem Prozess, der eine umfassende Kompetenz in urbaner und medialer Kommunikation voraussetzt.

### *Abstrakte versus konkrete Stadt*

Abschließend soll noch einmal ein Blick auf die „Wandlungen in den Lesarten des Urbanen“ aus semiotischer Sicht geworfen werden. Dabei lässt sich feststellen, dass eine erste „Spur“ der Wandlungen so verläuft, dass die moderne Auffassung von Architektur und Stadt als Sprache oder Text abgelöst wird von einer spätmodernen Konzeption, die den massen- und multi-medialen Charakter des urbanen „Hypertextes“



hervorhebt, bevor eine postmoderne ereignisorientierte und aktionistische Sichtweise die Stadt als bildhafte Kulisse und Bühne für die Inszenierungen von Spektakeln aller Art zu begreifen und zu lesen versucht. Während in der ersten Lesart Strukturen von architektonischen Texten und Funktionen gesucht und verglichen werden, sind es in der zweiten Lesart die vielfältigen Codes, die identifiziert und gedeutet werden sollen, bevor in der dritten Lesart komplexe Szenen, die aus Rollen, Skripten, Bildern, Räumen, Installationen und Atmosphären bestehen, den Prozess der Lektüre leiten.

Man könnte diesen Wandel in einer zweiten „Spur“ als Übergang von einer syntaktisch dominierten über eine semantisch orientierte zu einer pragmatisch disponierten Auffassung von Stadt ansehen, der eine stetige Abnahme von Abstraktionen und eine graduelle Zunahme von „Konkretionen“ im Architekturverständnis zeigt (vgl. zur architektonischen Konkretion Hauser / Dreyer 2009), bei dem eine vorwiegend rationale Einstellung über eine „poetische“ Sichtweise zu einer spielerisch-aktionistischen Aneignungsform urbaner „Texte“ fortschreitet. Auf das „Verstehenwollen“ wäre damit über das „Erlebenwollen“ ein „Dabeiseinwollen“ geworden, in dessen Erfüllung sich der Sinn von architektonischer und urbaner Lektüre erschließen würde. Ob diese Wandlungen ein Fortschritt oder eher ein Rückschritt im kommunikativen Umgang mit urbanen Texten sind, muss hier nicht entschieden werden. Es wäre zu wünschen, dass der „Stadtleser“, vor allem aus dem professionellen Bereich, über Kompetenzen in allen drei modellartig vorgeführten Leseweisen verfügt, damit von ihm sowohl historische als auch aktuelle Stadttex te gelesen und interpretiert werden können.

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# Zur visuellen Kommunikation von Urbanität:

## *Schrift und Entschriftung des öffentlichen Raums*

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Die Metapher der Lesbarkeit von Stadt möchte ich in meinem Beitrag auf einen ihrer pragmatischen Aspekte eingrenzen: Die Stadt ist kein Text, wohl aber gibt es Text in der Stadt. Im Folgenden werden kommerzielle, subkulturelle, künstlerische und letztlich immer auch politische Textformen im urbanen Umfeld (1) anhand ausgesuchter Beispiele behandelt sowie ansatzweise der Umgang mit diesen als unterschiedlich motivierten Ästhetisierungen im Rahmen von künstlerischen Modalitäten der Einschreibung (2) sowie der gelegentlich funktionierenden Interventionen zur Entschriftung des öffentlichen Raums (3).

### *Markieren*

An allen Enden und Ecken des städtischen Raums finden sich systemkonforme, orientierende, kommerzielle oder subversive Texte. Sie sorgen für Disparität, sie tauchen nach eigenen Gesetzmäßigkeiten auf und gelegentlich verschwinden sie wieder. Die Regeln dafür sind festgelegt, sofern es sich um Verlautbarungen, Plakate und

Anschläge, Baustellenordnungen und dergleichen handelt. Die orientierenden Hinweise im Bereich der Signaletik und die Verkehrszeichen dienen der Orientierung von Menschen und der Koordinierung ihrer Bewegungsströme (Bauer 2009). Dazu kommen die allgegenwärtigen Botschaften einer vollständig kommerzialisierten Konsumkultur, widerständig dazu dann die der Kritik und des Protestes. Und schließlich buhlt noch die Kunst im öffentlichen Raum um Aufmerksamkeit: In Kulturstädten wie Weimar beispielsweise finden sich literarische Sinnsprüche an zahlreichen Hauswänden über die Stadt verteilt, auf andere Beispiele künstlerischer Intervention werde ich in diesem Beitrag noch eingehen.

Zum Einstieg ist die unvermeidliche Beobachtung von Walter Benjamin in Erinnerung zu rufen, der in seinen surrealistisch angehauchten Aphorismen „Einbahnstraße“ (1928) die entscheidende Beobachtung festhält, dass innerhalb der modernen Großstadt der Schrift eine neue Form im ontologischen Sinne zukommt. Das „Geschehen dieser Tage in Wirtschaft, Technik und öffentlichem Leben“ verlange es:

70 „Die Schrift, die im gedruckten Buche ihr Asyl gefunden hatte, wo sie ihr autonomes Dasein führte, wird unerbittlich von Reklamen auf die Straße hinausgezerrt und den brutalen Heteronomien des wirtschaftlichen Chaos unterstellt.“ Benjamin war Zeitzeuge einer Ära, in der nicht nur neue Medien den bürgerlichen Alltag durchdrangen, sondern in welcher durch die visuelle Kultur der Reklametechniken der städtische Raum sein Gesicht grundlegend verändert hat. Während nach seiner Beobachtung die Schrift von der Horizontalen des Schreibtisches sich in die Vertikale von Hauswänden und Plakaten bewegt, ist es der Reklame geschuldet, dass in der Stadt ein neuartiges „dichtes Gestöber von wandelbaren, farbigen, streitenden Lettern“ auf die Flaneure und Passanten niedergeht (Abb. 1) (Benjamin 2002: 196f.).



Abb. 1: Piccadilly Circus, London ca. 1930er-Jahre

Eine neue Bildersprache verändert die Dimensionen der urbanen visuellen Kultur. Der strukturierende Code für die öffentlich wirksamen Bildersprachen wurde in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts von neuen Akteuren entwickelt (Hartmann und Bauer 2006). Sie gehören

mittlerweile unabdingbar zur Wahrnehmung von Urbanität, die ohne Lichterglanz und Werbetafeln kaum mehr vorstellbar ist. Es handelt sich dabei meist nicht um reinen Text, sondern um eine Kombination von Schrift- und Bildelementen, deren Ästhetik reproduktionsbedingt sich zunächst auf typografische Elemente konzentriert und mit der Farblithografie und dem Aufkommen modernerer Druckverfahren wie Siebdruck und Foto-Offsetdruck zunehmend grafische und fotografische Bildelemente integriert hat. Gegenwärtig erlaubt Digitaltechnik neue Formate der Außenwerbung wie die an Gebäuden temporär angebrachten Riesenposter („BlowUps“), darüber hinaus sorgt Beleuchtungstechnik für neue mediale Plakatformen („Mega-Light-Poster“) und dank LED-Technologie finden sich zunehmend bewegte Bilder auf Videodisplays im öffentlichen Raum.

Bekanntlich bleibt diese Entwicklung nicht ohne Wirkung für die Wahrnehmung von Urbanität, wobei dieser Begriff schon einem Bedeutungswandel ausgesetzt scheint: von „urban“ im Sinne von verfeinerter oder distanzierter Haltung hin zu „Urbanität“ als Versprechen der vielseitigen Möglichkeiten und Nutzungen, die eine Großstadt den Menschen bietet. Letzteres kommt zunehmend laut und schrill daher, zu schrill, wie manche meinen. Besonders die Werbemittelindustrie treibt vieles auf die Spitze und dehnt jede sich bietende Oberfläche noch einmal künstlich aus, um sie dann mit ihren plakativen optischen Reizen zu überziehen. Dass Betrachter auf Schritt und Tritt dieser „Push“-Mediensituation ausgesetzt sind, wird von diesen aber nicht kritiklos hingenommen. In den vergangenen Jahren wird generell verstärkt kritisiert, dass es den Unternehmen im Kampf um Marktmacht mehr um ihr Markenimage geht als um tatsächliche Produktqualität geht – Stichwort „No Logo!“ (Klein 2001).

Man muss nun kein unversöhnlicher „Anti-Corporate“-Aktivist sein, um zu erkennen, dass die Markenindustrie in ihrem Kampf um die Aufmerksamkeit der Konsumenten in praktisch jeder Alltagssituation eine Art Kolonialisierung des Blickfeldes betreibt. Protest kommt etwa von Seiten der Stadtverwaltungen. Neben dieser politischen gibt es eine subkulturelle und eine künstlerische Ebene, auf denen Protest gegen die Proliferation visueller Kommunikation in städtischen Räumen zum Ausdruck kommt – bzw. auf denen dieser Protest funktionalisiert wird. Urbane Zeichensprachen unterschiedlichster Provenienz kondensieren Bedeutung an bestimmten Orten, und es ist kein Zufall, dass sie sich gegen eine Homogenisierung des Visuellen durch die Welt des „Corporate Design“ sträuben. Die Form, in der sie das tun, ist sowohl getragen von ihrem Anspruch auf visuelle Integrität als auch von den ikonoklastischen Gesten der Gegenkultur, die sich dann zum Missfallen ordentlicher Bürger als Graffiti-„Schmiererei“ an den Fassaden der Stadt wiederfinden (Abb. 2).

Soziologisch können Graffiti als Zeichen einer Aneignungspraxis öffentlichen Raums interpretiert werden, einer Praxis, die zunehmend einer Rückeroberung gleichkommt: Gegner ist die neoliberalistische Ökonomie, die Wirtschaftswelt mit ihrer globalen Marken- und Produktpolitik, die von lokalen Werbe- und Marketingagenturen visuell inszeniert werden. Bedingt durch die ständige technische Verbesserung von Präsentierungen gelingt ihnen dies immer perfekter und umfassender, wobei die Dauerpräsenz visueller Werbebotschaften deren soziokulturellen Akzeptanz jedoch eher schaden. Die Überflutung des öffentlichen Raums mit Zeichen und Schriften, die systemkonform kommunizieren, ist offensichtlich. Parallel dazu haben sich subversive Kommunikationsstrukturen

entwickelt, die den symbolischen Raum des Urbanen eigensinnig strukturieren. Besonders auffällig ist das Auftauchen von Graffiti seit den 1960er-Jahren; hinsichtlich des privaten Raums oder der Persönlichkeitsmerkmale ist in diesem Zusammenhang neben den Tätowierungen auch das in letzter Zeit so populäre „Piercing“ bemerkenswert. Die subversiven, sich Öffentlichkeit erschleichenden Zeichen kritisieren öffentliche Lesarten und treten zu einem ebenso andauernden wie fiktiven Dialog an mit jedem, der sie wahrnimmt.



Abb. 2: „Pixação“ Graffiti, São Paulo, Brasilien

Graffiti kann vieles bedeuten: Vandalismus im öffentlichen Raum, Subversion privaten Eigentums, Signatur tribalistischen Territoriums oder einfach nur Ausdruck persönlicher Kreativität, vielleicht illegitime Kunst im öffentlichen Raum. Eine Stimme des Protestes auf jeden Fall oder die Spur einer Aneignungspraxis. Der zugrunde liegende Kampf aber ist der zwischen System und

72 Subkultur, und er dreht sich um die Deutungshoheit innerhalb einer von der Werbeindustrie bereits nahezu restlos kolonialisierten Lebenswelt. „Meine Tags reproduzieren und kritisieren deine Schweinereien; sie machen sich über sie lustig; du sagst, dass ich die Mauern und die Türen der U-Bahn bekote, aber findest du nicht meine Werke origineller und weniger repetitiv als die deinen, die alles mit ein und derselben Marke wie mit Kot beschmieren?“ (Serres 2009: 62)



Abb. 3: „Style Writing“ in Berlin

Den französischen Philosophen Michel Serres beschäftigt dieser unmögliche Dialog, der zwischen dem rebellischen Sprayer und dem dominanten Werbefachmann angesiedelt ist – wer „sagt was“ im öffentlichen Raum und „wie“? Heutzutage markieren Unternehmen ausnahmslos alles, daher hat jedes Produkt ihre Marke und jede Dienstleistung ihr Logo. Selbst die Unterhose trägt den Namen ihres Designers. Es scheint, als ob ein jedes Ding auch nach dem Kaufakt noch im Besitz eines anderen bleibt, wenn dessen Namenszug ebenso untrennbar wie unübersehbar am Produkt haftet. Die Werbung wird

mitgetragen nach dem Kauf, ob man will oder nicht: Das Logo wirkt weiter, es unterwandert, altmodisch formuliert, jegliche Aneignung des Gebrauchswerts zugunsten des universalisierten Tauschwertes.

Der Protest dagegen ist alt, und vor der kapitalistischen Kommerzialisierung richtete er sich generell gegen die Obrigkeit. Wie eine aktuelle soziologische Studie (Lorenz 2009) zeigt, gründeten in Neuzeit und Aufklärung vandalistische Akte, die an öffentlichen Kulturgütern ausgeübt wurden, in der ständigen Demütigung und Ausbeutung der einfachen Menschen durch die adelige Herrschaft. Der Pöbel demolierte gern Baumpflanzungen und Gartenanlagen und einige Wut wurde an den im 18. Jahrhundert aufkommenden Straßenlaternen ausgelassen, deren Zweck eine bessere polizeiliche Überwachung der nächtlichen Stadt war. Im Zeitalter der Industrialisierung dann, wie der Hamburger Stadtarchivar Otto Beneke 1856 festhielt, kommt es verstärkt zum „Besmieren und Bemalen der Planken und Mauern mit unpassenden Wörtern und Zeichnungen usw.“ (zit. nach Lorenz 2009: 51).

In der Wissenschaft interessierte sich zunächst nur die Archäologie für Graffiti, in den Katakomben von Rom ab 1600 und bei der Ausgrabung von Pompeij im 19. Jahrhundert wurden Graffiti-Spuren untersucht. Als Zeugnis der menschlichen Kommunikation reicht Graffiti wohl bis in prähistorische Zeiten zurück, doch als urbanes Phänomen ist es modern definiert, vor allem hinsichtlich der unterschiedlichsten Formen semiotischer Aufladung von Umgebungen. Generell sind Schrift und Schriftbilder wesentliche Strukturelemente des städtischen Kommunikationsraumes, der im Unterschied zum ländlichen mehr durch indirekte, transpersonale Kommunikationsverhältnisse charakterisiert



ist. Dieses urbane System der Zeichen erzeugt im verkehrstechnischen Sinn Verhaltensmodelle, aber eben auch im lebensweltlichen Sinn: im Fall der Werbeflächen etwa als Konsumaufforderung, wobei Graffiti dann zum konterkarierten Zeichen alternativer Verhaltensoptionen werden kann. Das erklärt die ewige Aufregung der Spießler und jeder beliebigen Lokalpresse über die dauernden „Schmierereien“, die – kaum wurden sie teuer gereinigt – stets erneut auftauchen, und das nahezu zwingend: Weil eben jede Bereinigung, hinter welcher die Homogenisierungsabsicht bürgerlicher Verwaltung steckt, laufend weitere subkulturelle Artikulationswünsche provoziert. So steht, über die Aneignung von Bedeutungsraum hinaus, die Explizitmachung des subkulturellen Lebensentwurfs durch Graffiti in einer Tradition der ikonoklastischen Transformation von Werten (Latour 2002).

In diesem Sinn deklariert Michel Serres seine Sympathie für die Graffiti-Künstler der „Banlieue“, der Vororte von Großstädten wie Paris. Hier ist eine minder privilegierte Immigrantenkultur angesiedelt, die sich seit einigen Jahren – in der zweiten und dritten Generation mit ihren Interessen und Artikulationen in den öffentlichen Medien praktisch unsichtbar geworden – zur Explizitmachung ihrer Existenz in vandalistischen Akten anschickt. In New York war dies schon in der 1960er-Jahren virulent. Dort entwickelte sich mithilfe von Spraydosen eine neue Form von Graffiti, das „Style Writing“. Straßengangs mit unterschiedlichem ethnischen Hintergrund markieren ihr Territorium oder einzelne „Writer“ ihren Machtanspruch. Die Zeichen, die sie dabei im öffentlichen Raum hinterlassen, werden „Tags“ (Signatur des Writers) oder „Pieces“ (von Masterpiece) genannt und dieser Stil wird seit den 1980er-Jahren von den Subkulturen europäischer Städte kopiert (Abb. 3).

So ganz neu ist dies alles nicht, hier sei an einen gewissen Josef Kyselak erinnert, der im frühen 19. Jahrhundert überall in der österreich-ungarischen Monarchie sein „Kyselak war hier!“ hinterlassen hat; noch heute ist seine Signatur etwa an einer Säule im Wiener Stadtpark zu sehen (Abb. 4a). 1947 diskutierte ein Artikel der „New York Times“ das Graffiti-Phänomen „Kilroy was here“ (Abb. 4b). Dabei haben amerikanische GIs nur fortgesetzt, was Aufständische der Pariser Kommune und früher noch, der Französischen Revolution, begonnen haben: sich einer verschworenen Gemeinschaft zuzuschreiben, die sich gegen gewisse hegemoniale Machtansprüche



Abb. 4a/4b: Kyselak, Kilroy

stellt und dies in der Öffentlichkeit verschlüsselt kommuniziert.

Gegenwärtig ist Graffiti meist dem gegen- oder subkulturellen Bereich zuzuordnen, hat aber übergeordnete kulturelle Bedeutung und wird dort auch von kommerziellen Akteuren übernommen, beispielsweise in Werbekampagnen, die besonders Jugendliche ansprechen sollen. Graffiti treten neben die legalen Botschaften, die es in der Stadt zu lesen gibt. Sie kritisieren diese schon aufgrund der Öffnung eines parasitären Kommunikationskanals, sie unterlaufen die oberflächliche Wahrnehmung oder sie konterkarieren die offizielle Semantik von Orten. Es wird also in den städtischen Kommunikationsraum eine neue Bedeutungsschicht eingezogen. Graffiti transformieren Objekte auf der Zeichenebene oder schaffen eine Sichtbarkeit, die entweder subversiv oder schlicht expressiv codiert ist.

Die Lesbarkeit von Graffiti hängt ab von der Kenntnis der lokalen Codes. Wichtigstes Element von Urbanität im Sinne einer Frage der Macht ist der Kampf gegen die „Semio-kratie“ des systemkonformen Zeichenensembles, wie Jean Baudrillard einst das New Yorker „Style Writing“ deutete: ein Kampf, der sich gegen den deklarierten Unterschied zwischen Sendern und Empfängern von Zeichen richtet und in welchem er zu Recht den Ausdruck der gesellschaftlichen Machtfrage identifizierte (Baudrillard 1978: 23). Aber Baudrillard glaubte in Unkenntnis der subkulturellen Codes auch, die „Tags“ als bloße Namen würden sich jeglicher Interpretation entziehen – es handle sich hier um „leere Signifikanten“ im urbanen Raum, so die irreführende Behauptung des Soziologen, der die Stadt als ein „linguistisches Ghetto“ betrachtete, in dem nun eben ein „Aufstand der Zeichen“ ausgebrochen sei. An dieser Diagnose

ist mittlerweile unschwer die Trauerarbeit der 68er-Generation zu erkennen, die gerade in jenen Jahren ihre Hoffnung auf ein revolutionäres geschichtsphilosophisches Subjekt verabschieden musste.

### *Ästhetisieren*

Natürlich geht es bei Graffiti nicht allein um die Faszination der illegalen Botschaft, sondern um jene semiotische Aufladung, mit der andere Kommunikationen im öffentlichen Raum konkurrenziert werden. Die inzwischen auch in Europa längst verbreitete Graffiti-Szene vollzieht dies mit durchaus künstlerischem Anspruch. Sie versteht sich nicht als Resultat einer vandalistischen oder ideologischen, sondern einer durchaus kreativen Aktivität. Ihr sogenanntes „Style-Writing“ steht seit den 1980er-Jahren im Zusammenhang mit der „Hip-Hop“-Kultur.

„Hip-Hop“ ist „Street Culture“ und als solche ein aus Sprechgesang (Rap), Tanz (Breakdance) und Graffiti (Writing) bestehendes, identitätsstiftendes Ritual sozialer Randgruppen bzw. urbaner Subkulturen. Bei diesem Ritual handelt es sich gerade im Zusammenhang mit „Hip-Hop“ nicht immer um reale Gewalt, sondern um auf symbolischer Ebene ausgetragene Kämpfe, um „Battles“, in Parallele zu dem ursprünglich auch auf der Straße ausgetragenen „Rappen“. In soziologischer Hinsicht handelt es sich also um einen Habitus, den jugendliche Subkulturen im Kontrast zu traditionellen Sozialisationsinstanzen ausgeprägt haben; als „genuin großstädtisches Produkt“ gehören die Bilder des Städtischen zum „Hip-Hop“ wie zu keiner anderen Jugendkultur, ja ihr Authentizitätsgehalt misst sich geradezu an dieser Bildhaftigkeit: „Das Urbane tritt nicht mehr als gelebte städtische Kultur in Erscheinung, sondern

entfaltet seine Wirksamkeit als theatrales Gestaltungsmittel. Über die Bildinszenierungen des Urbanen wird ein urbanes Lebensgefühl weltweit vermarktet. Insofern erfüllt die HipHop-Kultur mit ihrer bildlichen Inszenierungspraxis eine Vorreiterfunktion bei der symbolischen Überhöhung des Städtischen in postindustriellen Zeiten, in denen Städte ihre Funktion als Standorte ökonomischer Produktion verlieren.“ (Klein und Friedrich 2003: 100f).

Ein sehr frühes Indiz dafür, dass diese subkulturellen Zeichen auch auf ihren ästhetischen Wert hin gelesen werden können, ist eine Ausstellung des „Museum of Modern Art“ in New York aus dem Jahr 1956, in der es Brassais Fotografien von Graffiti auf Pariser Hauswänden zu sehen gab. Auch die visuelle Gestaltung der Schriftzüge eines „Style-Writers“ zielen auf ästhetischen Mehrwert, dem keineswegs leere Signifikanten zugrunde liegen. Der „Writer“ selbst codiert seine Identität – und wer sich ästhetisch durchsetzt, wird zum Star, dessen „Masterpieces“ dann auch nicht mehr angetastet werden. „Tags“ selbst, die eigentliche Schrift, wird figürlich bis hin zum Logo, und ein guter „Style-Writer“ wird durchaus als Akteur von Kunst im öffentlichen Raum wahrgenommen. Dann folgen nicht selten öffentliche Aufträge zur Gestaltung einer Wand oder einer Straßenbahn. Firmen und ihre Agenturen haben Graffiti längst entdeckt, und so bereichern ihre Formen und Stile die Optik etwa von Plakaten besonders dann, wenn ein Unternehmen „Street Credibility“ vortäuschen will (ein Beispiel dafür sind McDonald's Werbeplakate in „Stencil-Optik“, Abb. 5). So kehrt eine vom geschäftssinnigen Getriebe der Agenturen verbannete Ästhetik durch ihre zynische Vereinnahmung zurück in den Diskurs der offiziellen visuellen Kultur. In Umkehrung dieses Trends zur Kommerzialisierung, nur um dies nicht unerwähnt zu

lassen, verwenden „Adbuster“ Graffiti im Sinne der ideologischen Kritik, indem etwa bestehende Werbebotschaften durch subversive Zusätze semantisch neu codiert werden (Lasn 2008).

Überdies ist Graffiti als Kunstform („Street Art“) mittlerweile offiziell anerkannt, aber auch in Schranken gewiesen worden. Gegenüber künstlerischen Ausdrucksformen im öffentlichen Raum fortschrittlich gesinnte Stadtregierungen – beispielsweise Helsinki im Jahr 2008 – haben sich dazu entschlossen, Graffiti nicht mehr ausnahmslos zu verfolgen und zu bestrafen, sondern erklären sie zum Teil der Stadtkultur. Der Bürgermeister von Wien folgte bereits 2006 dem Rat seines Kulturstadtrates und erklärte Graffiti entschlossen zur Kunst: Da aber Kunstwerke bekanntlich auch durch ihren Rahmen definiert sind, stellte man dieser Form der Kunstausübung nur definierte Flächen inklusive amtlich vorgeschriebener Nutzungsbedingungen zur Verfügung.<sup>1</sup>



Abb. 5: Werbung für McDonald's in „Stencil-Optik“

Es ist nicht nur der „Fast-Food“-Kommerz, der sich durch visuelle Zitate aus der Subkultur „Street Credibility“, also eine Spur von Wahrfähigkeit und Glaubwürdigkeit erschleicht, es ist offensichtlich auch die Kunst im öffentlichen Raum. Generell schlägt postmoderne Kunst ihr symbolisches Kapital gern aus ihrer deklarierten Nähe zur Subkultur, wenn nicht gar die Grenzen, die hier mehr oder weniger bestehen, durch die Akteure selbst überschritten werden.

1 Das Projekt „Wiener Wand“ – vgl. unter Impressum das „Wort des Bürgermeisters“, [www.wienerwand.at](http://www.wienerwand.at)

2 Presseinformation zu den Projekten, [www.linz09.at](http://www.linz09.at)



Abb. 6: Fassadenentwurf für Douglas, Stefan Sagmeister

Umstrittene Berühmtheit hat hier Banksy erlangt, ein bislang inkognito agierender britischer

Straßenkünstler, der mit Schablonen arbeitet und der längst seinen eigenen Galeristen sowie Website und Publikationen hat (Banksy 2007). Doch nicht nur im Fall Banksy hat Graffiti die Grenze zur kulturindustriellen Verwertung oder zumindest zu Kunstmarkt-affinen Äußerungen überschritten, ohne dabei den von der subkulturellen Ästhetik stammenden Anspruch auf Subversivität aufzugeben.

Ich wende mich nun kurz einigen Beispielen der Kunst im öffentlichen Raum zu, die Formen von Schrift in der Stadt vor allem konsumkritisch thematisiert bzw. diese Form der Kritik ästhetisiert haben. Zunächst die sogenannte Kunstmeile von „Linz 09“, einer der Aktivitäten der letztjährigen europäischen Kulturhauptstadt. Für die Kunstmeile wurden Schaufenster, Fassaden und Passagen der österreichischen Stadt an der Donau bespielt: Kunst am ungewohnten öffentlichen Ort, so lautete die Devise, und die beteiligten Künstler mühten sich, den gewohnten städtischen Kaufrausch mit einem sogenannten „Schaurausch“ zu konterkarieren.<sup>2</sup> Dass das Ergebnis dann wenig spektakulär ausfiel, entspricht einer freiwilligen Selbstbeschränkung so vieler Kunstproduzenten, die sich gern innerhalb des Kanons von genereller Erwartbarkeit bewegen. Eine Neudefinition eingespielter Gewohnheiten durch den künstlerischen Akt, der den Kaufrausch im Schaurausch aufzuheben vermag, übersteigt wohl die Möglichkeiten von Kunst, wie eine längere Geschichte einschlägiger Projekte zeigt (hier sei etwa auf das Scheitern der Situationisten verwiesen); wohl aber werden subversive Praktiken wie eben Graffiti und „Adbusting“ ziemlich ironiefrei kopiert.

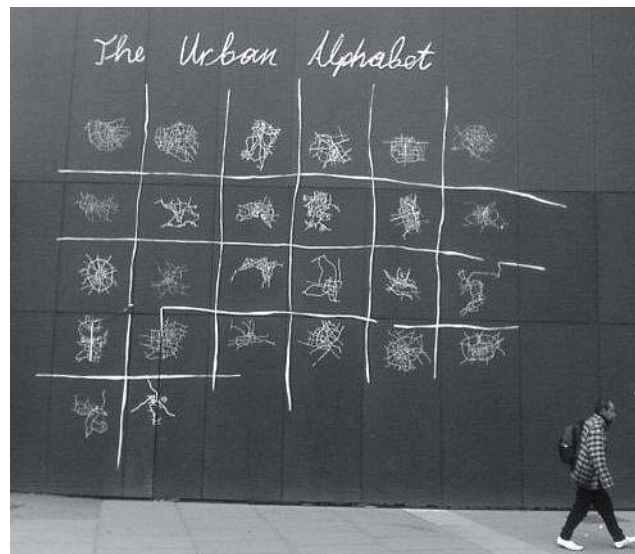
Beim ersten Beispiel (Abb. 6) handelt es sich um eine Umgestaltung der Fassade einer Parfümeriekette (Douglas) durch Stefan Sagmeister. Als Grafiker für einige Popmusiker

international bekannt geworden, beglückt er in jüngster Zeit die Welt gern mit erkenntnisfreien Sinnsprüchen (Sagmeister 2008) und wird dafür mit überdurchschnittlich hohen Budgets belohnt. Damit ließ sich dann auch die Fassade des Linzer Spielcasinos mit einem Blow-up neu gestalten, angeblich mit „Witz und Ironie“, wie in der Presseaussendung formuliert wurde. Wie originell: Am Ort der monetären Fantasien wird Geld selbst zum Thema, und zwar mit der Absicht, dessen Glücksversprechen zu dekonstruieren (Abb. 7). Umgesetzt in der „Hokusetsu“ (= Schneeberg) Typografie des japanischen Designers Ken Miki lesen die Passanten auf einer Fassade des Linzer Casinos zuerst den affirmativen Teil der künstlerischen Botschaft, nämlich das Wort „Money“, und in der Konsequenz auf der anschließenden Fassadenseite dann die Negation „does not make me happy“. Ungeachtet der Tatsache, dass Geld etwa im Falle einer etwas anspruchsvolleren Zahnbehandlung, die sich Durchschnittsverdiener schon kaum mehr leisten können, durchaus glücklich macht, ungeachtet solcher Implikationen also kann ein Künstler immer dann auf Zustimmung eines beflissen kritisch gestimmten Publikums hoffen, wenn Platitüden breitgetreten werden wie jene, dass Konsum und Massenkultur irgendwie grundsätzlich schlecht sind – eine immer wieder unspezifisch wiederholte Botschaft, die aber stets vorgibt, solch tiefeschürfende Erkenntnis ließe sich eben erst dank der künstlerischen Intervention gewinnen.

Kritik wird hier zum Teil des Betriebs. Es ist überaus bequem und auch lukrativ geworden, kritisch zu sein. Wer seine Botschaft im urbanen Raum anbringen will, muss sich mit den Mächten (Kulturstadtrat, Kuratoren) entsprechend arrangieren. Die Wut und Virilität von Graffiti geht dabei zugunsten ästhetisch anspruchsvoller



Abb. 7: Casino Linz

Abb. 8: *The Urban Alphabet*, Nikolaus Gansterer

78 und professionell gemachter Oberflächengestaltung verloren. Dazu ein aktuelles Beispiel aus Wien: „The Urban Alphabet“ von Nikolaus Gansterer, das schon aufgrund seines Titels hier Erwähnung finden soll. Es befindet sich als Installation an einer Wandverschalung des grundrenovierten Schnellbahnhofes Praterstern in Wien und sieht aus wie eine mit Kreide auf einer Schultafel angebrachte asiatische Bilderschrift (Abb. 8). Bei den aus ablösbaren Klebefolie bestehenden Zeichen handelt es sich um Kartografien internationaler Städte, die eine Art fiktives Alphabet als „Ausdruck einer globalen Sprache“ bilden sollen – eine „Intervention“ im Rahmen der Veranstaltungsreihe „Urban Signs – Local Strategies“ (Fluc, Oktober 2009).



Abb. 9: „Urban Characters“: Team Royal

Das Fluc am Wiener Praterstern war ursprünglich ein lokaler Projektraum für elektronische Musik und „hinterfragt“ mit der Präsentation aktueller Kunst deren Potenzial im öffentlichen Raum. Gansterer liefert einen von mehreren Beiträgen von Künstlern, die aber untereinander in keinem offensichtlichen Zusammenhang

stehen. Sein möglicherweise ironischer Anspruch, mit der Assoziation einer Schultafel auf eine offensichtlich veraltete Form der Wissensvermittlung hinzuweisen, wird nicht explizit. Die Zeichen selbst sind der kartografischen Symbolik entlehnt, lassen aber keine Systematik und damit keine Aussage erkennen. Sie sollen „Urban Characters“ darstellen, wobei die Installation der Materialität der Wandverschalung entsprechend im ersten Augenblick die eines wirklich außergewöhnlichen Graffitis ist. Wer näher tritt, bemerkt jedoch den Betrug, da es sich um ablösbare Klebefolien handelt. Wenn diese Kunst den ihr von offizieller Seite genehmigten Zeitraum hinter sich gebracht hat, darf sie spurlos verschwinden. So also sehen heutzutage subversive Kunstaktionen aus: umweltverträglich und auftragskonform. Die wahren „Urban Characters“ am Praterstern erschließen sich nur dem Betrachter, der gleich um die nächste Ecke biegt: Sie sind, Monate nach der inzwischen vergessenen Kunstaktion, immer noch vorhanden (Abb. 9).

### *Intervenieren*

Das letztgenannte Beispiel ist eines von vielen, bei denen es um leere Beschwörungsformeln von urbanen Zeichen und Zeichenhaftigkeiten geht. „Contemporary Public Art“ oder Kunst im öffentlichen Raum verlässt sich gern auf jene semiotische Valorisierung, die in den 1970er-Jahren begonnen hat. Seit Baudrillards theoretischer Nobilitierung von Graffiti ist die Perspektive daraufhin angelegt, jegliche Zeichenmanipulation sogleich als eine Implosion der „Macht“ umzudeuten. Doch eine Manipulation auf symbolischer Ebene bleibt eben dort stehen, wenn ihr nicht Maßnahmen auf politischer und auf technischer Ebene entsprechen. Schließlich

waren es Politik, Wirtschaft und Technik, die in den vergangenen vier Jahrzehnten unsere Kommunikationsverhältnisse verändert haben, und kein Aufstand der frei flottierenden Zeichen.

Mangels Beispielen, bei denen etwa Künstler auf Augenhöhe ihrer Zeit elektronische Infoscreens gehackt und damit für neue Lesarten des Urbanen gesorgt hätten, möchte ich abschließend noch ein analog realisiertes Beispiel anführen, das in die Zeichenwelt der Stadt interveniert hat, wenn auch sehr konsensuell, also mit Zustimmung aller Beteiligten. Es handelt sich um „Delete!“, das ebenfalls in Wien realisierte Projekt zur Auseinandersetzung mit der visuellen Kommunikation einer Geschäftsstraße. 2005 realisierten Christoph Steinbrenner und Rainer Dempf die „Entschriftung“ der Wiener Neubaugasse. Dies ist eine prominente Seitengasse der größten Wiener Einkaufsstraße und wie zum Verständnis festgehalten werden muss, sind die dort agierenden Kaufleute lokal bestens organisiert, d. h., sie organisieren Feste und andere Aktionen zur Belebung und Kommunikation ihrer Gegend. Für das Projekt „Delete!“ nun wurden, wie der Titel schon andeutet, im gesamten Straßenzug jegliche Schriften, Logos und Werbetafeln für zwei Wochen abgedeckt. Die Reaktion war enorm, es gab eine internationale Medienberichterstattung (Abb. 10).

Auch folgender Hintergrund muss erwähnt werden: In Wien dominiert im öffentlichen Raum relativ unangefochten die GEWISTA, ein städtisches Werbeunternehmen, das den größten Marktanteil in der lokalen Außenwerbung besitzt. Die Monopolstellung dieses flächendeckend agierenden Unternehmens, die mit immer neuen Werbeformen gefestigt wird, stört nicht nur Wild-Plakatierer und Sprayer: Hier bestimmt ein der sozialistischen Stadtregierung nahestehendes Unternehmen alles, was

im öffentlichen Raum sich als visuelle Kommunikation ereignet. Aspekte der urbanen Zeichenwelt werden allein auf deren kommerziellen Teil reduziert. Es gibt in Wien 6000 Werbeflächen im 24 Bogen-Plakatformat, das ist dreimal so viel wie in vergleichbaren Städten. Und ständig kommen neue Werbeflächen hinzu, wie City Lights, Rolling Boards oder Halbschalen an Licht- und Strommasten, die nur von diesem Unternehmen gestaltet werden dürfen; jede Fremdplakatierung auf diesen Flächen ist strikt verboten. Dieses Unbehagen an der Werbekultur in Wien führte zur Suche nach einer Form der künstlerischen Intervention, wobei aus Gründen der strafrechtlichen Relevanz eine direkte Bearbeitung der Werbeflächen nicht möglich war (Dempf Hrsg. 2006: 63f.).



Abb. 10: „Delete!“ im ARD nachtmagazin

Ein echtes „Delete!“ oder vollständiges Löschen von Schrift bzw. Werbebotschaften konnte wiederum nur symbolisch realisiert werden. Alle Reklameschilder und Werbungen wurden mit gelber Folie überdeckt, was die Absicht symbolisieren sollte, den öffentlichen Raum durch die Entschriftung zu neutralisieren: „Streichung,

80 Tilgung aller um die Aufmerksamkeit der Passanten werbenden Schriftsignale“ durch monochrome Farbfolien. Passanten nutzten die gelben Flächen, um projektbezogene und allgemeine Kommentare zu hinterlassen. Diese Kommentarfunktion wurde sozusagen zum ungeplanten Teil des Projektes, und doch wäre es übertrieben, hier mit wohlfeilen Formeln wie jener der Rückeroberung von urbanen Kommunikationsräumen zu hantieren (Abb. 11).



Abb. 11: „Delete!“

Ein anderer Aspekt, auf den „Delete!“ hinweist, ist die Verschiebung der ErfahrungsEbene eines städtischen Raumes. Der persönliche Eindruck bei einer Begehung ließ die Assoziation von Schneefall hochkommen: Die laute und bewegte Stadt wird bei Neuschnee entschleunigt und ihre Geräusche sind plötzlich gedämpft. An die multisensorische Erfahrung wird eher wenig gedacht, denn das kulturwissenschaftliche Paradigma ist immer noch „Lesbarkeit“, also Stadt als Text, und es wäre an der Zeit, Schrift und Sprache als Strukturmodell kultureller und persönlicher Erfahrung zu relativieren: „Indem Delete! gerade das Lesbare aus der Einkaufsstraße tilgt, setzt es nicht nur den Blick auf andere Dinge im Sinn einer Schule des Sehens frei, sondern es provoziert ein Nachjustieren des gesamten Sinnesapparates.“ (Dempf Hrsg. 2006: 93) Natürlich gefiel die Aktion den „Culture Jammern“ gut, und das „Adbusters Magazine“ hob eben jenen sinnesökologischen Moment hervor, wenn es über die Aktion schrieb: „Vienna’s mental environment was a little cleaner this past June thanks to a bit of „streetsculpture.“ Das Motiv der Reinigung ist hier mit einer anderen Konnotation angesprochen als bei jener des Entfernens von Graffiti im Sinne kleinbürgerlichen Ordnungstrebens. Der Wunsch, die städtische Umgebung einem originären Erleben zugänglich zu machen, steht ebenso unmissverständlich wie disparat hinter einer künstlerischen Aktion wie jener von „Delete!“, mag die angestrebte Nachjustierung des menschlichen Wahrnehmungsapparates auch noch so sehr als blaue Blume im Land der postmodernen Urbanität erscheinen.

Diesen erstrebten Moment einer (mit Plessner gesprochen) ästhesiologischen Konzentration gilt es abschließend noch auszuloten. Diese scheint als Form einer Konzentration, die einer Beruhigung der aufgeregten Sinne gleichkommt,



immer weniger leicht zu gelingen – als Askese hinsichtlich all der durch Geschäftsreklame und Außenwerbung künstlich herbeigeführten Eindrücke, jenes bereits von Benjamin bemerkten unaufhörlichen Gestöbers „von wandelbaren, farbigen, streitenden Lettern“ in der modernen Großstadt. Die neue Verkehrswelt, die im vergangenen Jahrhundert herangewachsen ist, und mit ihr die Elektrifizierung erzeugen ihre eigene Nervosität. Da sind einerseits die in den lebensweltlichen Alltag eindringenden Medien, mit denen bereits Sigmund Freud ein „Unbehagen in der Kultur“ (1929) attestiert hat, und andererseits die neuen Formeln und Strukturierungen der Einbildungskraft, die durch optische Medien und neue Visualitäten (wie Farbdruck, Fotodruck, Leuchtreklame, Verkehrsschilder) verursacht werden.

Wie der Philosoph Helmuth Plessner einst in seiner „Anthropologie der Sinne“ ausgeführt hat, erschöpft sich die Bedeutung der sinnlichen Wahrnehmung für den Menschen nicht in der Aufnahme von Informationen (Plessner 2003). Die Sinne werden „erlebt“ und das bedeutet: über ihre funktionale Bedeutung hinaus reflektiert und sind dabei ständig einer Suche nach dem ästhetischen Mehrwert ausgesetzt. Jenseits der billigen Klage über die Informationsflut kann hier nach einem Maß gefragt werden, welches die Sinnestätigkeit und die Umwelt in ein entsprechendes Verhältnis zu setzen erlaubt; das Motto „Weniger ist mehr“ darf dabei getrost herangezogen werden. Insofern kann eine kritische Kunstpraxis wie das Projekt „Delete!“ wesentliche Akzente setzen, um darauf aufmerksam zu machen, dass es eine Fülle von Korrekturmomenten gibt, wie auch immer verschieden artikuliert, um einer widerständigen Ästhetik Raum zu geben, die sich dem werbeindustriell gestalteten Projektionsfeld einer Waren- und Konsumwelt

entgegensetzt. Entfaltet Kunst traditionell eine Sphäre des ästhetischen Scheins, eine von der Lebenswelt abgesetzte Sondersphäre, so ist sie auch in diesem Fall nicht rückübersetzbar auf den Alltag, den nach bloß vierzehn Tagen in der Wiener Neubaugasse wieder die Welt der Geschäfte mit ihren Reklameschriftzügen übernommen haben. In dem mit einer Verhüllungsstrategie arbeitenden Projekt artikuliert sich unfreiwillig die Machtlosigkeit der künstlerischen Aktion, die höchstens temporäre Wahrnehmungsoptionen anbietet und damit eine Debatte auslöst, nicht aber die Verhältnisse ändern kann.

3 Vgl. den Bericht des Handelsblatt-Korrespondenten Alexander Busch: Rückkehr der Nacht, 19.1.2008 - <http://www.wiwo.de/lifestyle/rueckkehr-der-nacht-262463/> (nachfolgende Zitate ebd.)

Kann kritische Kunstpraxis eine dominante Hegemonie infrage stellen? Nein, wie Chantal Mouffe diagnostiziert: Sie kann es sich nämlich nicht leisten, traditionelle Formen der „politischen“ Intervention außen vor zu lassen (vgl. in: Dempf, Hrsg. 2006: 146f). Wer die Homogenisierung der visuellen Codes durch die neoliberale Ideologie im Stadtbild kritisieren will, muss auf einer grundsätzlichen Ebene antreten – das kann nur die Legislative leisten. Dafür gibt es, als Reinigung nicht bloß einer Geschäftsstraße, sondern einer ganzen Stadt, seit 2007 ein prominentes Beispiel: São Paulo – eine brasilianische Stadt von hoher Industriedichte und großem Verkehrsaufkommen – wurde durch das „Lei Cidade Limpa“ (Gesetz der sauberen Stadt) des neu gewählten Bürgermeisters Gilberto Kassab praktisch von einem Tag auf den anderen werbefrei gemacht. Die Logos und Aufschriften an den Fassaden mussten verschwinden, alles, was

82 über eine bestimmte Größe hinausging: die Plakate, die Schilder sowie die riesigen Leuchtreklamen; faszinierte Beobachter sprachen von einer Rückkehr der Nacht.<sup>3</sup> Solches kann nur mittels politischer Macht umgesetzt werden. Im Sinne eines „ästhetischen, kulturellen und ökologischen Wohlergehens“ der Stadt wurde das neue Gesetz drastisch vollzogen. Die von der Außenwerbung befreite Stadt wirkte wie von einer Maske befreit – was den Bewohnern gefällt. Das Gesicht der Stadt war wieder das der Architektur, nachdem die Werbekosmetik verschwunden war (Abb. 12).



Abb. 12a/12b: São Paulo

Wie der brasilianische Filmregisseur Fernando Meirelles (u.a. „City of God“, „Blindness“) dazu sagte: „Endlich kann ich die Stadt sehen, statt sie permanent lesen zu müssen.“

„Schrift“, so der Medienphilosoph Vilém Flusser, ist in ihrer kulturellen Funktion durch die neuen Aufzeichnungsmedien der technischen Moderne infrage gestellt (Flusser 1987). Die Mediengeste des Schreibens hat er an die Absicht der Herstellung eines bedeutenden Ganzen gebunden, wie einen geschlossenen Text oder ein Buch, also ein Werk, was in einer zum Performativen tendierenden Kultur langsam an Stellenwert verliert. Ich möchte abschließend nur einen seiner Gedanken aufgreifen, der uns das Phänomen „Schrift“ noch einmal in einem anderen Lichte zeigt. Flusser war selbst viele Jahre in São Paulo heimisch, doch da er 1991 verstarb, konnte er die radikale ästhetische Veränderung dieser Stadt natürlich nicht erleben; in einem Sammelband über „Urbane Milieus“ hat er sich zuvor jedoch noch mit den Codes der brasilianischen Stadt befasst (vgl. in Flusser 1994: 287ff.). Er bemerkt hier vor allem die vorherrschende Geste der „bildherstellenden Intellektuellen“ – der Funktionselite aus Architekten, Planern, Intellektuellen, Künstlern und Medienleuten. Dies steht offensichtlich für die überkommene Praxis von Intellektuellen, die Teilnahme am Urbanitäts-Diskurs auf jene Code-Produzenten zu beschränken, deren Modelle auf die offiziellen Lesarten abgestellt sind. Was umso erstaunlicher ist, da Flusser durchaus neugierig in der Vielzahl der Codes herumstochert und nach lebensraumgestaltenden Alternativen fragt. Die Überblendung von europäisch-rationaler Bewusstseinsform mit dem nicht-okzidentalen magischen Denken im Kulturraum der brasilianischen Stadt übersieht er dabei nicht. Aber er bleibt insofern Kulturpessimist, als er behauptet, ein in Werbeagenturen beheimateter neuer

„Menschenschlag“ nutze die Stadt als ihr „weites und kaum Widerstand leistendes Projektionsfeld“, um eine überall zu beobachtende Homogenisierung der visuellen Codes zu betreiben (Flusser 1994, 312). Heute kann man das nicht mehr einfach so behaupten. Ein neues „Sehen“ ist im Entstehen, und es wird beispielsweise durch die politische Intervention begünstigt, welche die Projektionsfelder einer auf Kommerz abgestellten Gruppe von Akteuren beschneidet. Es erinnert an die „Slow-Food“-Bewegung, der es um die Aufwertung des genussvollen, bewussten und regional geprägten Essens geht. Jenes „Sehen“ aber, wie der oben zitierte Filmemacher bemerkt, befreit vom permanenten Imperativ des „Lesens“ und der „Lesbarkeit“. Jenseits der Schrift bedeutet aber auch „Jenseits der Bilder“ (Debray 2007) – weil es nicht darum gehen kann, gegenüber Lesbarkeit jetzt den Status von Bildlichkeit anzuheben. Mit dem Sehen hingegen bewegen wir uns in Richtung eines Zeitalters der neuen „visuelle Kulturen“, in dem es darum gehen wird, nicht mehr nur Lesbarkeit zu schaffen, sondern „Explizitmachungen“ zu leisten, das heißt, die unsichtbaren Codes von Sichtbarkeiten an die Oberfläche der Wahrnehmung zu bringen. Doch damit eröffnet sich eine erkenntnistheoretische Dimension, deren Auslotung im gegebenen Zusammenhang erst schematisch angedeutet werden konnte.

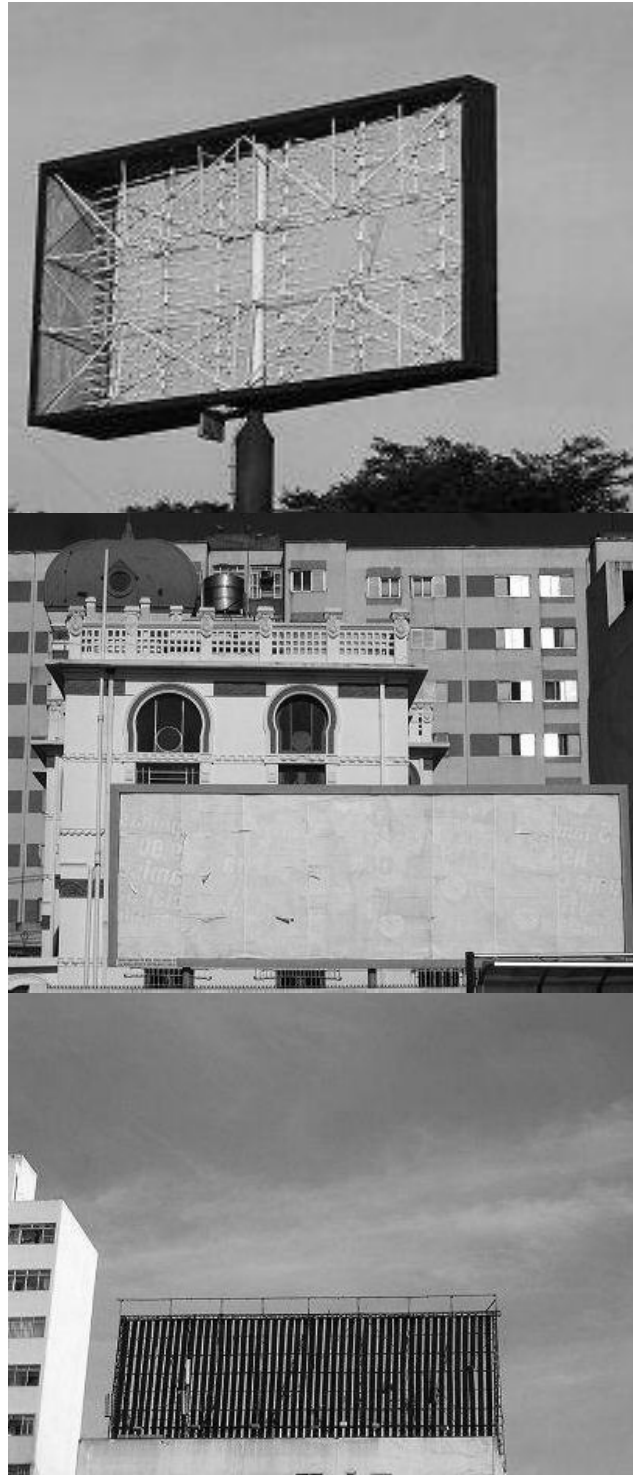


Abb. 12c/12d/12e: Sao Paolo

## Abbildungen

1. Piccadilly Circus, London ca. 1930er-Jahre; Autor
2. „Pixação“ Graffiti, São Paulo, Brasilien; Quelle: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/gaf/2543060964/>
3. „Style Writing“ in Berlin; Quelle: <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graffiti>

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# Reading the Urban Through the Rural:

## *Comments on the Significance of Space-related Distinctions and Semantics*

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### *A documentary film*

In 1939, Lewis Mumford wrote a commentary for the documentary film *The City*, a film sponsored by the American Institute of Planners which received its premiere at the 1939/1940 New York World's Fair.<sup>1</sup> Engaging with the early twentieth century American metropolis, the film delivers a dystopian image of existence in the city: hyper-accelerated social life created by new mobilities (such as telecommunication, cars and trams), grey and dirty skies as the result of modernity's heavy industries, the insecurity and poverty of many urban dwellers. Mumford catches the esprit of that particular solid modernity (Bauman 2000) in an apt and ironic phrase: "Machines, inventions and power black-out the past. Forget the quiet cities. Bring in the steam and steel, the iron men, the giants ... Machines to make machines, production to expand production. Faster and faster, better and better" (fig. 1).

This dystopian urban image stands in contrast to what is depicted as rural in the documentary:

1 A digital two-part version of the film can be found at the Internet Archive. The film is distributed under Creative Commons license (Public Domain): <http://www.archive.org/details/CityThe1939>; and [http://www.archive.org/details/CityThe1939\\_2](http://www.archive.org/details/CityThe1939_2)



Figure 1a The dark and crowded metropolis  
(*The City*, Part I, Creative Commons license: Public Domain)

86 The image of a 19<sup>th</sup> century community full of honest craftsmanship, of hard working and upright and religious people within a healthy and pleasant environment. Here, one finds the romanticism of the ‘good’ rural life. However, in presenting images of the good old days of rural life, the viewer soon recognises that this life has disappeared and is overrun by urbanisation.



Figure 1b The dark and crowded metropolis (The City, Part I, Creative Commons license: Public Domain)

Bemoaning the loss of traditional rural life, the film to some degree contributes to the long “history of rural complaint” as Raymond Williams has precisely observed (Williams 1973, p. 44). Drawing on a wide range of English literature, Williams suggests that the loss of rurality and the tranquil and harmonious rural way of life seems to constitute some sort of cultural invariance which generations of writers have since made use of: “On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence and simple virtue” (Williams 1973, p. 1). Social relations are (re) presented in implicitly spatialising and moralising ways as being intact. “An idealisation of feudal

and immediately post-feudal values: of an order based on settled and reciprocal social and economic relations of an avowedly total kind“ (ibid., p. 35) underlies these representations. The rural and the countryside serve as markers of a ‘good’, yet disappearing history.

And it is exactly this idea of a lost countryside, of a lost rurality that also gleams through Mumfords commentary: “There was (...) harmony between the soil and what we have built and planted there. We used our hands and mastered what we have laid our hands on. Working and living, we found a balance. The town was us and we were a part of it. We never let our cities grow too big for us to manage. We never pushed the open land too far away”. The good countryside is distinguished from and placed in opposition to the bad metropolis (fig. 2).<sup>2</sup>

### *Modernity as the force disrupting the harmonious relationship between the urban and rural*

Times have, however, changed and if, as Bauman (2000, p. 113) writes, modernity is all about size and volume it should be of no surprise that “year by year our cities grow more complex and less fit for living”, as Mumford declares. No wonder then that this particular urban condition also creates the modern metropolitan man who adapts to the size, speed and volume of Modernity while anonymity becomes one of the predominant social characteristics (Simmel 1950; Wirth 1938): “With each crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life, the city sets up a deep contrast with small town and rural life with reference to the sensory foundations of psychic life. The metropolis exacts from man as a discriminating creature a

different amount of consciousness than does rural life. Here the rhythm of life and sensory mental imagery flows more slowly, more habitually, and more evenly. Precisely in this connection the sophisticated character of metropolitan psychic life becomes understandable – as over against small town life which rests more upon deeply felt and emotional relationships” (Simmel 1950, p. 410).

It is already a commonplace to state that there was, with respect to the early 20th century, a fascination in sharply distinguishing the rural from the urban on the basis of dissimilar kinds of social interaction – a theme that can be unanimously traced back to the writings of Georg Simmel and Louis Wirth. But there is more to it than that. Separating the rural from the urban was not only combined with the expression of a particular moral geography but also a political geography. Not long after the turn of the 20th century, a text with the programmatic title *Rural versus urban* was published by John Bookwalter (1911), who explicitly distinguished urban from rural parts in a somewhat binary fashion. For Bookwalter the distinction between urban and rural and its balanced state were nothing less than a national requisite. This argument enabled him to caution against the effects on the nation’s welfare of the emerging supremacy of the modern city and the consequent decline in importance of rural villages and the rural economy. Representing a good deal of early 20th century organic thinking, Bookwalter argued that rural and urban were separated spatial domains. Though each contained a different form of social organisation both were indispensable components to ensure the nation’s viability and national harmony. Each attempt in disbalancing the relation between rural and urban parts of the nation causes a dysfunctionality which leads with the utmost probability towards instability (Bookwalter 1911, p. 90). The

intensification of rapid urban growth, he feared, would take place at the expense of weakening the rural. And with culture, power and economic innovation tending to reside more and more in urban areas, agriculture and rural traditions were, he argued, being successively devalued and seen as representing a decent and yet seemingly out-of-time way of life.

On the last page of his book, Bookwalter revealed what he considered to be the true value of the rural: “To those who hold the belief that the safety and stability of a nation can be maintained only through sustaining a just communion of all its essential parts, and especially the purity of rural life, does it not seem an ever increasing and pressing necessity that the agrarian rights and powers of a people should be ever more vigilantly safeguarded,

2 It has to be mentioned that in the end Mumford solves the opposition between rural and urban by proposing a third entity which transcends both the rural and the urban by introducing and marketing the idea of the Garden City. The second part of the film then introduces to one of these new cities, Greenbelt (Maryland).



Figure 2a Honest farmers in rural setting  
(The City, Part I, Creative Commons license: Public Domain)

88 by holding urban aggression and power under salutary restraints, and thereby placing them both on the same common and enduring basis of equity” (Bookwalter 1911, p. 272):

Taking into account that Bookwalter depicted the modern city as being characterised by a tendency towards vice, it becomes clear that the once established moral geography between the good and pristine rural way of life and the bad and debauched urban way of life was seen to be under threat from urban expansion (Bookwalter 1911, p. 78ff.). There is much evidence that Bookwalter’s moral geography fits well into a more general episteme which became visible in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, we find this motif of the dangerous and risky urban in Burgess’ reflections on 1920s Chicago: “Rapid urban expansion is accompanied by excessive increases in disease, crime, disorder, vice, insanity, and suicide, rough indexes of social disorganization” (Burgess 1925, p. 57). A few years earlier, Frederick DeLand Leete, Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, demanded that more churches had to be built in the modern metropolis because “it is the Church itself which is required to stem the tide of immorality in the midst of dense populations, and to seize with a firm hand the youth who is beginning to be carried whither he knows not” (Leete 1915, p. 22).

The urban/rural binary draws sharp boundaries by referring to an exclusive set of social and cultural practices attributed to each area. In the remainder of this article, I scrutinise this distinction by emphasising two different aspects. Firstly, in investigating the urban/rural distinction, I want to show that the rural is always connected to the urban even if we concentrate predominantly (as within contemporary geographical research) on researching and talking about urban phenomena (thereby remaining silent about the rural or even marginalising it). Acknowledging a multiplicity of theories

and interventions that criticise logics of presence, I will base my arguments upon systems-theoretical thinking which challenges the assumption that “(b)inary structures therefore establish relations of opposition and exclusion rather than of sameness and interconnection between the two terms involved” (Cloe/Johnston 2005, p. 12). Secondly, I want to explore the ‘technique’ of attributing distinct social features exclusively to the rural, in relation to the urban. Take, for example, the distinct meanings assigned to *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), both of which originally relate to different types of social organisation on the basis of division and association and to particular places. This assignation usually links *Gemeinschaft* with rural places and *Gesellschaft* with urban places (Tönnies 1887; Halfacree 1993). I call this technique the ‘spatialisation of the social’ and will return to it later when introducing theories of difference and the concept of space-related semantics to explore and demonstrate the societal function of spatialised distinctions in more depth (see sections “What about asymmetrical distinctions ...” and “Emphasising distinctions ...”).

### *Distinguishing the urban from the rural*

To draw a first intermediate conclusion: From the accounts presented above, one can discern the outlines of the societal function played by the rural. Mumford, Bookwalter and Leete regard the rural as a necessary *corrective* to some new and often deviant social forms that emerge and evolve with the rise of the modern metropolis. In their arguments, the rural as the ‘other’ to the urban is necessary for the sake of a greater whole. The rural constitutes a socially accepted counterpart of the urban. From their perspective it is necessary



to draw a distinction between the urban and the rural, one which respects both as separate realms that should not be intermingled, at least if the collapse of national cohesion is to be avoided.

In contrast to these arguments, a well established critique in geography, sociology and many other disciplines can be discerned to abolish this too easy binary thinking expressed so obviously in the urban/rural dichotomy (Clope/Johnston 2005, see section section “The blurring of ...” for further discussion of this argument). Critique usually puts forward the much more complex and intermingled spatiality of today’s advanced society that undermines and blurs sharp distinctions like the urban/rural one (see with reference to social complexity Urry 2005). Instead of accepting separated realms, attention should be paid to a third form which is neither rural nor urban but something in-between (Sieverts 2008).

A second set of criticism expresses serious doubts as to whether social differentiation can be explained at all by looking at processes of spatial differentiation. Hence, as Ray Pahl has stated, “(a)ny attempt to tie particular patterns of social relationships to specific geographical milieux is a singularly fruitless exercise” (1966, p. 322). Any identification of a *rural-urban continuum* understood in spatial terms is bound to fail because it explains social differentiation by regional differentiation and not by social causes – a kind of category error: “No one disputes the right of the layman to use these terms to denote different patterns of land use, which are easily observable; what is disputable is the sociological relevance of these physical differences especially in highly complex industrial societies” (Pahl 1966, p. 299).

In this article, however, I argue that researching the urban/rural distinction (and binary thinking in general) is still of much relevance today since this is an integral part in the organisation of the social

in everyday life (Jones 1995, p. 43). Can we really think and communicate without distinguishing one thing from another, without deciding to look closer at only one object thereby ‘cutting off’ all other objects? To dismiss this and other binary distinctions by simply arguing that they are inappropriate categorisations of socio-spatial reality is, in itself, a far too easy and inappropriate argument. In contrast to too hasty attempts to abolish the urban/rural distinction, we might instead pay attention to some “other more hidden messages” (Clope/Johnston 2005, p. 10) that are carried with this distinction and categories like urban and rural. Indeed, we can keep in mind that the act of distinguishing, of bounding and categorising, is unavoidable in order to construct and to know the world (Jenkins 2000; Luhmann 1997). And, as Reese Jones (2009) recently remarked, these space-related classifications and categorisations are crucial issues which geographers should be interested in. Or, to be more precise: the researcher should pay much more attention to the “inchoate process of bounding that delimits the categories that shape daily life and academic work” (Jones 2009, p. 178).



Figure 2b Honest farmers in rural setting  
(The City, Part I, Creative Commons license: Public Domain)

Yet, the act of distinguishing and categorising goes hand in hand with an asymmetrical handling of the categories. We often observe that one (distinguished) category is very present and important as an organising scheme in our society while at the same time its other side is absent in the way that it is pushed to the periphery, becoming an unimportant object or issue. Roughly spoken and with respect to the urban/rural distinction, urban issues are much more present than rural ones, which are, indeed, quite absent. The urban is very much at top of the political, cultural and economic agenda while the rural ekes out a dire existence on the fringes. Think, for example, of cultural industry discourses or of the key places of recent credit crunch – both happen to take place in very urban settings. Thus, the city and the urban seem to constitute a highly undisputed, unquestioned and present part of reality. Even as a scientific category of understanding, the city has been left relatively intact and only rarely subjected to deconstructionist interventions (Cloeke/Johnston 2005, p. 10). The urban is present while the rural seems to be absent.

3 Kwa (2002, p. 26) deliberately uses the expression *baroque*. Amongst others, he sees the baroque epoch characterised by flows, the blurring of traditional distinctions and the variation of forms as a system of differences as in baroque music (see also Hofstadter 1980).

### *Absence/presence*

But, isn't it inherently problematic to define what is actually present? Some social theories, especially those clinging to the paradigm of complexity, have repeatedly pointed to the seemingly trivial insight that *presence* is only possible because there are many other things and objects *absent*

at the very same time. These things simply are – metaphorically speaking – transferred to a residual space where they usually escape our attention. For example, the density of people, goods and services, as one important geographical and sociological observation to signify the urban and urbanity, is only possible through the absence of extensive farming practices and wide open spaces ('nature') within the city. In particular, the absence of these particular features, commonly designated as rural, is producing the kind of urbanity we love or hate today. Consequently, this allows us to argue that the presence of an object or even an idea, like urbanity, is only possible by the absence of other ideas and objects. But things are somewhat more complicated.

Let's consider this: No one seriously doubts that agricultural products (like meat, wheat, fruits and vegetables) are a necessary condition for the reproduction of today's urban citizen. Doesn't that mean that the absent agriculture is at the same time present through its products that are consumed by the urban dweller on a regular basis? Although being separated by different spaces and by the principle of bivalence, urban consumers and rural agriculture are connected through the performative act of consuming, to name just this one example. Accepting these thin and often invisible relations between urban and rural spaces, we can directly postulate a connection between the absent and the present.

To generalise: If we talk about present objects it seems necessary to keep in mind that those present objects are connected with those that we regard as being absent in a given and specific situation (Law/Mol 2001; Callon/Law 2004). Annemarie Mol and John Law in this regard encourage us to think "about the dependence of that which cannot be made present – that which is absent – on that which is indeed present. Or,

as the poststructuralist literatures sometimes put it, the way in which the authority of presence depends on the alterity of Otherness” (2001, pp. 615–616) ... “The constancy of object presence depends on simultaneous absence or alterity” (ibid., p. 616). We now know that there is a plethora of relations between the present and the absent. The presence of something is enacted by the absence of other things. Niklas Luhmann’s theory of social systems and especially its differential theoretical elements comes to quite similar findings. As one of the theory’s general propositions, Luhmann emphasises that there is a connection between the divided (Luhmann 1984, p. 52; Baecker 2005, p. 68). But to make these connections visible, the inventiveness of the observer who produces “lots of novel combinations out of a rather limited set of elements” (Kwa 2002, p. 26) is required. Chunglin Kwa (2002) has labelled such an understanding, one which is interested in tiny and invisible connections between objects, as the baroque understanding of complexity<sup>3</sup> (see also Law 2004). From this perspective, one should “look down” at the detailed practices of social life. Only from this view is it possible, Kwa argues, to become surprised by the various associations and connections that exist alongside established distinctions like urban/rural. If we accept the viewpoint that social life is indeed a dialectical process of making and blurring distinctions, a general focus on distinctions and especially on drawing these distinctions seems a much more promising starting point for conducting geographical research that focuses on sole objects – like ‘the’ urban or ‘the’ rural. A focus on distinction also emphasises that two separated sides are nevertheless connected to each other. Again, why are (space-related) distinctions and their societal functionality not a bigger concern in geographical research?

## *What about asymmetrical distinctions?* 91

Situating this with reference to the article’s topic, I suggest a renewed interest in the old and famous urban/rural distinction – but not at the price of reifying some kind of urban/rural divide, binary or dichotomy. At this point, the criticisms made by postmodernism and a modernism as two intellectual movements against binary thinking, should be taken seriously. However, if we admit that things and objects are logically preceded by processes of distinguishing we might build up a ‘firewall’ against reification by focussing on the processes out of which things and entities emerge: “We should not look for boundaries of things but for things of boundaries” (Abbott 1995, p. 857). Things and objects only emerge after distinctions have been drawn.

4 In Luhmannian social systems theory the term communication is used in a very broad sense: Communication includes not only language and speaking but also all kinds of actions and practices which are designed to be understood by someone else thereby performing the social. Communication is the specific mode of operation in social systems.

This interest in things of boundaries is constitutive of modern social systems theory, as proposed by writers like Niklas Luhmann and Dirk Baecker who try to translate these process-oriented premises into social theory (Luhmann 1997; Baecker 2005). Luhmann and Baecker are key figures in a wider project of redesigning systems theory as “distinction theory” (Arnoldi 2001, p. 2). This understanding of systems theory argues that society is made up of communication<sup>4</sup>; every communication therefore performs society and ensures the reproduction of the social. Communication is a specific type of

92 operation that only belongs to social systems: “A social systems emerges if communication designs communication” (Luhmann 2006, p. 74). Hence, as Dirk Baecker argues, communication is in constant need to select issues which then become the entities of the communication process (Baecker 2005, p. 29). The act of distinguishing and indicating to select the basic elements for communication and its reproduction is called in Luhmannian terminology ‘observing’ (Luhmann 1998, p. 73) – a definition quite unfamiliar to our everyday life imagination of observing. One advantage of the theory is to regard boundaries not as expressions of pre-given objects and things. On the contrary, boundaries emerge with each act of making distinctions. Through the boundaries of each distinction (‘this’ and not ‘that’) things and objects are produced which then can be used to perform a certain kind of social order. Hence, drawing boundaries is the precondition to classify and mark things and objects as belonging to the inner or outer side of a particular boundary (Baecker 2005, pp. 156–157). Or to put it very bluntly: without boundaries (i.e. drawing distinctions) there is no communication and no society.

5 German Original: *Sinnverdichtungen*

From a Luhmannian systems-theoretical perspective, we can see that communication reproduces itself by distinguishing something from the multiplicity of other possibilities. To illustrate this abstract formulation, let’s construe a simple example that very much prescinds from the complexity of the social: Being with a friend in some sidewalk café, I can choose my next actions by drawing from the specific set of impressions that I perceive in that particular place. I can intervene

to end the chat because I feel more and more repulsed by traffic noise. I can even pull myself together and try to adapt to the situation. However, I can also ‘feed’ communication by drawing on the themes of the communication we already maintained or that have been discussed earlier. In this respect, my dissatisfaction with the actual situation could have been obviated by reminding me of some semantics my friend used earlier to designate the quality of the place, telling me that it is a very *urban* one. Apparently, this would have allowed me to adjust my expectations by keeping in mind what urban means: density, crowds, hyperactivity, and noise. Thus, semantics like urban are able to categorise a particular set of impressions in order to calibrate our expectations and to point to the circumstances under which the social will perform itself.

To regard expressions like urban or rural as semantics means to understand them as condensed artefacts or condensed observations<sup>5</sup> within communication to which we hark back in specific situations. In this paper, I use the term semantics with no reference to linguistics but with reference to the specific understanding of the term that has been proposed by Luhmann (1980). Luhmann advocates a sociological understanding of semantics that bears similarities to the concept of the evolution of ideas. To speak of semantics, then, is to speak of particular imaginations of how to understand an idea or concept within society. This does not mean that there is only one understanding of an idea. On the contrary, we might accept that the more often a specific semantics is used in society, the more it is accumulated with different meanings from different social contexts. Luhmann terms this accumulation the “condensation and confirmation” of different context-specific meanings (Luhmann 1998, pp. 311–315). Both nevertheless ensure the identity of semantics.

We can deduce from this a preliminary, rough working definition: Semantics are self-produced expressions within communication that, despite a variation in meaning, generally possess a firm identity. But as long as semantics are used in different contexts, their identity should be understood as some kind of fluid or viscous identity: some content is added, some is completely ceded, while some gain in prominence, others decline and so on. But from the systems-theoretical perspective, the concept of semantics does not only point to meaning and to the identity of important expressions or ideas. Rather, emphasis is paid to the potential of semantics to serve as structural units or permanencies within the overall autopoiesis (self-reproduction) of communication. Semantics, therefore, permit to orientate and guide communication because of their frequent repetition (see Luhmann 1998, pp. 107–111). No wonder then that they play a crucial role in the self-description of societies since they constitute one ‘tool’ to categorise the fluidity of performing the social, i.e. to make it meaningful and stable while constructing identities around which the social can be ordered (Jenkins 2000; Jones 2009). At least with reference to what can be called spatial disciplines key words like urban and rural doubtlessly constitute such influential semantics. I will call those semantics that refer to spatiality in the widest sense, space-related semantics (for further discussion see Redepening 2006, 2008).

We finally have arrived at the point to conclude that rural and urban as space-related semantics emerge out of boundary drawing processes. From the theoretical design promoted here both, far from being distinct spatial realms, form a *distinction directrice* (this term from Luhmann 1998, p. 212) within communication.

They form a distinction of which society frequently makes use to observe, describe and ultimately order its own functioning. Yet, these distinctions or differences are usually enacted asymmetrically: one side of the distinction is privileged over the other. This becomes obvious when reviewing, as has already been mentioned, the significance urban references have gained within recent discourses of competitiveness, innovativeness, cultural industries, or the (assumed) rise of the creative class. Undoubtedly, urban issues are much more prominent on the policy maker’s agenda than rural ones – at least today, as it has to be emphasised that this asymmetry is always open to change. Again, this poses some interesting challenges to scientific research, when keeping in mind that every distinction only reveals a hidden connection (see section “Absence/presence ...”). The changing relationships, the diffuse (re)organisations of the connections between urban and rural now come to the fore. German sociologist Detlef Ipsen (1992) stressed this point by arguing that there is *not one* relationship between urban and rural but there is a plethora of ever changing and fluctuating relationships. Relations between urban and rural are thus complex; they detract from perfect designation and offer many different varieties.

The social functions of space-related semantics and distinguishing between urban and rural will be discussed in the last sections of this article. My central argument is that sustained analysis of the various forms in which the rural is distinguished from the urban allow us to cast an interesting but unfamiliar eye over the contemporary city.

## 94 *Distinctions, dichotomies and space-related semantics*

Space-related semantics allude to the ‘spatialisation of the social’ (see section “Emphasising distinctions ...”). In society, these particular semantics allow us to locate and to place particular social activities: Some activities are designated to be very urban, some to be very rural. Thus, in using space-related semantics, the heterogeneity of the social can be ordered by attributing social practices to occur only in particular places. Quite often, this takes the form of a mutually exclusive arrangement: The urban with its associated activities is *here*, the rural with its associated activities is *there* – without anything in-between. Space-related semantics can therefore be seen as a ‘smart tool’ to come to terms with the flexibility and the fluidity of contemporary social arrangements. They locate the social, pin it down and ‘capture’ it by translating it to the material sphere. Hence, space-related semantics, such as the urban and the rural, aim to cope with the complexity of the social. In other words, they contribute in an effective way to the reduction of the complexity and obscurity of the social (see Cloke/Johnston 2005). Such a perspective theorises space as a medium for processes of social ordering (Hetherington 1997) and concentrates on the different semantics space acquires in communication.

**6** And if one wants to consider the hybridization of urban-rural, he has nevertheless to draw another sharp distinction and to form another side from which this hybridization is distinguished.

**7** To speak of ‘rigid boundaries’ would only be reasonable, if a bit (the particular distinction) of the endless process of performing the social is scrutinised. But this would only lead to a static and inadequate view of the social.

What can we keep in mind so far? From a systems-theoretical perspective, the distinction between urban and rural is marked by a constitutive vagueness concerning each side of the distinction, yet a sharp boundary divides both in the way that they appear as distinct and fix categories (Jones 2009, p. 179).<sup>6</sup> But as categories they do not represent a spatial order or even a natural order of the world. Both are the results of performing the social by distinguishing. A distinction, then, is a:

performance that underlies no higher-order laws to steer social life;

performance that is always open to change because of its process like character;

performance that produces results that from a diachronic perspective are contradictory to each other;

performance that also stimulates contextualised interpretation.

Each distinction simply represents “complexity without telos” (Kwa 2002, p. 42) and as such adds bit by bit to the fluid characteristics of the social (see also Law/Mol 2001). So do space-related semantics, like urban and rural. They too accumulate new meanings, particularly under conditions of rapidly changing social relations. From a systems-theoretical perspective the urban/rural distinction becomes more and more fluid and thus cannot be adequately grasped with traditional images of rigid boundaries because of the distinction’s constant modification.<sup>7</sup> These characteristics of fluidity and changing relations permit a scientific endeavour which explores the movement of the ideas of rural and urban in more depths (see also Williams’ proposition 1973, p. 275).

### *The problems of blurring the urban/ rural distinction*

As mentioned earlier, interest in the urban/rural distinction is contradictory to contemporary debates in those scientific disciplines that share a strong interest in the spatial differentiation of society. A short and quite superficial look at these debates shows a concurrence that the distinction between urban and rural proves to be an *obstacle épistémologique*. It is already a commonplace to emphasise that the boundaries between rural and urban are becoming more and more blurred and are thus in a state of dissolution. Especially, emerging new figurations of the rural, like the consumption countryside (Marsden 2002) and the trend towards commodification and urbanisation of the rural (Cloeke 2005) are put forward to underline profound changes in rural areas. Some observers already talk of post-productivist rural areas and allude to the diminishing role of traditional agriculture as the predominant feature of rural landscapes (Wilson 2001). Business parks and new housing estates have effectively blurred the morphological difference between rural and urban areas. New space-related semantics like the *Zwischenstadt* (the city-in-between) already respond to these developments (Sieverts 2008). Many writers argue that rural areas are to quite the same extent affected by global processes as are urban areas, hence the blurring of the urban/rural distinction and the urbanisation of the rural. This is why Michael Woods speaks of the global countryside (Woods 2007); a countryside that is in itself politically, socially and culturally differentiated because of uneven development generated by global flows and interests (Murdoch et al 2003). Years ago, Keith Hoggart (1990) provided an interesting solution to this discussion with his famous and now programmatic phrase: Let's do away with rural!

In addition, the erosion or diminishment of the differences between urban and rural regions is one objective of European Rural Development policies (under the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development [EAFRD]). These place the *urbanisation of the rural* to the fore by establishing principles of competitiveness, efficiency and the uptake of new technologies to enhance the production of goods (and services). At the very same time we can observe a *ruralisation of the urban*. Urban revitalisation programs, at least those with a focus on social policies, usually promote ideals of close neighbourhood and primary face-to-face social contacts – something the lay imagination in general terms regards to be a very rural quality (see for emphasis on such primary contacts Wirth 1938).

To put it bluntly: the majority of recent publications stresses that the dominant spatial structure of (at least) western nations is marked by a hybrid syntheses of urban and rural elements which renders talk of 'the' urban and 'the' rural as distinct realms inappropriate (Cloeke/Johnston 2005, p. 5). And even those who do not want to give up space-related semantics like rural agree that the present-day rural is a fragmented and heterogeneous entity. But such an endeavour to keep the notion of rural alive by attesting to it a fragmented character appears somewhat ironic because those who do so must turn to attributes which social sciences usually relates to the urban sphere: incoherence, fragmentation, pluralisation and the like (see Simmel 1950). However, the arguments for the dissolution of the urban/rural distinction are manifold and at first sight quite convincing.

Again, let's pause a moment. Research which emphasises the erosion of the urban/rural distinction depends on at least one significant presupposition: We can only perform the erosion

96 or the blurring of this distinction if we already know on what grounds the rural can be distinguished from the urban. We already have to know which activities are labelled as typically rural and which as typically urban (see Cloke 1985, p. 4). Without already having an idea of the differences between urban and rural it makes no sense to state that the hybridisation of urban and rural is to be observed today; places and landscapes that are neither ‘really’ urban nor rural. Behind this observation of a blurring urban/rural distinction, there still has to be an overall *organising blueprint* which advises us on what criteria to draw the distinction between urban and rural. Or, using the terminology introduced in this article: Even those who state the blurring of the urban/rural distinction can only do so by using space-related semantics of the urban and the rural. It seems as if the semantics of urban and rural as distinguished entities are nonetheless efficiently at work.

8 My translation from German: Jede Verräumlichung muss in Kauf nehmen, dass die „(k)ontingente soziale Wirklichkeit dabei der gesellschaftlichen Verfügbarkeit entzogen und ihres politischen Gehaltes letztlich entledigt“ wird.

### *Emphasising distinctions and separations and putting them on the agenda of rural studies*

If we accept that there is this blueprint which organises the distinctions between urban and rural realms and that space-related semantics of the urban and the rural are still important, why not pick up this distinction between rural and urban anew and see how it is enacted under contemporary societal conditions? At first glance such an

endeavour might contradict scientific *Zeitgeist* which looks to deconstruct and erode all tokens of binary thinking (see above). But, on the other hand, such a course of action enables us to take a closer look at the functions of space-related semantics and of the techniques of spatialising the social. As the discussion, particularly in the last section, has shown, space-related semantics like urban and rural still play an important role in accompanying and ordering the development and evolution of societies – even within theories trying to dispose semantics like urban and rural.

However, the price to pay when using space-related semantics to order the social is rather high. By using this set of semantics, social and physical attributes are mixed and intermingled simply by projecting the social onto material and physical space. In the aftermath of this spatialisation of the social, a creeping naturalisation takes place. In other words, each spatialisation must accept that the “contingent social reality will be stripped off of its social disposability and disposed of its political contents”<sup>8</sup> (Lossau/Lippuner 2004, p. 202). The products of social practices and communications are thereby transformed into seeming natural and unchangeable geographical facts. Without doubt, the distinction between urban and rural also draws on this spatialisation of the social because semantics like urban and rural are usually regarded as place dependent and invariant manifestations of the social.

The social significance of distinguishing and even dividing the urban from the rural, as it becomes utmost prominent in popular journals like *LandLust* or *Country Living* or within the green anti-capitalist agenda (Halfacree 2007a), cannot be denied. This distinction is simply too relevant to wipe it away with reference to the ‘scientific fact’ that both semantics rely on an archaic space-related blueprint for ordering the social,



and that this old blueprint has to be replaced by concentrating on the blurrings or even the annihilation of the urban/rural distinction. Things are not that easy. As argued above both sides of the distinction need their respective 'other'. Even if only one side of the distinction is picked out as a central theme and therefore made present, the absent side is nevertheless present and necessary and 'silently' shapes its other. This particular conception of distinctions should permit a manoeuvre in which we try to read or understand one side of the distinction by reading the other side. Looking at particular figurations of the rural then provides insights on the condition of its other: the urban.

To do so, it is rewarding to reflect upon early writings about this distinction. For example, Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* notices the loss of fundamental features of the rural as an innocent space marked by simpleness, homeliness and ordered life as a recurring *topos* in the literature throughout centuries (Williams 1973, p. 23). The fear of being overrun by the new urban condition is a theme apparent not only in the work of English writers but a broader body of global literature. As discussed above (section "Modernity as the force ..."), John Bookwalter's thoughts on *Rural versus Urban* were reflective of this structure of feeling in America. For Bookwalter it is the *purity of rural life* (Bookwalter 1911, p. 292) which must be a rigid counterpart to the *vice of cities* to safeguard national balance and concord.

## Mirrors

What someone is able to observe in these earlier efforts of distinguishing, even dividing the urban from the rural, is a particular figurative vision in which the rural becomes an area upon which yearnings and visions for the better life are projected. Intellectual ideas have often positioned the rural as a clear-cut counterpart to the urban. In this spirit, the rural serves as the negation of the urban (Williams 1973, p. 235).

The theoretical propositions made in this article allow us to regard the rural and its different figurations in a metaphorical way, as a kind of mirror. A mirror can be understood as being a tool that enables us to see something that would otherwise be invisible (Luhmann 1998, p. 96). A mirror is other to us but at the same time an absolute requirement for viewing and improving ourselves. Maybe it is even the mirror that renders self-awareness and self-reflexivity possible because it inescapably shows us who we are and how this might not match the cognitive picture we have of ourselves (Luhmann 1997, p. 915). In theorising the rural as a kind of mirror, the urban society is able to see and read its defects and deficiencies by looking at the different figurations of the rural. From this particular perspective, distinguishing the urban from the rural appears not to be an outdated and obsolete mode of thinking but an essential opportunity for performing self-reflexivity. Dissolving and abolishing the distinction would then mean the loss for the urban condition to read and reflect upon itself.

From this, a new interpretation of how to read the urban might also emerge: one that centers upon looking at the different conceptualisations of the urban counterpart under contemporary social conditions. To do so, an analysis of distinguishing space-related semantics like urban and rural in quite stark (and often binary)

98 ways, seems promising. Therefore, research on those social practices and institutions<sup>9</sup> that connect and adapt to the old tradition of keeping the rural separated from the urban, is worth to be enforced – without falling prey to reification of such distinctions.

9 See, for example, some of the ‚new social movements‘: the movement of Bioregionalism but also those that keep an eye at the protection and preservation of traditional rural properties.

helpful to look at current articulated space-related semantics. If we take theories of difference seriously it might also make sense to look closer at those semantics that are distinguished from each other – without falling prey to reifying and spatialising this distinction! If we talk about the urban, it seems important to make its absent other present again and to have a glance at the different ways in which it – the rural – is figured.

### *A last remark*

Finally, a last remark is necessary. Which specific figurations of the distinction between urban and rural appear the most promising for future investigation? One suggestion would be to relate the urban/rural distinction to more general social conditions such as those of acceleration and deceleration (see Rosa 2003; 2005). To regard the rural as a *space of deceleration* adapts to the long tradition of seeing and envisioning the rural as a corrective value to the urban: as a place which endorses the yearnings, cravings and imaginations of harmony to oppose the powers of modernisation. This space-related semantics of the rural as a decelerated area becomes apparent by looking at the growing significance of (new) back-to-the-land movements (Halfacree 2007b). Studies indeed show some evidence for emphasising the aspect of deceleration and of finding one’s particular *place for solitude* – meanings which indeed add to familiar semantics of the rural (see Sorokin/Zimmerman/Galpin 1930, p. 233).

If we try how to understand the contemporary condition of the urban, it might be

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# The City *IS* the Sustainable Development

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The relationship between the concepts of the 'city' and 'sustainable development' is probably simpler than we could have imagined. Such a statement emerges from an analysis of both notions. A city, when considered on its own, is a peculiar expression of the urban phenomenon. Sustainable development is a very specific expression of ecological awareness. When we explore and 'purify' their meaning (in the spirit of Edmund Husserl's eidetic reduction), a large degree of consubstantiality between the two notions.

## *What Do We Mean by 'City'?*

Let us define some terms first. For this purpose, I have to introduce another concept here, that of urbanity. Urbanity is what makes an urban space urban. What makes a space an urban space? The combination of density and diversity, or, to put it differently, diversity within density.

Density is understood here as the density of any kind of social reality: built-up objects of course, but people too, in their homes, at work, in a hotel, in a shop or in the street in buildings,

as well as the various material and non-material realities that characterise social life.

Similarly diversity is defined as a diversity of people ('social mix'), of activities (industry, commerce, school, etc.), of functions (activities, housing, transport, etc.), of times in daily life as well as in the history of the city.

Density and diversity are not completely orthogonal notions, since a too diffuse diversity (like, for example, that existing at the global scale) entails a loss of the main characteristics of diversity, i.e. the exposure to otherness. Conversely, density creates, *mutatis mutandis*, proximity between social realities that enhance this exposure. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the methodological distinction between density and diversity is relevant because many situations, such as those of mono-industrial towns or touristic resorts, are characterised by density without diversity.

Urbanity = Density + Diversity.

Within this general framework we can define a city as an urban space characterised by a maximum of urbanity (Lévy, 2008). The city is not the only type of urban space. We can find urbanity in places other than cities (in periurban or different ‘exurban’ configurations), but a city is a space where the intensity of urbanity is maximal.

This simple definition allows us to compact different terms into one:

Urbanity  $\approx$  urbaneness  $\approx$  ‘urbaness’  $\approx$  ‘urbanism’ (in the meaning developed by Wirth, 1938)

In short, urbanity is based on co-presence: the maximum social realities in a minimum spatial extension. This simplification is all the more important in that we are experiencing the end of absolute urbanisation.

As the diagram below shows (fig. 1), we are increasingly living in a totally urban world. Ex-rural

and non-permanently inhabited areas are urban. A recent book on urban Switzerland (Diener et al., 2006) contends with good reasons that the Matterhorn, an icon of the Swiss Alps, is urban, a statement that can be extended to many touristic spots, as void as they seem to be of any urbanity.

The traditional urban/rural divide is no longer relevant and the landscape or functional opposition between, city and countryside deserves a serious relativisation. As the table below shows, the city has been a particular expression of a dominantly rural society, for example during the European Middle Ages. Today, the countryside has become a peculiar actualisation of the urban world.

As a result, in a virtually all-urban world, the control panel of societies is defined by whether or not they want to inject *relative* urbanity, that is to increase the density + diversity rationale of a given spatial area with a stable population (fig. 2).

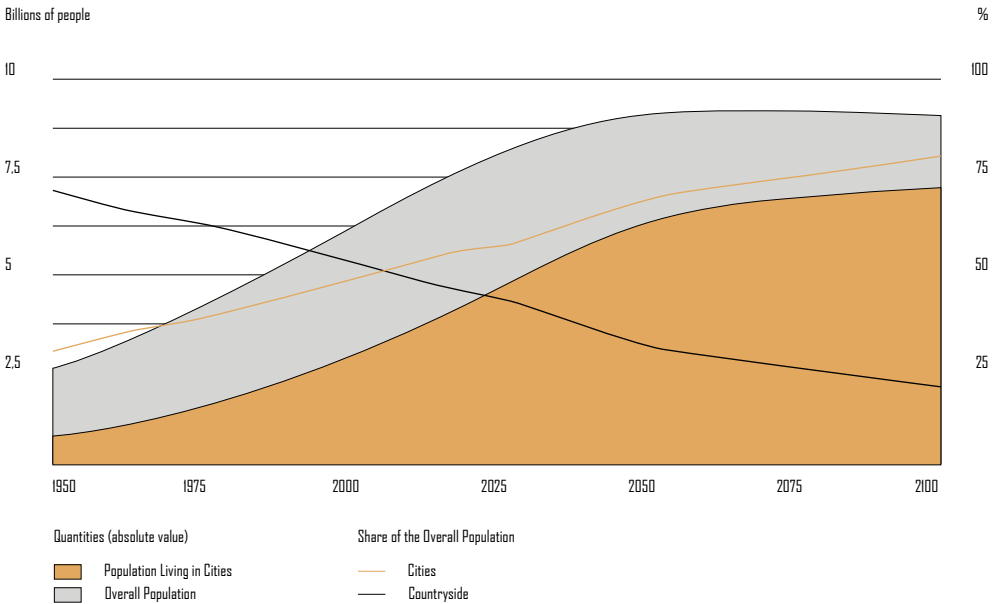


Figure 1 Overall and City-Dwelling World Population / The End of Absolute Urbanisation Process (Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Secretariat, 2007)



LAYOUT	City	Countryside
SOCIETAL DOMINANCE		
Urban	<i>Metropolitan City-Centre, Suburbia</i>	<i>Peri-Urban, Exurbia, Infra-Urban</i>
Rural	<i>Medieval Town</i>	<i>'Country', 'Land'</i>

Figure 2 Spatial Configurations and Spatial Contexts

### *An Archipelago of Public Spaces*

In this context, a specific word to characterise the city carries a critical importance: *public*. The public spatial sphere in the urban dimension can be defined as that what makes an urban society a whole, a system, something other than the sum of its parts. What is public does not belong to individuals, nor to a (communal) community (*Gemeinschaft*), but indivisibly to the overall society. The public space is a space, which is part of an urban area, where anybody knows that he/she should expect to experience an urban diversity of a magnitude that might be similar to that of the overall urban area.

We can notice that public space should not be confused with the public domain that is state property, nor what can be termed the 'public scene', that is the explicit part of political life. The public realm, Kant's and Habermas' *Öffentlichkeit*, includes the public space as it encompasses all the aspects of production and distribution of public goods, that is, in a wider sense, politics (French: *le politique*). However, in public places, the relevant expression of politics is civility. Civility is a permanent interaction-based, non-institutional construction of politics. Thus, in contrast to a common misunderstanding, the public space cannot be seen as an 'agora', a place for direct

deliberative democracy. In the practice of civility, there is no deliberation and 'discussions', 'negotiations', or 'decisions' are not dissociable from the weak social links of concrete, everyday agency.

In this regard, spaces of movement replay the opposition of stable places. Public metrics is the set of the relations to distance that have a public dimension. Public transport requires public space (accessibility to all is a condition of its relevance), but also creates public space (exposure to otherness exists in stations, stops as well as bus, trams, or trains). Public metrics is then the part of the mobility system that requires and produces public space.

Given the importance of public space in the urban realm, the urban areas of the world can be seen and appraised as an emerging interconnected archipelago of public spaces, including spaces of public mobility. This archipelago can be addressed as the main grid, and even as a base-map, of global civil society. Conversely, urban areas deprived of public space appear as blind spots in the geographic dimension of this civil society.

The issue of public space is part of a larger framework. As a matter of fact, we can identify two models of urbanity, which are at stake in experts' debates as well as in public controversies. The table below shows the dividing lines of this opposition.

The first model accepts urbanity and its consequences: public space and public metrics. The second one rejects it and tries to privatise space beyond private personal space. The ‘Amsterdam’ model is more common in Europe and Asia, in large cities, and city-centres. The ‘Johannesburg’ model prevails in North America and Africa, in small towns, and in suburbs (fig. 3).

Which urbanity model will overcome the other? The debate has recently been re-opened worldwide. Many authors had predicted the end of co-presence thanks to private mobility. In 1964 Melvyn Webber coined the term ‘*Non-placerealm*’ to express this view. Another author, William Mitchell, in *City of Bits* (1994) also forecast the end of co-presence because of new technologies of telecommunication. But this did not happen.

If we identify the three major ways, the three dominant modalities of managing distance (co-presence, mobility, and telecommunication), we can sum up their interrelations by the notion of *coopetition* (= co-operation + competition). Every ‘method’ uses the other ones for its own goal but is also used by the others. No city without phone and internet. No email without places to meet. No e-commerce without delivery system.

Actually, as is shown in figure 4, co-presence gets its best results in situations where multi-sensorial exposure to the environment enhances the capability to put together different kinds of information and allows for innovative processes.

In brief, a city that takes on its urbanity can be considered as a societal utopia, that of developing society by maximising co-presence. This utopia

	‘Amsterdam’	‘Johannesburg’
Density	+	-
Compactness	+	-
Cross-accessibility of urban places	+	-
Public Space	+	-
Pedestrian (=public) metrics	+	-
Co-presence of dwelling/jobs	+	-
Diversity of activities	+	-
Sociological mix	+	-
Intra-urban polarities	+	-
Per capity productivity	+	-
Positive self-valuation of all urban places	+	-
Preservation of natural environment (soil, water, air)	+	-
Self-visibility and self-identification of urban society	+	-
Urban-scale polity	+	-

Figure 3 Two models of urbanity; from Lévy, 1999

requires the notion of development, of economy of means, of self-improvement.

The reason why the city and city-centred urban planning (let's call it *urbanism*) has re-emerged in the last decades, is probably to be found in the fact that to make the urban choice efficient, the city is the best solution. This can be related to the comparative advantage of a systematic co-presence.

The comeback of the city began in the 1980s as a criticism of the Modern movement by urban planners, who convinced a part of the political players that the urbanity option was the best means of strengthening political cohesion. But, at the same moment, developing environmental awareness, has given a fresh, unexpected comparative advantage to dense and diverse urban spaces.

### What Do We Mean by 'Sustainable Development'?

The paradigm of sustainable development (SD) should be understood as a discussion frame in which only the general principles are explicit. This approach opens up a large array of public debates, not only on its practical implementation, but, in

more conceptual terms, on the agency framework that should result from its fundamental values. The SD approach includes a procedural component that cannot be dissociated from its substance: all the concerned people, 'big' or 'small' stakeholders, including ordinary citizens should be invited to participate in this permanent process of interpretation of its basic principles through a transparency in the circulation of political legitimacy and both representation and participation of the general public. Thus, sustainable development is basically incompatible with non-rule-of-law, non-democratic political regimes.

In saying this we should not, however, neglect the substantial component of the SD paradigm which was present from the very beginning. In the Brundtland Report (1987), the three major 'pillars' of SD, economic growth, social cohesion and environmental preservation, are defined as being compatible with, rather than in opposition to, each other and, further, that each of these pillars can support the others. The SD paradigm should not be seen as a compromise between ecology and economy, simply because these two realities are not addressed as an antinomy. The notion of development underpins and encompasses the whole rationale of the SD paradigm.

	Co-presence	Mobility	Telecommunication
Accessibility to identified information	-	=	+
Serendipity	+	-/=	=/-
Exposure to place otherness	-	+	-
Exposure to body otherness	+	=	-
Type of space generated	<i>Place, territory</i>	<i>Territory, network</i>	<i>Network, place</i>
Examples	<i>City, family</i>	<i>Intercity and intra-city transportation networks</i>	<i>Mail, books, the Web</i>

Figure 4 Managing distance: Three modalities

It is important to remember that this intellectual construction is challenged by another political current, epitomised by another founding text: the Meadows Report to the Club of Rome (1972), which states that there is an ineluctable incompatibility between limited natural resources and the perspective of enduring societal development. In this scope, the Meadows Report contends that, whatever social orientations and choices,

There is here a bold opposition between two conceptions of the relationships between nature and society. Clearly the very definition of development in the Brundtland Report reveals an unequivocal refutation of the Meadows Report's conclusions.

Environmental concerns should not then be reduced to sustainable development, and vice versa, sustainable development should not be reduced to environmental concerns. Indeed, in the current configuration of the ideological debate, three major families of conceptions are at stake, among which two claim to be part of an ecological awareness. This is summed up in the table below, where we can see a third paradigm, 'agro-industrial', which represents a social model that considers environmental issues as irrelevant and does not address it as a significant political issue.

As figure 5 shows, each of those three paradigms has a strong consistency, not only in the realm of nature/society relationships, but also in terms of the representation of history, political philosophy, social structure, development model and spatial patterns. For the SD approach, more development can, if well designed, mean greater conservation of natural resources, while for the 'neo-naturalist' model, the only solution is *décroissance*, 'un-growth'.

### *Sustainable Development and the City: Close Encounters*

On urban issues (density, diversity, mobility), the three paradigms are clearly at odds with each other. The 'agro-industrial' conception has strong resonances with the 'Johannesburg' model, and, even more clearly, the 'post-materialist' paradigm and the 'Amsterdam' models can be seen as two expressions of the same framework. Because of its general hostility to massive human agency, like urbanisation, the 'neo-naturalist' approach creates a significant disruption in this duality.

For the 'agro-industrial' paradigm, cities are mere locations, sites, *topos*. For the 'neo-naturalist' stance, the city is condemned for its very existence as a disruption of natural rationales, with density being seen as an increasing of the 'ecological footprint' and mobility as the opposite to the supposedly necessary local preference principle. This is challenged by the SD promoters, who consider a city as a technical system with the better per capita rate of surface, energy, land-consumption sobriety. From this perspective, it can be argued that, in an urbanised world, the city as urbanity-based configuration is the spatial dimension of sustainable development.

There is therefore a dramatic convergence between an urbanity-maximising model and a sustainable development model. The close encounter between them was not planned but it appears obvious and powerful today. Actually, as shown in the table below, if green cars can possibly reach the objective of preserving the natural environment, at least in its air-protection component, they certainly fail to satisfy the two other 'pillars' of the SD-framework (fig. 6).

		Paradigm		
		Agro-industrial	Neo-naturalist	Post-Materialist
Topics	The Nature of Nature	Stand-object for agency  Nature is a set of available resources	Extra-societal, independent actor  Nature has a point of view and rights	Environment, component of the society  Nature is a heritage to be invented
	Development/ Environment Relationship	Irrelevant	Antinomy	Compatibility
	Type of Development	Hazardous development  Nature/society: zero sum game	Sustainable under-development  Nature/society: negative sum game	Sustainable development  Nature/society: positive sum game.
	System of Values	Moral norms	Morals of duty and guilt	Ethical values
	Momentum for the Productive System	Predatory production, growth	Reproductive predation, zero or negative growth	Reproductive production, development
	Dominant Players	<i>Gemeinschaft</i> (communal community)	Organisations, institutions	Individuals, societies
	Spatial Values	Generality, uniformity, locations, circulation, trivialisatation, sites	Idiosyncrasy, parochialism, immobility, ruralness, <i>milieu</i>	Singularity, universality, places, mobility, urbanity, globalness, environments
	Expectation Horizons	Scientism, technological historicism	No cumulative history, no progress	Self-perfectibility of societies

Figure 5 Society, nature, and space: Three paradigms: derived from Lévy, 2008

		Pillar II + III Production of urbanity	
		Yes	No
Pillar I Preservation of the natural environment	Yes	<i>Public Metrics</i> [public transport, incl. individual transportation (taxis, bicycle, car-pooling, car-sharing)],	<i>Green' Car Metrics</i> (non-fossil energy)
	No		<i>Current Automobile Metrics</i> (fossil energy, urban sprawl)

Figure 6 How many pillars of SD?

In this regard, Asian cities are the key places because it is there that the huge majority of the new urbans will live. This is all the more critical when the 'asianisation' of the Pacific Rim (Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, Pacific Coast of Canada and the US) leads Asians, for example in Hong Kong or South Korea, to reappraise themselves and their influence (food, body image, aesthetics and density), and turn them into powerful actors beyond Asia itself.

We can observe the same 3-stage process in all Asian metropolises, as figure 7 shows.

1. *Anti-urbanity urbanisation policy* (Tokyo in the 1950–70s, Hong Kong in the 1970–80s, Bangkok in the 1980–90s [Europe: 1950–1970; North America: 1930–90]): destruction of old districts, creation of specialised, mono-functional districts, construction of freeways, neglect of public transport and the glorification of the car as the perfect expression of individual and collective achievement.

2. *Dual, ambivalent urbanisation policy* (Bangkok, Djakarta, Manila, Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata today [Europe: 1980–90; North America: today]): massive infrastructure investment in public transport, emerging concerns about the toxicity of a car oriented-urbanism, hesitancy concerning the urban model.

3. *Pro-urbanity urbanisation policy* (Tokyo, Osaka, Singapore, Seoul, Taipei today [Europe: today]): functional and sociological mix in new urban projects, exclusive choice for public transport, legal and economic restrictions to car use, collapse of the pro-car ideology.

It is pretty clear that, from the point of view of urbanity, Asian cities have been 'saved' by their density, and that finally diversity has experienced a revival, in spite of a catastrophic start. Is it possible to skip stages 1 and 2 and directly go to stage 3? There is no evidence of this so far and China is currently undergoing the collateral effects of stage 1 as it moves toward an inflexion point between stages 1 and 2.

In conclusion, it can be stated that:

I there is no significant component in environmental policies that does not deal with the general issues of an urbanity model: dwelling, mobility;

II there is more than an intersection between urbanity and sustainable development: if they wholeheartedly make the choice for urbanity, cities are logically to be addressed as the spatial component of sustainable development.

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Definition of the Stage	Anti-urbanity urbanisation policy	Dual, ambivalent urbanisation policy	Pro-urbanity urbanisation policy
Asian Metropolises	Tokyo (1950-70s), Hong Kong (1970-80s), Bangkok (1980-90s)	Bangkok, Djakarta, Manila, Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata (currently)	Tokyo, Osaka, Singapore, Seoul, Taipei (currently)
West European and North American Metropolises	Western Europe (1950-1970s); North America (1930-90s)	Western Europe (1980-90s); North America (currently)	Western Europe (currently)

Figure 7 A three-stage process in Asian metropolises

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# Suburban Dreaming

## *A Social Semiotic Analysis of Suburban Life in Australia*

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Suburbia polarises. Whenever people take a look at a photo of a leafy suburb, there will usually be two groups who claim to “see” the exact opposite in suburbia: some see it as a much desired Arcadian place to live, a paradise on earth; whereas others cannot imagine living there, believing it would be hell. Some see it as a dream, others as a nightmare. Such puzzling facts (or observations that at first sight appear contradictory or paradoxical) are often a good starting point for research. Both of the two above-mentioned groups are also of particular relevance to the practice of urban planning. Those who fall into the first category will contribute to the continuing suburbanisation of cities, provided they have sufficient assets and no other obstacles are put in their way. Members of the second group will help to reurbanise cities and thus add to urbanity. At the same time, they might also contribute to the gentrification of inner cities.

This chapter attempts to shed light on the diverging views on suburbia by combining a social semiotic approach to urban studies (“urban semiotics”) with discourse analysis and findings from empirical studies on the issue, the latter

of which have been conducted in fields such as urban history, urban geography, urban sociology, and urban planning. The interdisciplinary character of the approach outlined in this paper is based on an attempt to do justice to the complexity of the issue (Forsyth, 1999, 2005; Nicolaides and Wiese, 2006). It also rests upon two important methodological insights. First, a social semiotics analysis inevitably requires a “*substanzwissenschaftliche Ergänzung*”, i.e. a completion by theories and concepts on the issue a particular study is concerned with. As it is an approach or tool, which can be applied to a large number of issues, it does not include concrete statements on particular fields of research (e.g. hypotheses or findings on the actual situation of cities or on the characteristics of suburbs). In any social semiotic study this needs to be gathered from other theories and studies that do provide such information or hypotheses. In a way the latter serve as necessary “add-ons” to an urban semiotic analysis. Secondly, a semiotic analysis does not allow for determining the “truth”, i.e. providing evidence for or against a hypothesis (Chandler, 2007: 64f. and 221ff.; see also van

114 Leeuwen, 2005; Kress, 2010). As enlightening as a social constructivist or social constructionist concept of the “author dependence” of “a truth” (amongst a group of other “truths”) may be, as soon as one intends to provide applicable knowledge to the practice of urban planning by means of academic research, there will be a need for empirically tested concepts and (sets of) hypotheses. This is not to say that such “down-to-earth” approaches should not be qualified by (modern and post-modern) conclusions on the social construction of truth. Such insights may encourage politicians, planners and citizens to adopt a more critical stance towards science and technocratic solutions.

The following research question will serve as a unifying thread for this complex undertaking: What discourses of suburbia have evolved and how do they relate to the debate on sustainability? By asking this question, the paper enters the wider debate on the liveability of cities and sustainable urban development. Both are fundamental issues within urban studies and have been crucial to the practice of urban planning (Wheeler and Beatley, 2008). The discussion will also point to the fact that in recent decades there have been two major flaws in urban studies (and in much of both, the theory and practice of urban planning). First, deterministic approaches to space, the environment, technology and architecture have, among other things, suggested that there is a “spatial fix” (Gleeson, 2008a) to most or at least many of the pressing environmental and social problems cities face (Broady, 1969; Harvey, 1997). Second, urban sociology has too often ignored the relevance of urban design, public space and spatial arrangements. In fact, the importance of the physical reality of cities, i.e. their materiality, has been denied or overlooked (Schroer, 2006; Schäfers and Bauer, 1994; Sturm,

2000). As a result, features, which have a bearing on social interaction and human behaviour such as spatial distance, boundaries, and public space qualities, have been absent from much of urban research conducted by social scientists. This has rendered many findings irrelevant to practice or even misleading. Conceptual denial (of the relevance) of space, on the one hand, or, conversely, an overemphasis on space on the other should, therefore, be avoided in both, policy development on urban issues and in the study of suburbs and suburban ways of life.

For an adequate understanding of contemporary (*zeitgeist*) discourses, it is essential to acknowledge that in today’s knowledge-based society academic, literary, media and public perceptions of an increasing number of issues interact with each other at an ever growing speed. They intersect and influence each other profoundly. “Multimodality” (Kress, 2010) has become the mode of our time. Claims to truth and authority are diverse, subtle and contested at the same time. This is also true for the urban arena and for urban analysis in itself, where power, (self-positioning) practices of various actors and institutions, identity (construction) and representation have become central issues and concepts (Gottdiener/Lagopoulos, 1986; van Leeuwen, 2008; Webb, 2009). Suburbia plays a complex role in these processes and practices and has developed into a deictic term evoking many connotations and associations. Unless targeting a specific audience, the term – in politics as well as in marketing – will not function as a purr word or snarl word anymore. In order to capture some of the variety of the meanings involved I will refer to perceptions of suburbia in movies, TV series, songs and literary texts in some sections of this paper. It will become obvious that the academic world as well as many fiction and

screenplay authors grapple with the “localisation” (i.e. theoretical positioning or classification) of suburbia. This is one point where urban semiotics comes into play.

### *Urban semiotics: Doing meaning, the Sydney circle, and palimpsests*

Urban semiotics, as presented in this contribution, is rooted in social semiotics. The latter originated from the enduring discussions about Ferdinand de Saussure’s and Charles S. Peirce’s approaches to semiotics, and follows many of Peirce’s propositions (Kress, 2010). In contrast to some other accounts in semiology, social semiotics does not assume that there is a fixed relation between a term and what is meant by it. This relation is not considered to be arbitrary, though. Instead it is held that meaning (the relation between a signifier and the signified) is maintained or challenged every day, i.e. constructed constantly by social processes that include power relations. Thus, the relation between a signifier and the signified is affected by social change and simultaneously serves as an agent of this change itself (Hodge and Kress, 1988; Kress, 2010). Analogous to the concept of “doing gender”, one could speak of “doing meaning”:

*“The core unit of semiotics is the sign, a fusion of form and meaning. Signs exist in all modes, so that all modes need to be considered for their contribution to the meaning of a sign-complex. The genesis of signs lies in social actions. In semiosis – the active making of signs in social (inter)actions – signs are made rather than used. The focus on sign-making rather than sign use is one of several feature [sic!] which distinguishes social-semiotic theory*

*from other forms of semiotics. In a social-semiotic account of meaning, individuals, with their social histories, socially shaped, located in social environments, using socially made, culturally available resources, are agentive and generative in sign-making and communication” (Kress, 2010: 54).*

As original work, especially by Michael Halliday, has been further advanced by a number of Sydney-based scholars, Chandler (2007: 219ff.) speaks of a “Sydney semiotics circle” or a “Sydney school” of social semiotics. Cobley and Randviir (2009) also speak of an “Anglo-Australian, Hallidayan perspective” of sociosemiotics, indicating that there are also some other approaches to the social in semiotics. Prominent in the field of urban sociology, Mark Gottdiener’s (1994) approach combines the so-called “New Urban Sociology” with urban semiotics (see also Gottdiener and Hutchison, 2010). As Soja (1996) points out, there are also semiotic strands in parts of Henri Lefebvre’s work (see also Kofman and Lebas, 1996: 17; Lefebvre, 1996: 114ff.). Soja himself is not disinclined to apply semiotic thinking in order to make his socio-geographical studies of cities and space more comprehensive.

Social semiotics has much in common with critical discourse analysis (van Leeuwen, 2008; Low, 2009). Both approaches have been used to explore a large variety of issues, including urban ones. For instance, Ann Forsyth (1999), in her excellent study on the Rouse Hill development project in the north-west of Sydney that created a long lasting debate on suburban expansion, showed that five major views on “good urban form” have informed the debate: expansionist, economic developmental, scientific environmental, locally environmental and consolidationist. These views represent not only different economic

116 or other individual interests of people, they also are interpretations of the “given” situation and of what public interest means (in the particular case and in general). As such, they represent a conglomerate of *goals* (own ones and those of others, which are either accepted or rejected), *perceptions* of reality, *visions* of what makes a good city and *beliefs* of what is deemed best for the greater public good or for the community’s welfare.<sup>1</sup>

1 Rouse Hill continues to receive the attention of developers, the public and the media. In March 2008, for example, a shopping centre called the Rouse Hill Town Centre was opened. It was built at a cost of 470 million Australian Dollars and offers more than 65,000 sqm of retail space and another 3,500 sqm of office space. The centre was built in anticipation of substantial residential growth in Rouse Hill and nearby areas in the near future ([www.gpt.com.au/contentdocs/FactSheets/FactSheets\\_development\\_rhtc.pdf](http://www.gpt.com.au/contentdocs/FactSheets/FactSheets_development_rhtc.pdf), retrieved June 1, 2010). See also an article by Michael Duffy in the Sydney Morning Herald of March 15, 2008 ([www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/new-city-in-modern-times-shows-best-and-worst-of-design/2008/03/14/1205472079218.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1](http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/new-city-in-modern-times-shows-best-and-worst-of-design/2008/03/14/1205472079218.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1), retrieved June 1, 2010). One problem of the Rouse Hill Development Area is that parts of it belong to the flood-prone areas in the Sydney region ([www.sydneywater.com.au/majorprojects/NorthWest/StormwaterManagementRouseHill.cfm](http://www.sydneywater.com.au/majorprojects/NorthWest/StormwaterManagementRouseHill.cfm), 01.06.2010).

In a seminal article Alex Schafran (2009: 24ff.) demonstrates how – in the course of a discourse – language use (and interpretations derived thereof) can gradually change to finally turn against people. His example is well-intentioned policies to tackle (sub)urban decline and poverty. Frequently, these policies move away from targeting poor quarters and the reasons that lie behind poverty and decline, and move towards eventually defining the poor as the problem. This may result in policies of exclusion or removal as has often happened as a consequence of “urban renewal” projects in the US and elsewhere, and is likely to happen to suburban areas if the discourse on “slumburbia” gains even more momentum.<sup>2</sup>

Although the discussion on problems of decline in some suburban areas has been ongoing for quite a while, the current housing crash that followed the financial crisis of autumn 2008 has aggravated the situation, especially in some of the newly built suburban areas and outer suburbs (Lucy, 2010). In a *New York Times* article published on February 10, 2010, correspondent Timothy Egan writes:

*“Drive along foreclosure alley, through new planned communities that look like tile-roofed versions of a 21st century ghost town, and you see what happens when people gamble with houses instead of casino chips. [...] Dirty flags advertise rock-bottom discounts on empty starter mansions. On the ground, foreclosure signs are tagged with gang graffiti. Empty lots are untended, cratered with mud puddles from the winter storms that have hammered California’s San Joaquin Valley.”*<sup>3</sup>

Later in his article Egan offers some long-term hope for those newly built suburbs currently facing a foreclosure epidemic. Especially the expected strong increase in the U.S. population due to immigration and high birth rates is seen as a chance for economic recovery (see also Kottkin, 2010). Next to suburbs under stress, there are also many leafy suburbs and “boomburbs” (Lang and Simmons, 2003; Lang and Lefurgy, 2005).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, urban sociology reveals that locations often experience ups and downs over time. The recovery of the U.S. housing and financial markets also depends on psychological factors such as confidence in the future and general optimism. The fate of suburbs, especially the troubled ones, is also heavily influenced by their image and representation. In order not to repeat the mistakes caused by earlier policies aimed at urban renewal it is essential to watch one’s language when discussing suburban decline:

*“Inasmuch as Americans were unwilling or unable to separate poor people and people of color from ideas of slums and blight a generation ago, why should we assume they will do so during this go ‘round of abandonment?’ Although it may seem far-fetched right now, I can envision a future where the representation of suburbs as slums reaches the point where we see policies of ‘suburban renewal,’ which remove people and not problems. One can stand on top of rooftops shouting, ‘It’s not black people! It’s neoliberalism, dammit!’ but without paying attention to how the new suburban reality is represented; no matter how bad it may become, we risk making the same mistakes that scholars and writers made a generation ago” (Schafan, 2009: 26).*

The power attributed to discourses can also be drawn from the formation of alliances of investors and developers who, sharing vested interests in ongoing suburbanisation, try to establish discursive dominance. Supported by international consultancies these alliances develop a joint language on urban issues, which becomes the basis for lobbying activities. One element of the meta (or master) narrative is the discrediting of urban planning and environmentalism. Both are portrayed as if they were tokens of a small, but ambitious and albeit dangerous minority acting against the majority’s right to freely choose their form of housing. Those who worry about urban sprawl are considered to be opposed to freedom of (housing) choice, prosperity and progress. Critics of unhampered urban sprawl or of other, more regulated forms of suburbanisation tend to be lumped together in one category as if they were all members of some kind of obscure anti-growth movement working against people’s and national interests.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, the goal of “pro-growth” alliances seems to be to push a certain

view on urban expansion, which – resting on a particular vocabulary, purr words, and a language code comparable to a dress code – creates political, media and academic support for further expansion. At the same time, the narrative created discredits any kind of criticism of urban expansion as ill-informed or even motivated by bad intentions.

**2** For the article referred to above Alex Schafan was awarded the Edward W. Soja Prize for Critical Thinking in Urban and Regional Research (Youn, 2009: 6).

**3** Egan, T., Slumburbia, The New York Times, February 10, 2010, accessible online at <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/02/10/slumburbia> (retrieved June 10, 2010)

**4** Suburbs under stress are those, where foreclosure problems loom and/or some of the following problems accumulate: an ageing housing stock, a declining and/or ageing population, high rates of unemployment, a deteriorating infrastructure, the prevalence of vandalism and crime, much waste land or many underutilized commercial buildings. The term “troubled suburbs” may be applied as well, but has been widely used to denote areas where massive riots have broken out, especially those that took place in some “banlieues” (mostly high-density, high-rise suburbs) in France some years ago.

**5** For an example of an initiative that equates concerns about urban sprawl with “un-American ideals” see a paper published online by the Connecticut Partnership for Balanced Growth at [www.cpbg.org/PDF%20documents/CBPG%20-%20Is%20it%20Sprawl%20or%20Suburbanization%20Handout.pdf](http://www.cpbg.org/PDF%20documents/CBPG%20-%20Is%20it%20Sprawl%20or%20Suburbanization%20Handout.pdf) (retrieved June 7, 2010).

The struggle for dominance between self-appointed “pro-market” alliances and an (alleged) anti-growth coalition gives rise to the question of how to balance power and interests in order to bring about fair planning. Can planning regulations assure neutrality in urban development? In “The Code of the City” Ben-Joseph (2005) reminds us that planning codes do not simply contain and condense technical information or solely represent the codifiable aspects<sup>6</sup>

118 of technological knowledge. Instead, they are a means of constructing reality. Accordingly, societal values and social norms are always reflected in planning codes, no matter how neutral and technical their wording may be. It is therefore probable that minority groups will be discriminated against by planning practices based on these codes.<sup>7</sup> This might occur unintentionally by “simply” not considering their needs in the planning process.

6 Written planning codes cannot fully represent the technological knowledge they are founded upon. This can be drawn from A. Ziedonis (2002) discussion of patents (which are a comparable matter in this regard): “Patents also incompletely represent technological knowledge. A patent represents “codified” knowledge, (i.e., knowledge that can be articulated in written form). However, a substantial fraction of technological knowledge is “uncodifiable” or “tacit,” (i.e., knowledge that requires face to face interaction to transfer or knowledge that is accumulated through experience and not otherwise easily gained or transferred” (p. 13f.).

7 In fact, all planning is based on some kind of code, whether written or unwritten. What matters are their contents and wording, the interpretations derived thereof, and the practices of their implementation adopted by planners and other relevant actors. For planning outcomes to be just, there is a need for transparency, accountability and democratic control of the planning process.

8 Retrieved on July 5, 2010 from <http://urbanpalimpsest.blogspot.com/2007/01/about-this-blog.html>

It is also likely that dated planning codes – which once upon a time may have fitted a society and its cities and towns well – are no longer appropriate to the changed social fabric of contemporary cities. They might, then, be out of touch with everyday life; appearing (or being) impracticable or bureaucratic. These examples stress the need for advocacy planning, community participation, and, more generally, social inclusion that go beyond tokenism. They also illustrate that urban

planning is *a social process that includes engineering tasks* and not, vice versa, an engineering process that just has to include some social aspects. Historically and internationally, urban planning has often been linked to the pursuit of happiness – in fact, it has often been regarded as a means to this end (Bartetzky and Schalenberg, 2009). To the extent that towns and cities are built realisations of specific historic, social, political and architectural ideas and visions, a sound understanding or “reading” of urban structure requires adequate knowledge and awareness of the social forces and ideas that have rendered these structures meaningful for people in a particular local situation.

Urban semiotics tries to make the city “readable”, not only by analysing and interpreting the obvious signs in the urban realm, but by treating everything that can be observed in a city (buildings, streets, parks, shop windows, advertisements, road signs, the “expressive” life-styles of the inhabitants, etc.) as a “sign” or “symbol.” The latter is also called a “symbolic sign” in Peirce’s terminology (Kress, 2010: 63). The decoding of historical and other layers plays an important role in this conceptual approach. The struggle over the meaning and uses of urban space as well as the discursive power of “memory politics” (i.e. the creation of collective memory or of “present pasts”, see Huyssen, 2003) become evident through this type of research:

*“Cities constitute a constant ‘work in progress’ of different actors with competing agenda’s. Cities are the dynamic result of prior necessities and choices and present day re-articulations and revisions of those. [...] Some artifacts of the past are simply torn down and replaced but many remain and are re-imbued or re-infused with new meanings, or at the least reframed as a materialized memory of past events and ways of living.*

*Thus the present inscribes itself on the past, layer after layer, and in an asynchronous fashion. In this respect the city can be thought of as a palimpsest which is constantly being rewritten, repainted, and re-populated by hurried crowds with a purpose.*

*The day-to-day metabolism of the city may be observed through its artifacts which are as much materializations of norms and values and functions as objects that are constantly being uploaded with new meanings, or redefined or re-appropriated to fulfill new functions. But the social fabric also becomes apparent through routine behavior, incidents, major events and the various signs and symptoms of how the city is 'used' (Pauwels, 2009: 263).*

In recent years the term "urban palimpsest" has become more widely used as a metaphor to capture the multi-layered urban reality which is essentially made up of the built environment, open public and green space, the history of a city, the interests of its current inhabitants, its social and demographic structure along with the local and broader political, cultural and economic conditions and contexts. On "Google", the term will return more than ten thousand results if entered in plural form, and will show almost four thousand hits if entered in singular (Google search performed by the author on July 5, 2010). In her blog, "Urban Palimpsest", the Baltimore-based journalist Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson writes on a variety of urban issues ranging from architecture and urban planning to culture. She is particularly interested in "the built environment and the layers of place and culture that exist in cities."<sup>8</sup> The difficulty of dealing adequately with the "urban palimpsest" or these layers of the urban becomes particularly obvious whenever buildings, streets or places can be said to bear some kind of historical burden:

*"The erasure of histories is a loaded gesture in cities that are more prone to swoon at the novelty of corporate architecture than contend with the contradictions of history [...]. The elision of unsavoury or problematic histories either through the renaming of streets or districts, or the transfiguration of Communist or Nazi-era buildings into contemporary institutions in post-Communist cities, does not entirely do away with their residual signifying power; instead, they take on the character of what Lisiak refers to as 'urban palimpsests' and thus can persist in different, often troubling or unsettling, ways" (Stahl, 2009: 259; see also Lisiak, 2009, on the examples of Berlin and Warsaw).*

### *The "For Sale" sign*

How do people know that a house in their neighbourhood is for sale? In Australia people could ring a real estate agent, read the classifieds in their local newspaper, or simply walk around and look for "for sale" signs in the front yards (fig. 1). In Germany, the latter option would not exist, as people do not put up such signs in their front yards. What is the reason for this seemingly minor difference?

In Australia, the sign "For Sale" in the front yard of a house usually indicates upward social mobility. Most Australians can and actually do go for two types of career: a professional career and housing career. They can climb the professional and the "housing ladder" (Paris, 1993; see also Beer et al., 2007; Johnson, 1994; Wulff and Maher, 1998). "Anything for the House" (Murphy and Probert, 2004) has strong historic roots: "[S]uburbs are more or less tacitly understood in Australia as an embodiment of the Great Australian Dream of affluence, independence, privacy and security: a dream of certainty

120 in a ‘new’ world characterised above all by flux” (Davison, 2005: 3). Therefore, it is no wonder that people who get a substantial pay rise or get offered a better paid job are inclined to buy a bigger or nicer house in a more prestigious and more established suburb. Especially first home buyers think that way. Moving is, therefore, associated with the idea of leading a better life.

against false advertising that might mislead potential home buyers as to the exact location of a property which is for sale: “Inaccurate advertising can give false perceptions to prospective buyers about the level of amenities available in the suburb, rates charged by local council, and schools in the area” (REBA, 2007: 1). Using a South African example to illustrate some methodical problems of address matching tools (address geocoding) Rahed *et al.* (2008: 201) point to a more general observation: “There is also always the human ego factor that sees a person, living near the boundary of a more prestigious suburb, use the name of that suburb in their address.” This quotation emphasises the point that people attribute meaning to a location, with the address especially acting as a signifier of social status, of belonging to a particular social group. Conversely, the representation of addresses on (digital) maps based on geocoding (e.g. by applying ISO 19112:2003 “Geographic information – Spatial referencing by geographic identifiers”) includes assignments of social status, of market value of properties, and of the desirability and general appreciation of a location.

Unlike most Australians, many people in Germany hope that when they decide to build or buy a house, they will be able to stay there for good. When they move in, say at the age of 30, they still imagine themselves living there when they retire – too often, though, they do not consider a barrier free design or a “universal design”, when they make the decision to buy or build a home (Büscher *et al.*, 2009; GdW, 2009; Führ, 2005; Häußermann and Siebel, 2000). Mortgages are usually high and must be paid off within thirty or forty years (Ammann and Demuth, 2009: 5ff.). Usually, there are no “for sale” signs in the front yard when people have to sell their house, as this would indicate that something has gone wrong



Figure 1 “For Sale” sign in front yard, Adelaide  
Photo: B. Stratmann

Living in a leafy suburb is a powerful symbol of personal social and economic success.<sup>9</sup> As location strongly impacts on the price of a property, the Western Australian Real Estate and Business Agents Supervisory Board (REBA) warns



(e.g. that they cannot pay the mortgage any more due to long-term unemployment, illness, marriage breakup or other unexpected life events). Since people usually do not want everyone to know about these things, they would not want a sign in front of their home potentially indicating that the inhabitants of the house might have faced serious problems. In spite of a growing number of labour market and lifestyle induced changes, in Germany selling a house is still strongly associated with the assumption that someone *has* to sell their house. This, in turn, is understood as a symbol of downward social mobility, personal problems, or even severe hardship. The same assumptions are not made for renters (about 58 percent of the German population are renting – flats, mostly; see Timm, 2008).<sup>10</sup> It is believed that they move flats (more rarely houses) for a variety of reasons, e.g. starting a new job somewhere else or needing more space because of additions to the family (BBSR, 2009; Gieck, 2007; Sturm and Meyer, 2008).

### *Suburban dreaming: stuck in a cul-de-sac or when does “Revolutionary Road” turn into “Mulholland Drive”?*

“It’s been a bad couple of decades for dreamers. So many collective dreams shattered into ugly shards. The devastation was democratic. Almost every political and social constituency suffered the agonies of disillusion. [...] The neoliberal dream of the boundless economy (‘Go for Growth’) is drowning in frightful waves of ecological feedback and, even worse, popular doubt” (Gleeson, 2008b: 1). What has, then, happened to the suburban dream so many Australians share with the majority of the inhabitants of countries such as Great Britain, the United States, France and Germany (Barker, 2009; Büscher

et al., 2009; Chudacoff and Smith, 2005, ch. 9; Gleeson, 2008b; Hanlon et al., 2010)? Was it a dream at all – or rather a nightmare? TV series such as the British dramedy “Suburban Shoot-out” and its US-American counterpart “Desperate Housewives” or the movie “The ‘Burbs” (starring Tom Hanks) seem to suggest that life in suburbia is so boring that only (self-) destructive behaviour, shootings and intrigues can help people (and the suburban TV viewers or movie audience) escape from it.

**9** A current AHURI (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute) research project tries to determine, whether or to what extent low to moderate income households benefit from home ownership. There is some evidence that these households might underestimate the potential risks of home ownership (Hulse and Burke, 2009). Considering the American case Pitcoff (2008) points to the mortgage strain being particularly risky for low-income households. Reason for the financial crisis that followed can already be drawn from the paper.

**10** The owner occupancy rate has been relative stable in recent years. However, it is estimated to rise up to 47 percent by 2025 (Waltersbacher and Scharmanski, 2010: 5) Currently about five percent of all households own a house or flat, but live elsewhere in rented accommodation.

Are a lack of humour, endurance and experience the reasons for such a one-sided and rather cynical perspective? For Richard Gordon, much-loved British writer of many humorous books, a “suburban postcode had the ring of the Gulag Archipelago and it was to be avoided at all costs. However after decades living in suburbia he has come to love it – the way Gauguin loved Tahiti” (Gordon, 2001: back page). Shaun Tan, a much-acclaimed Australian illustrator and writer, enjoys life in suburban Melbourne. He, a Chinese-Australian, and his partner Inari Kiuru, a Finnish born graphic designer, are a good example of the

122 diversity of today's suburbia. Like many other members of the "creative class" (Florida, 2003; see also Heßler, 2007) they do not believe that suburbs must necessarily be a dull place to live. As Tan says in an article in *The Australian* on May 24, 2008: "Suburbia [...] is often represented as a banal, quotidian, even boring place that escapes much notice. Yet I think it is also a fine substitute for the medieval forests of fairytale lore, a place of subconscious imaginings. I've always found the idea of suburban fantasy very appealing." In her article Rosemary Neill, the interviewer, continues to summarise Tan's observations:

11 Neill, R., Suburban dreaming, article/interview with Shaun Tan, *The Australian*, May 24, 2008; retrieved on January 15, 2010 from <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/story/0-11111639221>

12 Nielsen, J., Cul-de-Sacs: Suburban Dream or Dead End? NPR, June 7, 2006; retrieved on June 14, 2010 from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5455743>

13 Source: see previous footnote.

14 Retrieved on June 14, 2010 from [http://www.cnu.org/Intro\\_to\\_new\\_urbanism](http://www.cnu.org/Intro_to_new_urbanism)

*"Tan argues that a double reality attends suburbia: it is highly visible but, at the same time, unseen. On the one hand, it's so familiar it's taken for granted; on the other, this familiarity means it is overlooked or ridiculed. [...] Nevertheless, he thinks 'there is something unsettling about (life in the suburbs) from an aesthetic point of view, and also from a cultural point of view'. He feels new, fringe suburbs lend themselves to surreality because they lack a settled identity. [...] For [him], outer suburbia is as much a state of mind as a place: as he puts it, 'somewhere close and familiar but also on the edge of consciousness (and not unlike outer space)'."*<sup>11</sup>

In his 2008 book "Tales from Outer Suburbia" Shaun Tan tries to capture some of the intuitions that arise from observing life in fringe suburbs. The book comprises fifteen illustrated short stories and was published almost simultaneously in a number of countries (title of the German edition "Geschichten aus der Vorstadt des Universums"; Carlsen Verlag, Hamburg, 2008). The international success of the book might suggest that the author offers a timely account of what happens "out there".

The idea that the suburban dream can easily turn into a nightmare has been the theme of songs such as "The Ballad Of Lucy Jordan" sung by Marianne Faithfull, or movies such as "Revolutionary Road" (USA, 2008, directed by Sam Mendes). Interestingly, in both cases (song and movie) the realisation of being unable to get to Paris (the city which is one of the world's foremost icons of sophistication and urbanity) can be seen as the catalyst for disenchantment. In the film, the suburban road where the central characters live literally turns into "Mulholland Drive" (title of a 2001 David Lynch movie) – a surreal world of despair, confusion and subtle violence. What is it that seems to turn suburbia into a battlefield? In the real world there is also plenty of confusion in the attempt to assess the attributes of a suburban location. Whereas many urban dwellers strongly believe that suburbia is the best place for bringing up children, statistics, at least in parts, tell a different story. The cul-de-sacs, for example, which were and still are popular in the layout of US-American suburbs, turn out to be amongst those streets, where many children are killed by cars while playing outside:

*"Lucy [William H. Lucy, a professor of urban and environmental planning at the University of Virginia, USA] says cul-de-sac communities*

*turn out to have some of the highest rates of traffic accidents involving young children. 'The actual research about injuries and deaths to small children under five is that the main cause of death is being backed over, not being driven over forward [...] And it would be expected that the main people doing the backing over would in fact be family members, usually the parents.'*<sup>12</sup>

Even though arguments like these have led to councils banning cul-de-sac suburbs in some US cities, houses on cul-de-sacs are still very popular with many home buyers and, therefore, sell at a better price. This, of course, is an incentive for developers to continue building suburbs based on a tree-shaped layout with as many cul-de-sacs as possible at the “branches”. Internationally the model has also met with interest: “Speck [Jeff Speck, an influential American town planner and writer] says this isn’t just an American dream anymore. He says that in countries like the Philippines and China, and in parts of the Middle East, cul-de-sacs are fast becoming all the rage.”<sup>13</sup> However, a heated public and expert debate on the social, economic and ecological sustainability of those suburbs is currently taking place. In a video that won the Congress for the New Urbanism’s video contest in Denver in 2009 the message even is “The greatest threat to our planet is cul-de-sacs!”<sup>14</sup> This is, of course, to make a point. Unfortunately, in the debate sprawl and any form of suburbanisation are often incorrectly equated (for a critique of the equation between sprawl and suburbanisation see Gleeson, 2008a: 2654f.; for an ambitious defence of sprawl see Bruegmann, 2005; for fierce criticism of sprawl and suburbanisation see Duany et al., 2000; see also Kunstler, 1993; Marshall, 2000; Saunders et al., 2005; for a “smart growth manual” see Duany and Speck, 2010).

In order to better understand how these diverging views on suburbia have evolved the following section will introduce some necessary differentiations.

### *Fringe Living*

That a large portion of the population of many Western countries can afford to live in suburban areas these days can, in many ways, be seen as symbol of enormous social progress. Ordinary people have managed to live a modest version of the villa lifestyle previously reserved to the upper classes and the nobility in past centuries – and that is still reserved to the affluent and the powerful in most countries of the world. However, because so many people want to live at the fringe of the cities and towns they now often end up living at the fringe of the fringe’s fringe. This can be understood as an example of the unintended consequences of purposeful action, a collective, yet unexpected or undesirable outcome of many individuals’ activities directed towards the same goal (in this case: owning a single-family home).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> In Sociology, unintended consequences and their meaning for the shaping of society is one of the key concepts in understanding social change. The (purposeful) activities of individual or collective actors often produce side effects, which can be negative or positive. Unintended consequences of social action are, thus, unanticipated by the actors, but not necessarily harmful to them or to society as a whole. Sociologists such as Robert K. Merton, Anthony Giddens, Raymond Boudon or James S. Coleman employ the concept as a central element of their theories. In urban planning there are many examples of negative side effects of well-intentioned planning activities that, in some case, have even resulted in outcomes, which turned out to be in diametrical opposition to the original intent (Terlinden, 1994). Trying to anticipate possible unintended consequences of planned actions (e.g. proposed new urban planning strategies) is, therefore, an important task for researchers, practitioners and other responsible social actors.

“Unintended consequences”, however, do not fully explain suburbanisation, nor do they tell us what suburbs and suburban life are like. There has been a long, and still ongoing debate about what happens at the urban fringe. Mainly, it has been a debate on the “subs” or better the “sub” of the city (historically most suburbs were seen as bad places to be and live, see Archer, 2006; Fishman, 2006). Three main areas of discussion can be differentiated: Firstly, there is a debate on suburbs as a built form. Is there an optimal urban density, scale or size? What urban functions should be provided, and where? What is the best layout? How do suburbs relate to the city spatially? Secondly, there is the debate on mass suburbanisation as an important new stage in the urbanisation process – a process leading to suburbs gradually becoming the major part of urban space in many (Western) countries. What does this mean for “suburban nations” such as the United States and Australia, where more than half of the total population live in suburban areas? Do these countries deurbanise? What should be the rationale for decisions on administrative boundaries of cities and municipalities, in view of the fact that economic activity, commuters and air pollution constantly cross these boundaries? Is there a need for reorganising the distribution of tax revenues among (urban and suburban or rich and poor) local governments and between them and the other tiers of government, e.g. in order to fund infrastructure?

Finally, there is a debate on “suburbia” as a socio-cultural phenomenon. It includes questions such as whether there is a “suburban way of life” (that is non-urban or even anti-urban), whether suburbs create or help to create a certain type of suburban mentality that shapes particular lifestyles (architectural determinism), or whether, *vice versa*, an existing model of the good

life provides the cognitive basis for the formation of suburbia.

In the last two decades there have also been growing concerns regarding the sustainability of the expanding suburban areas in many parts of the world. In particular, ecological sustainability (energy consumption of buildings and for transport, air and noise pollution due to automobile dependence, loss of arable land, etc.) became an important issue widely discussed. However, the economic costs to the public and the individual household (infrastructure provision and maintenance, rates, increasing costs for travel, health costs due to road accidents and stress-related diseases caused by the daily driving grind, etc.) are also a matter of concern. As to the social dimension of sustainability, issues such as the affordability of housing and transport, accessibility of services, public health, social isolation, gender roles and equality, safety, segregation and exclusion are of particular relevance (Dempsey et al., 2009; Forster, 2004: 72ff., 168ff.; Jenks and Jones, 2010; Saunders, 2005). The combined effects of the increasing world population and the growing share of people living in cities have further fuelled the debate as problems seem to accumulate and urgency for action increases. The housing demands of the growing middle and upper classes in emerging markets such as China, India and parts of Southeast Asia are seen as additional factors that might contribute to a massive suburban expansion in this highly populated part of the world (United Nations, 2008; UN-HABITAT, 2010: 10f.). Considering this, it is “only” a secondary issue whether new suburbs emerge as an accumulation of single-family homes or of high-rise apartment blocks. Global suburbanisation is a fact, and fringe development a normal result of population growth and economic expansion.

A plethora of terms has been coined to capture the developments at the urban fringe:

*“These names range from wordplays on the etymological roots ‘urb’ and ‘burb’ (such as slurb, the burbs, the technoburb, exurbia, disurbia, superurbia, shock suburbs, suburban downtown, suburban activity center, nonplace urban field, dispersed urban regions, the rurban fringe) to word combinations with ‘city’ (edge city, outer city, technocity, galactic city, elastic city, polynucleated city, spread city, perimeter city, città autostradale) and other labels (sprawl, megalopolis, exopolis, out-town, growth corridor, multinucleated metropolitan region. Nowheresville, Anywheresville, autopia...” (Ghent Urban Studies Team, 1999: 28; see also Hauser, 2010, who uses parts of this quotation as an introduction to her article on “Urbanisierte Landschaften“ [urbanised landscapes]).*

The inflationary production of novel terms is sometimes even confusing for those who are quite familiar with the analysis of cities. It hampers communication among and between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. It also leads to misunderstandings, as notions partly overlap in meaning and as different authors use different definitions of the some of these terms. “Sprawl” is an excellent example for this (see Hanlon et al., 2010: 162ff.). Especially in the case of international comparative studies and cross-national knowledge transfer an uncritical adoption of terms can be detrimental to research:

*“The landscape of Australian urban scholarship and debate has been signed by imported US totems, such as ‘sprawl’, ‘smart growth’ and ‘new urbanism’. Although sprawl is defined as poorly planned – that is haphazard – low-density urban*

*development (McManus [...]), the term in use has tended to blanket neatly the entire suburban form, well planned or otherwise. Sprawl’s totemic power is signified by the deathly potency granted it in scholarship and commentary, especially in the US. Hirschhorn’s 2005 book reports that Sprawl Kills and annihilates comprehensively by also stealing ‘your time, health and money’. The pathologised view of suburbia in the US is extended by Frumkin et al. [...] who conceive smart growth as ‘a medicine that treats a multitude of diseases’. Australian architectural critic Elizabeth Farrelly [...] provides forensic detail: ‘the traffic jams and the water shortages, the poisonous air and the childhood asthma, the obesity, the neuroses, the depression’. The social impotence of the ‘sprawl’ totem, however, is marked by the manifest failure of urban critique to blunt the continuing enthusiasm of Western populations, most especially Australians, for some form of suburban life” (Gleeson, 2008a: 2654).*

Four aspects are often not considered when it comes to discussing suburbs:

a) Vibrancy and diversity: Suburbia is not class-coded, culturally dull, uniform or “single-lifestyled” anymore. In fact, it has for a long time been more diverse than readily acknowledged (see, e.g., Barker, 2009; Clapson, 2003; Hanlon et al., 2010). In Australia, suburban life has never been exclusive due to the fact that houses were affordable to most income-earning households – this is not to say that some suburbs are more exclusive than others (Davison, 1999; Forster, 2004; Murphy and Probert, 2004).

b) Variety: There are declining and growing, rich and poor suburbs. “Boomburbs” and “slumburbia” are two of the many faces of today’s suburban reality. Multicultural areas and ethnic

126 enclaves can also be found in suburbia. The suburban dream does exist alongside the “suburban gothic” – sometimes they even seem to co-exist as dark movies such as David Lynch’s “Blue Velvet” (USA, 1986) suggests (Clapson, 2003; Hanlon et al., 2010, Lang and Simmons, 2003; Lang and Lefurgy, 2005; Schafran, 2009).

c) Size, density, and height: Suburbs can vary a lot in terms of population. They can be as small as a village (where most people know – or could know – each other), but also as big as a town. Variety exists within and between countries. There are also medium-density and high-rise suburbs, not only suburbs made up of single-family homes. Within a suburb density and height of constructions can vary. A suburban shopping centre, for example, can develop into an urban sub-centre, where scale will also become more urban (Bodenschatz, 2009; UN-HABITAT, 2010).

d) Uses: Suburbanisation does not only refer to the growth of suburban housing areas. It also refers to the suburbanisation of industry, trade and commerce, shopping, administration, education and recreation. Industrial areas and business parks, administrative and office buildings, shopping centres and malls, schools and campuses, public parks, cafés and pubs, tennis courts and squash centres all can be found in suburban locations (Bodenschatz, 2009; Forster, 2004; Hanlon et al., 2010).

Regardless of its diverse character, the image of suburbs people have in mind – no matter whether they love or despise suburbia –, is that of a built-up residential area consisting mainly of single-family homes. This popular image is also often taken up for covers of textbooks or monographs on the issue of urban and suburban development.

They often display a photo of a leafy suburb or parts thereof (see, e.g., the covers of the excellent books by Clapson, 2003; Forsyth, 1999; Hanlon et al., 2010, or of the readers edited by Nicolaidis and Wiese, 2006, and by Saunders, 2005). The authors and editors of these and many other books on this issue know that suburban reality is far more complex than the popular image may suggest. However the cover pictures represent the issue well because criticism of suburbanisation often focuses on this type of suburbia; one seen as monotonous in its physical appearance and uniform in its social life and social structure.

To highlight the multitude of forms suburban reality can take is not to deny that powerful stereotypes of middle-class suburban life have existed and will partly continue to persist, exerting an influence of how people live their lives. Films such as “The Ice Storm” (Ang Lee, USA, 1997, German title “Der Eissturm”), “Revolutionary Road” (Sam Mendes, USA, 2008; German title “Zeiten des Aufbruchs”) or “American Beauty” (Sam Mendes, USA, 1999) brilliantly illustrate both the configuration of the ideal and its limitations, downsides and pitfalls. The following quote elaborately summarises much of the conventional narrative on suburbia prevailing in 20th Century America. It also serves as a reminder that the massive 20th-century wave of suburbanisation was heavily promoted by governments (the so-called “GI bill” that included a special program providing insured and low-interest building loans to returning servicemen, the availability of various tax deduction schemes encouraging home ownership, the hedging of banks via mortgage repayment insurance provided by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), and federal road subsidies were important means to this end; see also Hanlon et al., 2010: 46ff.):

*“Though suburbs varied in quality and composition, American culture celebrated and intensified version of domesticity that presumed single-family housing in suburbia, with the breadwinner fathers and homemaker mothers finding personal satisfaction in family life and in the commodity purchases that enhance it. New Deal social legislation, the GI bill, and FHA-insured mortgages subsidized the demographic trends of high marriage rates, earlier ages at marriage, and large families, with which life in the suburbs became associated. The presumption that suburban husbands would go off to the city to work, leaving wives at home to care for children, was reflected in the suburban home design. Each house in Levittown<sup>16</sup> was intended to be a self-contained world marked off by a white picket fence. Inside were a standardized living room with television set built into the wall and a kitchen and washing machine. The grassy lawns surrounding large house lots highlighted privacy, and the garages took car ownership for granted” (Chudacoff and Smith, 2005: 275).*

In Australia, many people would subscribe to the view held by Barker: “Suburbia is the great compromise between privacy and price, and between town and country” (Barker, 2009: 216). Since colonial beginnings most Australians have tried, and managed, to live in the major cities along the coast. Even though or precisely because the remoteness, loneliness and bleakness of the outback were feared, rural communities and farmers on isolated homesteads were and are celebrated for their courage and mateship. Down-to-earthness, integrity and unpretentiousness are other associated values (Bulbeck, 1998: 24ff.; Davison, 2005; Share et al., 2000; Waterhouse, 2005). Television drama series such as “The Flying Doctors” (original run 1986–1993) and “McLeod’s Daughters” (original run

2001–2009) well represent this popular and, at times, romanticised picture of rural life. Notably, both TV series were highly successful internationally (in Germany each episode has been dubbed for German TV broadcasting by voice actors).

<sup>16</sup> Levittown is the name of some large, mass-produced post World War II suburban developments, which became a model for the development of many other postwar American suburbs (see <http://web1.fandm.edu/levittown/one/b.html>; see also: <http://www.levittownhistoricalsociety.org>).

Despite this widespread appreciation of rural virtues, cultural, political, professional and economic elites usually prefer urban lifestyles (though not rarely realised in a suburban location). As suburbia incorporates aspects of the rural it is not fully accepted as an integral part of the urban:

*“The way we read the street will be a product of our culture and experience. These commonalities are drawn on and created by architects, artists, advertisers, and planners. The social construction of the city involves a preparedness to reject the tradition of rurality embodied in suburbia and embrace the city. In modernity this is perhaps best reflected in the work of Baudelaire and his image of the flaneur” (Bounds, 2004: 114).*

Interestingly, in Australia academic papers in defence of suburbia are published in critical journals such as *Australian Rationalist* (Hassan, 1996; Troy, 1996) or avantgarde journals such as *Polis* (O’Connor, 1994). Book or journal articles on the issue are often written by well-respected authors such as Hugh Stretton (e.g. 1996), who could never be accused of sacrificing his academic

128 ideals to aid the vested interests of developers, property speculators, real-estate agents or institutional investors. Suburbanisation is not a project promoted only by big business or conservative politicians, it is also a process encouraged by proponents of social equality such as trade unionists or labour party members. It is as much about business as it is a social movement and an element of national identity built around the idea of the “fair go” (Davison, 1999; Forster, 2004; Gleeson, 2008b; Stretton, 1996). This “national coalition” for the detached house on its own block of land, the “Great Australian Dream”, is now challenged by the quest for sustainability. Once more a negative light is shed on suburbia. This has some kind of tradition. Writing from a UK perspective, Paul Barker (2009) observes:

*“Almost all architectural and planning commentaries, in the press or in government publications, still speak of the suburb as an evil that must somehow be cast out. To call anything or anyone ‘suburban’ is to utter a put-down, an anathema, a curse. Yet suburbs are almost unbelievably popular. They do not merely survive: they flourish, in the teeth of all criticism, like a leylandii cypress or a red-flowering horse chestnut. The ‘new era’, which so delighted the Baptists of Hackney in north-east London, was in fact the return of the old. Suburbia resumed its grip on hearts and minds” (Barker, 2009: 13f.)*

The history of the evolution of suburbs sheds more light on the reasons why suburbia has so many connotations, why it heats emotions and tends to polarise both, academic discussions and public opinion.

### *The social history of suburbanisation*

*“A nation of homeowners, of people who won a real share in their own land, is unconquerable” (US Pres Franklin D. Roosevelt, quoted from Kenneth T. Jackson, 1985, p. 190).*

The first known proclamation of the suburban ideal is much older than one might think and refers to a suburb of Ur:

*“Our property seems to me the most beautiful in the world. It is so close to Babylon that we enjoy all the advantages of the city, and yet when we come home we are away from all the noise and dust” (Letter to the King of Persia, written on a clay tablet in 539 B.C., quoted from Kenneth T. Jackson, 1985: 12).*

In his award-winning book “Crabgrass Frontier. The Suburbanization of the United States” Kenneth T. Jackson shows that the term “suburb” was used in London from about 1500 A.C. to describe parts of the urban area. There is also evidence that in continental Europe medieval and early modern cities and towns had suburbs (French: le faubourg, German: Vorstadt). They were often, though not necessarily, located outside town walls, and in peaceful times many of them were considered desirable places to live, offering cleaner air, greenery and more space. The latter was also seen as protection against diseases (Jackson, 1985: 12f.). Drawing on work done by Frank A. Smallwood he writes that “much of London’s early suburbanisation [can be ascribed] to two catastrophes in 1665 and 1666, the plague and the fire” (ibid.).

Suburbanisation thus preceded the car. This is even true for modern forms of suburbanisation, which first took shape in some of the major cities



in Great Britain and the United States in the early 19th century, and gradually replaced the “walking city” (Chudacoff and Smith, 2005, ch. 3 and 4). “Walking cities” have five “spatial characteristics”: congestion (due to high population density, relatively small lot sizes, and narrow lanes and streets), a “clear distinction between city and country”, the mixed use of most urban areas for functions such as housing, trade and production, short walks or horse rides to work (due to short distances between workplace and home or even spatial integration of both), and finally “the tendency of the most fashionable and respectable addresses to be located close to the centre of town” (Jackson, 1985: 14ff.). In Germany, the evolution of the modern suburban city(land)scape began in the late 19th century (Bodenschatz, 2009: 34f.). In Australia, suburbanization almost immediately followed white settlement beginning in 1788. It was, at least in parts, a response to the negative experience with high residential density made in British cities, especially in the working class areas of the early industrialisation period. Moreover, it was not, at least at the beginning, a zone in-between of town and country:

*“Unlike the first modern suburbs [...] Australian suburbs were not lodged between city and country, between urban and rural orders, but developed as an unprecedented form of settlement in their own right. These were truly suburban cities in which the ‘capitals developed suburbs before their centres were built up’ (Dingle & Frost [...]). As early as 1788, in the first months of settlement, Arthur Phillip, Governor of New South Wales, wrote of his (only partially implemented) plan that ‘land will be granted with a clause that will prevent more than one house being built on the allotment, which will be sixty feet in front and one hundred and fifty feet in depth’ (Phillip cited in Davison [...]).*

*[...] The suburban orientation of the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century resulted from the interaction of pro-urban and anti-urban forces” (Davison, 2005: 4f).*

Australian Cities grew “as public transport cities” (Forster, 2004: 10) and the same is true for German and American cities. Tramways and light-rail systems allowed for commuting and, therefore, early growth centred around their routes (Bodenschatz, 2009; Chudacoff and Smith, 2005, ch. 4; Jackson, 1985: 120ff.). Extensive road construction and the increasing affordability of cars due to rising income levels then led to further urban expansion. The car is therefore not the source of suburban growth. Instead, it rather accelerated this process and often led to a decline in the provision of public transport services. The main proponents of “Human Ecology”, an early approach to urban sociology, did not recognise these historical facts and were criticised by exponents of the New Urban Sociology for seeing the car as the cause of suburbanisation (Gottdiener and Feagin, 1988). Not even trams and trains can be held responsible for changes in urban form. Rather, new technologies are invented and applied if there are strong social, political or economic forces, which urge for change. To argue the other way round would lead straight to “technological determinism”, a term used in science to criticise concepts claiming that new technological developments are the main agent of social change. This is not to say that technological change does not matter. On the contrary, without new technologies some changes cannot be realised. For example, the carriage of goods by truck instead of trains requires reliable trucks in the first place, capable of long haul. Cars also made it possible to commute long distance comfortably.

In America, massive interstate highway construction and the urban network of streets and roads made it increasingly attractive to move goods by truck. In turn, this contributed to the suburbanisation of industry, wholesale, retail, and professions (see, e.g., Chudacoff and Smith, 2005, ch. 9). Commercial areas led to the suburbanisation of employment and trade. At the same time suburban shopping centres and recreational facilities were added in large numbers. In many cases the clustering of these activities created suburban centres that started to compete with the city centres. Some sub-centres became strong “edge cities”. Other suburbs have developed into “boomburbs”, large independent cities that have a strong local economy, but usually no identifiable centre (Lang and Simmons, 2003; Lang and Lefurgy, 2005). Thus, the massive suburbanisation of housing, employment and retailing in recent decades has changed urban structure dramatically. Moreover, growth at and beyond the urban fringe has also affected the inner cities. They have lost population, jobs and commercial activities to suburban areas, which are often located outside their municipal boundaries. This means that cities also lose tax revenues, which, in turn, makes it harder to fund urban infrastructure. In Australia, for example, all major cities apart from Brisbane are divided up into many independent local government areas (LGAs) so that the suburbs surrounding the inner cities usually do not belong to that city in administrative, political and fiscal terms. In Germany, towns and cities usually form just one municipality. However, suburbanisation often takes place in the form of the establishment or expansion of single-family house areas at the fringe of small neighbouring municipalities, often former rural villages or small towns nearby larger towns and cities (Hirschle and Schürt, 2008; Sturm and Meyer, 2008).

Even though the exact staging of the suburbanisation process, its detailed historic background and the approaches to urban planning and urban design it encompasses differ from country to country, the general picture as sketched above captures features of a rather similar suburbanisation process occurring in many Western countries. This is true even for the structure and content of affirmative and critical discourses on suburbanisation and urban sprawl. Issues discussed, lines of argumentation employed and solutions proposed resemble each other. What varies between countries is which discourse, affirmative or critical, is more influential. Nonetheless, suburbanisation as such is currently globalising in that the above mentioned urban processes can be observed in a growing number of countries, especially in emerging markets such as India and China. In these countries suburbs often consist of high-rise buildings (Campanella, 2008, ch. 7; CRIT, 2007a and b; Hassenpflug, 2010; Heitzman, 2008; Ipsen, 2004; Jun and Xiaoming, 2008; Liauw, 2008; Monson, 2008; Sivaramakrishnan et al., 2007). Depending on the quality of their planning they are either an approach to reduce the consumption of valuable and scarce land or – if ill-planned – are an example of “vertical sprawl”.

It should be noted that high-rise suburbs are not unknown in Western countries, either. They were often built with the intent to provide affordable housing to lower-income households. Frequently, however, they led to aggravated forms of socio-economic and ethnic segregation (Knorr-Siedow, 1997; see also Friedrichs and Triemer, 2008 on recent trends in German cities). They demoralised their inhabitants and stigmatised them at the same time. Vandalism, high crime rates, alcoholism and substance abuse are just some of the negative connotations soon

to become associated with this type of suburbia and housing form. Residents are variously labelled as poor communicators, difficult, aggressive, anti-social, benefit scroungers, underachievers, job hoppers, and lazy. Even though the majority of residents of such estates usually do not fit this stereotype, but lead an orderly, working class or petit bourgeois life, they are still affected by both the negative ramifications of these stereotypes (discrimination by address, deterioration of the neighbourhood, physical decline due to little maintenance investment, etc.) and the general social change towards post-fordism. When the latter gradually began to replace fordism in many fields of production and consumption the new (and old) middle-classes started to reject cheap mass produced consumer goods, including prefabricated high-rise housing, and even the lifestyle of those who lived in these buildings (Schmoll, 1990; see also Hannemann, 2010). The era of this type of social housing (in some countries the concept of social housing altogether) came to an end. However, the problems with the existing stock will remain for quite some time. The massive riots that took place in the “banlieues” of Paris and other French cities in autumn 2005 are just one, yet striking example of high-rise planning gone wrong.

In the former socialist countries many high-rise residential areas were built in order to gradually replace the traditional urban form and housing styles. Some politicians and some other commentators in Western countries attacked the model of the socialist city, its urban design, architecture, layout and vision for being inhumane. In the cold war era it did not seem to matter much that residential high-rise buildings were also put up in large numbers in countries such as France, West Germany or the Netherlands in order to house poor citizens or (newly arrived) migrants.

What was condemned as inhumane if practised on one side of the fence was appreciated by some of the same people as welfarism and wise use of scarce land, if practised on the other side of the ideological fence: the same type of housing, but two different stories told.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Sure enough, there also was some early criticism of high-rise estates in Western countries.

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/planen/basisdaten\\_stadtentwicklung/atlas/de/stadt\\_umland.shtml](http://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/planen/basisdaten_stadtentwicklung/atlas/de/stadt_umland.shtml) and [http://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/planen/basisdaten\\_stadtentwicklung/atlas/de/bevoelkerung.shtml](http://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/planen/basisdaten_stadtentwicklung/atlas/de/bevoelkerung.shtml) (last viewed January 31, 2010)

In East Germany, after reunification, the GDR high-rise quickly lost its popularity. Many people moved back to the inner cities, which were redeveloped (in that process, nice old towns and historic quarters could be reconstructed; the political turn, the so-called “Wende”, came just in time for much of the built cultural heritage to be preserved). More people, however, moved to suburban areas, where they started building single-family homes – something that was not possible for most people under communist rule (Großmann, 2007; Häußermann, 1997; Kahl, 2003; Haller, 2002; Rietdorf, 1997; Rietdorf et al., 2001). During the first fifteen years after reunification Berlin lost 381,000 inhabitants to the surrounding area. As there was also substantial in-migration from the region and other parts of Germany as well as immigration from abroad, the migration balance left Berlin with a total loss of only about 38,000 inhabitants as compared to the time when the Wall came down.<sup>18</sup> With this net migration figure the culturally vibrant city of Berlin is doing much better than many other towns and cities in the former East Germany

132 which suffer from the combined effects of a low birth rate in the years of uncertainty following reunification, a persistently high unemployment rate, the movement of people to other areas, and the low levels of in-migration and immigration.

In Australia, ‘high-rise’ signals, first of all, city centre. The skyline of the five largest cities is made up of skyscrapers serving as office towers for major industries such as banking, investment and insurance (with others being used as hotels). High-rise blocks of flats used to be, by and large, public housing. Now, there are more and more advertisements in the newspapers or on TV promoting high-end, high-rise condominium buildings located at the waterfront, at suburban beaches or near the Central Business District (CBD). The luxurious and spacious apartments are often offered at a price that exceeds the median price of an average single family home in the suburbs. Whether this indicates a sea change in housing preferences will be discussed further below. The following section will examine the relationship between sustainability and urban form and, in the process, conventional wisdom will be challenged.

### *Climate change, peak oil and the debate on urban form*

Climate change and peak oil pose enormous challenges to cities. There is the urgent need to avoid the “urban meltdown” (Doucet, 2007) and to speed up planning for the post-fossil city (Droegge, 2009; Schindler et al., 2009). Both global warming and declining reserves of fossil fuels are as much related to the future of cities as to the economic and ecological survival of mankind. Both processes do not necessarily suggest only additional burdens, they also offer a

chance to better cities. As a matter of fact, many measurements that need to be taken include the potential to considerably improve the liveability of cities and to enhance prosperity, social justice, equity, and human health. A move towards the “solar city”, for example, would not only reduce the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of cities drastically, it would also eliminate other emissions related to burning fossil fuels, and would thus improve air quality and, consequently, health. It goes without saying that fossil resources are currently still very important to the production of many goods used on a daily basis (much of clothing, any household items being made of or containing plastic parts, most food packaging, detergents and other cleaning agents, cosmetics and pharmaceuticals based on mineral oils, etc.). A lot of these uses of fossil resources will not easily be replaced by other resources in the near future, at least not at adequate quality, in the quantities required for a growing world population and at acceptable social, economic and environmental costs. It is also for this reason that fossil resources should not be wasted as fuel.

In science and politics there is a widespread agreement that human induced climate change does exist. It is also generally held that there is still a chance to limit the extent to which global warming will occur. A dual strategy is usually suggested: adaption and mitigation. The latter refers to all activities which are likely to stop, or at least limit, global warming. In Copenhagen, at the 15th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 15) the countries of the world could not agree on a binding plan for action, but rather agreed on expert opinion that global warming should be limited to 2°C by the end of the century.<sup>19</sup> Adaptation, the other component of the double approach, comprises all measures and policies that can be

taken to reduce the possible impact of climate change on cities, infrastructure, human health, and the ecological system that sustains our lives (e.g. protection of biodiversity, flood control and prevention, sufficient ventilation to avoid urban heat island effects and high concentration of emissions, bush fire control). For the development, testing and implementation of measures and policies on mitigation and adaptation, the local level is held in high regard:

*“Generally speaking, it is held that the city as a system constitutes the ideal geographical unit with which to organise integrated solutions to the climate problem, i.e. to plan and test practicable combinations of measures of prevention and adaptation, and this in direct dialogue with the actors concerned” (Rahmstorf and Schnellhuber, 2007: 130f., translation by author).<sup>20</sup>*

Cities are seen as both a major cause for climate change and a victim of climate change. The large and mega cities of the Global South, which are often coastal cities or located near the coast or at the banks of large rivers are especially prone to risk. However, other cities in developing countries are also likely to be affected by climate change as a result of desertification, (sand) storms, heavy rain, the reduction of water and food supply, and massive in-migration or international migration due to the influx of refugees from those coastal or river cities most affected by global warming. To a lesser – but possibly still dramatic – extent, countries and cities in the developed world are likely to be affected by these processes as well (Stratmann, 2007; Suzuki et al., 2009; Taylor, 2007; UN-HABITAT, 2008). The following quote illustrates the potential enormity of the challenge:

*“More than half of the world’s population lives within 60 km of the sea, and three quarters of all large cities are located on the coast. Globally, 60 per cent of the world’s population lives in Low Elevation Coastal Zones (less than 10 metres above sea level). The Low Elevation Coastal Zones represents 2 per cent of the world’s area but 10 per cent of its population. Coastal zones are the most urbanized with 80 per cent of coastal populations living in cities. 14 of the world’s 19 largest cities are port cities” (UN-HABITAT, 2009: 3 of 12).*

<sup>19</sup> For more detail see [http://unfccc.int/meetings/cop\\_15/items/5257.php](http://unfccc.int/meetings/cop_15/items/5257.php) (last viewed June 28, 2010)

<sup>20</sup> This statement does not come from “city-loving” urbanists, but has been put forward by two natural scientists, both professors of physics. One of them, Hans Joachim Schnellhuber, is also the founder and director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK).

In order to prevent the “urban meltdown” (Doucet, 2007) the structure of cities, i.e. their spatial layout, has become an important matter in the debate on both dealing with climate change and with the energy crisis (peak oil). It is often assumed that urban form is directly related to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. It is argued that a more compact urban form, a reduction of sprawl, would reduce the distance of travel and need for transport in general. This would decrease the level of car dependence and also reduce the overall energy consumption of private households. The assumption is therefore that the more compact a city is, the less energy dependent it will be and, as a consequence, the lower its dependence on fossil fuels will be. Urban compaction, i.e. the combination of increased housing density with mixed use, has become a guiding principle in urban planning. Other terms used are “urban

134 intensification” and “compact city model” (for a variety of aspects, findings and positions on the matter see the edited volume by Williams, Burton and Jenks, 2001; see also Dempsey, 2010).

As far as dealing with the energy crisis, the reduction of air pollution in urban centres, and the mitigation of greenhouse gases are concerned, there is another proposal which is gaining increasing political and scientific support, one which is less dependent on a particular urban form. The focus here is not so much on energy consumption (and energy saving), but on the source of energy production. What is proposed is the “solar city” or the “renewable city” (Droege, 2008, 2009). If it were to replace the current “fossil fuel city” (through a move towards the use of renewable energy for transport, heating and cooling, electricity generation, etc.) the “energy autonomy” of regions and countries could also be increased. Energy production itself would be less centralised as a large number of small suppliers would enter the market (Scheer, 2007).

David Satterthwaite (2009) has pointed out that the measurement of greenhouse gases produced by cities is a difficult issue. If, for example, the total amount of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions for London is calculated per area, and the resulting figures were compared to some industrial regions in emerging markets (say in China), then London, including its large suburban metropolitan region does better than those other regions. However, once total CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are calculated per capita (and this calculation does include the emissions created by the production, transportation, and use of goods consumed by the inhabitants of London but produced elsewhere in the world), then results are different: All of a sudden, London’s CO<sub>2</sub> emissions appear much higher than those caused by the lifestyle of people living in industrial regions in emerging markets or Third World countries.

Similarly, Brian Cody (2009) argues that environmental assessment of individual buildings more often than not focuses too narrowly on the energy consumption of a building at a particular point in time. These calculations usually suggest that a new, high-tech “green” building equipped with the latest trends in active and passive insulation technologies would perform much better than a more moderately insulated older building. Calculations like these, Cody explains, ignore the total life cycle costs of a building, in terms of both economic costs and burdens placed on the environment in the long run. A total cost analysis would often show that the production of some insulation material creates more environmental harm than it will ever be able to compensate for by its energy saving effect in a building. Results are even worse if a reasonably insulated, still functioning and well-maintained building is pulled down in order to be replaced by a new “green” building. In such cases, the “grey” energy (embodied energy) stored in the old building will be destroyed. Cody, head of the institute for buildings and energy at the University of Technology in Graz and former Associate Director with Arup, concludes that there certainly is a need for a reasonable degree of insulation (i.e. one that takes into account the total life cycle of a building), but that future cities concerned with emission reduction (including CO<sub>2</sub>) and investors interested in cost efficient buildings should focus more on the potential of the buildings to actively produce energy. Similar statements were made by other engineers, architects and urban designers delivering speeches at the Bauhaus.SOLAR 2009 conference in Erfurt, where Cody gave his highly insightful keynote address.<sup>21</sup>

Having reviewed a lot of the Australian and international research on the subject of energy consumption and urban form, Brendan Gleeson (2008a) concludes:

*“At best, the suburban critique – in its present form – may reflect a serious overestimation of the influence of urban form – and of spatial arrangements generally – on sustainability. In particular, the faith of many analyses (and more numerous commentaries) in residential density as a simple lever that can be used to manipulate urban sustainability appears to be misplaced. International scientific assessment of the link between density and energy use remains equivocal. It suggests multi-causal, context-dependent relationships between urban form and energy demand. [...] At worst, sprawl-angst masks aesthetic not scientific complaint with the suburban form. [...] The poorly grounded and condemnatory critique of ‘sprawl’ is a vexing problem for a suburban nation. Its failings haunt the grounds of contemporary suburban debate with misleading spectres, whose lamentations warn of obesity, poverty, loneliness and almost every other human malady, including an early death. I describe this critique as ‘suburban gothic’, opposed by an equally melodramatic counter-narrative, The Great Australian Dream Swindle. This tale of planning noir bemoans a stolen generation of homeownership dreams. A cinema-scoped fable of hopeful newlyweds in wagons turned back from suburban frontiers by unfeeling black-robed bureaucrats” (Gleeson, 2008a: 2655).*

Focussing predominately on the American debate on suburbs Hanlon, Short and Vicino (2010) arrive at a similar conclusion: “Suburbs’ is a free-floating signifier of a variety of ills, a deep container of social malaise, anomie and civic disengagement” (p. 52). Nonetheless,

they stress that although much of suburban critique appears convincing, there is a fundamental lack of empirical evidence to sustain many of the assumptions made. Therefore, it is wise and in the very best interest of urban and suburban dwellers not to rush policy before robust scientific knowledge is available.

21 For more information on the Bauhaus.SOLAR 2009 conference see [www.uni-weimar.de/projekte/twl-net/energybaseddesign/pages/solar/solar\\_projekte.html](http://www.uni-weimar.de/projekte/twl-net/energybaseddesign/pages/solar/solar_projekte.html). For information on the 2010 conference and future activities of the Bauhaus.SOLAR project see [www.bauhaus-solar.de](http://www.bauhaus-solar.de); for the English website see [www.bauhaus-solar.com](http://www.bauhaus-solar.com). The Bauhaus-Universität Weimar is a major scientific partner of the project.

In a study on Buenos Aires, Silvia de Schiller and colleagues (2006) demonstrate that centrally located high rise buildings cause an overheating of their surroundings and, thus, contribute to the so-called “urban heat island” effect which is making public places in affected areas unattractive or unbearable for people to stay in. There is also an increased need for cooling inside the buildings – a factor that adds to the high energy demand of office towers and other high rises. In areas of lower urban and housing tower density, e.g. at the urban fringe, high rise buildings have other problematic effects. For instance, they cause strong winds that make people avoid walking there and, thus, make nearby public spaces unattractive for use (de Schiller et al., 2006). Density is not therefore an end in itself, no guarantor of urbanity, livability or sustainability. In fact, it can be Janus-faced, even detrimental to public space quality and a sense of community (in high rise apartment blocks occupants often feel isolated or alienated, not knowing or trusting their neighbours). What matters is how density is achieved. European style perimeter block development, for example, has

136 many advantages over high rise. More generally, this suggests a discussion about ‘proper’ or ‘optimal’ urban density (or whether it is possible to define it across regions, cultures and societies):

*“The arguments about density are often very simplistic. They are a camouflage screen that conceals a wish that no one else should build anything anywhere. The case for saving on carbon emissions by building more densely is very thin. [...] Projections like that in the London Plan for densities of up to 60 dwellings to an acre (150 per hectare) were stupendously misguided. In his polemic The Land Fetish, Peter Hall cited a detailed study by the consultants Llewelyn Davies that proved that you can’t just keep ratcheting up the density of homes, and expect to make the same saving in land all along the rising graph of propinquity. To pack in more homes (if they are to be a tolerable place to live) also means allotting more space for schools, recreation, GPs’ surgeries and local shops. Most of the gain comes from getting the density up to between 12 and 16 homes per acre (30 to 40 per hectare). This is remarkably similar to the density at which many existing suburbs are built. At higher densities the gains rapidly diminish. One important difference from the past is that, with the change in household sizes, far fewer people will now be living in each of these new homes” (Barker, 2009: 222).*

By presenting a critique of common assumptions on the prevailing discourse surrounding the relationship between urban form and sustainability, this chapter is not arguing that medium-density housing areas cannot be sustainable themselves or cannot contribute to the overall sustainability of a city. On the contrary, there are already many excellent examples of high quality medium-density housing, such as Christie Walk in the inner city of Adelaide, South Australia,

BedZED (*Beddington Zero Energy Development*) in Hackbridge, London, or Freiburg-Vauban in Germany (for details on these and other model sustainable housing developments see Downton, 2009: 179ff.; Farr, 2008: 212ff.; Wheeler and Beatley, 2008: 393ff.; for a case study on living in a sustainable research house, see Buys et al., 2005). Instead, what is criticised is the “spatial fix” (Gleeson, 2008a), i.e. the assumption that there is a linear relationship between urban form (urban density) and sustainability. This ignores the qualities and potential of suburbs as a built form and suburbia as a cultural phenomenon. It denounces suburban dwellers as polluters and anti-social egocentrics, and limits the perception of the problem as it denies the complexity of cities, urban life and sustainability. All this poses enormous challenges for urban planning and the next section will deal with exactly this issue. In doing so, it will of course relate to what has been discussed above while, at the same time, offering a wider context for interpretation.

### *The pursuit of happiness: the good life, urban struggle and planning*

In planning and public opinion, urban consolidation has a variety of meanings and implications. Depending on the specific situation, the wider context and the people involved it is a magic formula, a buzzword or a provocative term. Thus, just like suburbia, it has become a deictic term (on the latter, see the introduction to this paper).

Urban consolidation is often seen as a countermeasure to urban sprawl. It refers to the policies and processes of increasing residential densities in established urban areas. Similar terms are



“urban compaction” or “densification”, though concepts and definitions vary between authors, regions and countries. Policies of urban consolidation include the encouragement of residential development on vacant or underutilised land in the city centre, around transport nodes and in inner suburbs (infill development, often on brownfield sites). Moreover, an increased number of housing units per building lot is usually promoted (e.g. semi-detached houses, terrace houses, multi-storey blocks of flats). Increased residential density in outer suburbs or at the urban fringe may, however, be counterproductive:

*“Policies of urban consolidation need to be developed carefully to avoid increasing housing densities ‘in the wrong areas’. For instance, increasing the densities of new housing lots in periphery development areas alone may result in a ‘doughnut’ effect. This is where low population density suburbs, well serviced by infrastructure and facilities surrounding the city centre, are in turn surrounded by high density living with minimal access to services and infrastructure – the exact opposite to what urban consolidation practitioners were trying to achieve” (Smith, 1997: 5f).*

In a critique of urban consolidation Hugh Stretton asks, “Who consolidates who?” (1988; see also Stretton, 1996). His article suggests that consolidation policies are not in line with the “fair go” Australians are proud of. To this day criticism persists that this approach to urban planning undermines social and economic sustainability, thus reducing the quality of life in cities:

*“[V]arious community groups and urban scholars have criticised urban consolidation, arguing that it compromises the character and heritage of inner city neighbourhoods, for example by*

*losing precious public open space to urban infill, by placing residents in noisy locations, by concentrating social disadvantage, and by potentially undermining social cohesion” (Byrne and Sipe, 2010: 1).*

However, Byrne and Sipe (2010) do not claim that urban consolidation is the wrong strategy, but rather that it has been inadequately realised in many cases and places. Their diagnosis represents the current state of research in the field. Balanced scientific criticism of urban compaction does not suggest that further uncontrolled sprawl or unplanned urban expansion is the solution. Nor does it deny that increased density, especially what is termed “medium density”, may have some advantages, if well planned (Gleeson, 2008a; Jenks and Jones, 2010). Instead, it is about deconstructing the myth that urban compaction on its own – and no matter how it is realised – will reduce the ecological footprint of cities, including CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (see, e.g., de Schiller et al., 2006). It is also about rectifying views that increasing urban residential density on its own can somehow act as a cure for other urban and social ills such as isolation, alienation, exclusion or segregation. There is no “simple spatial fix” (Gleeson, 2008a) to social, economic or ecological urban problems. Findings from an ongoing large-scale study conducted in five cities in England and Scotland support this viewpoint:

*“A wide variety of findings emerge from the CityForm project [...] Such findings both support and refute the claims that high-density, compact urban development is more sustainable than low-density, indicating that the relationship between urban form and sustainability is a complicated one. The integration of the findings across all the datasets is in progress, using a number of measures of urban*

138 *form, in particular by modelling spatial structure using multiple centrality analysis (MCA).*<sup>22</sup>

22 Retrieved on June 30, 2010 from [http://www.city-form.org/uk/research\\_findings.html](http://www.city-form.org/uk/research_findings.html); see also Jenks and Jones, 2010

Another very detailed study on the issue of energy consumption and urban form has been conducted in Adelaide, the state capital of South Australia. In the study a life cycle analysis was applied in order to compare the total energy consumption of a sample of households in centrally located apartment buildings to the energy used by households in low-density suburban areas (Perkins et al., 2009). The analysis included the operational energy use of the buildings, the energy embodied in the buildings and in the means of transport as well as the energy used for travel. Calculations were used to determine the amount of greenhouse emissions caused by each type of household. It turned out that, on a per capita basis, those people living in the apartment buildings had on average the highest figures for greenhouse gas emissions. The authors of the study argue, however, that higher residential densities offer the potential to save energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, if buildings are constructed differently and households adopt more sustainable lifestyles (Perkins et al, 2009; see also Rickwood, Glazebrook and Searle, 2008; Williams, Burton, and Jenks, 2001).

In her study on Sydney, Schüttemeyer (2005) points to a dilemma in the planning of medium-density dwellings and estates. In Sydney (and other Australian cities) they are often located at or near major roads and railway lines. This allows for a good return on investment for residential land-use in or close to the inner city. It also provides residents with easy access to transport. On

the other hand, this location comes at a price for the occupants, particularly those in lower quality blocks of flats which are often situated in noisy and changing environments with high levels of air pollution. It could be argued that those who live in these medium-density dwellings, the “consolidated”, reduce traffic and sprawl for those living in the suburbs. At the same time, however, they suffer the most from the noise and the air pollution caused by suburban commuters. The pioneers and the poor seem to be punished for their adherence to the compact city model. Wendell Cox even argues that the recent decline of air quality in Sydney is partially due to the increase of density as “housing densification is intensifying traffic congestion” (Cox, 2010: 1). Such arguments revive old fears, and appeal to lessons learned from historical experiences with overcrowded and overloaded cities that led to the career of suburbs in the first place:

*“The suburb has become so closely identified with popular ideas of the good life that any move away from it, for example towards urban consolidation, looks like an attack upon people’s living standards. ‘Saving our suburbs’ means defending the quarter acre block against the threats of dual occupancy and unsympathetic design codes. It is an issue that excites strong emotions and taps folk memories and fears deep within the national psyche. [...] Is the attack on a quarter acre block also an attack on the Australian way of life?” (Davison, 1999: 26)*

This paragraph, taken from a paper by Graeme Davison entitled “Suburban Character” (1999), illustrates that there is a very close link between concepts of the good life, the perception of what is the most appropriate built urban form conducive to leading a healthy and happy life, and the role of urban planning. In the process, planning is often

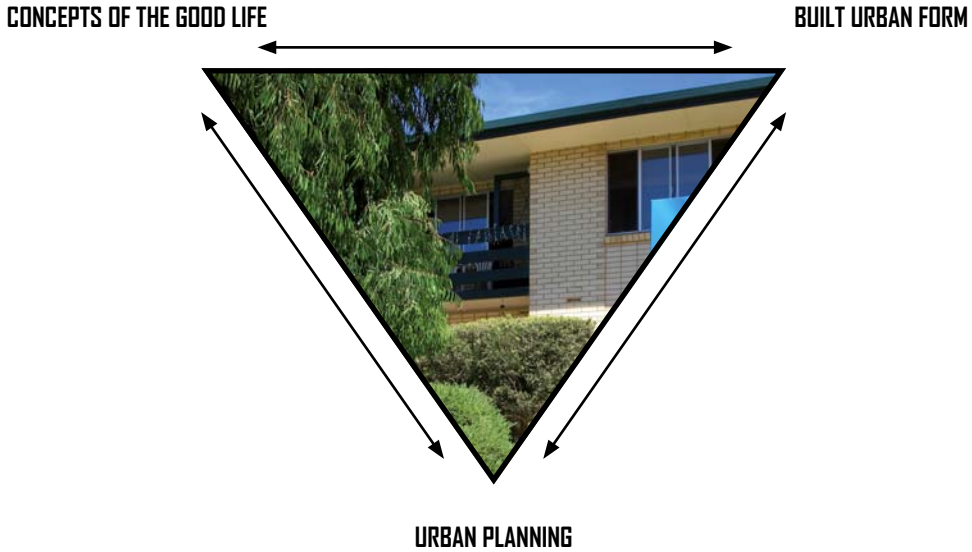


Figure 2 Relationship between the built environment, urban planning and the good life  
Source: B. Stratmann

charged with the task of building the foundations for the pursuit of happiness (fig. 2). Whether this task is implicit or explicit in urban planning, and whether it is to include the entire urban population, has, of course, changed over time and is also dependant on the level of democratisation of a society (Bartetzky and Schalenberg, 2009; Bruegmann, 2005; Short, 1989).

Even within democracies people's abilities to influence urban form and to pursue their own version of the good life varies according to factors such as their involvement in local politics, their economic situation, their health and their level of education. For example, in a study on Zurich, Koll-Schretzenmayr, Ritterhoff and Siebel (2009) demonstrate that the new middle class is producing a new socio-spatial phenomenon: "ennoblement". The term refers to the spatial and social changes that occur in a city as a consequence of the move of a substantial

number of members of the new middle classes into well-established upper class neighbourhoods. The authors' thesis is that the middle class households investing their capital in such a move assume that they will get access to the social and cultural capital concentrated in the upper class. A move of parts of the middle class in the "other direction", into former working class quarters, is called "gentrification" in urban studies (Breckner, 2010). Both processes tend to create conflicts between different groups of people claiming a stake in particular urban areas. As notions of the good life also vary between people, the goals of sustainability and liveability can, at times, appear to be at odds with each other. Waldheim (2010), however, argues that there is no longer any alternative to the goal of the sustainable city. All other goals need to be subsumed within sustainability, or otherwise cities will fail in the long run.

All this makes urban planning a far from easy task to perform. There are many people with different needs living in cities, and these needs are sometimes at odds with each other. One person alone may have different needs at different times. For example, some noise is inevitably linked to going out at night. Regulations determining the trading hours of pubs or limiting outdoor seating to certain hours of the night might reduce fun for people going out. If these or other people live close to inner city entertainment areas and have to get up early to go to work the next morning, they will, however, suffer from the fun-related noise and are therefore likely to appreciate any regulation which will help them sleep at night.

Planning and urban design are thus not merely technical or engineering tasks, where objective principles can be applied to problems that might arise. On the contrary, all decisions that have to be taken are political in nature (Allmendinger, 2009). In democratic countries, planning thus includes the fair recognition and balancing of interests and needs. The right of citizens to political participation in planning decisions is a means of making more voices heard. Social movements and citizens' initiatives have often developed around contested issues in urban planning (Castells, 1983). In his book "The Humane City" John Rennie Short (1989) captures these issues by calling part one of the book "Cities as if People Don't Matter" and by titling the concluding chapter of this part of the book "Cities as if Only Some People Matter".

Cities are a battlefield of cultural, ethnic, social, political and economic interests and values, with many actors in the urban arena claiming a stake. "Right to the city" movements, gentrifiers and squatters (as agents of urban renewal or of resistance to it, respectively), "reclaiming the street" groups, women "reclaiming the night",

urban development policies to revitalise parts of town (docklands, run down areas, brownfield sites), to enhance the social mix (i.e. to reduce segregation), to promote inclusion, and to cherish diversity – all are expressions of present-day struggles to reclaim urban space, to expand life chances and to reinvigorate urbanity. Cities are redefined and reinvented by these processes – through, among other things, the reattribution of meaning to terms such as community, participation, solidarity, subsidiarity, urbanism, public space, local identity and local citizenship.

In the midst of all this, poor urban planners are held responsible for everything that supposedly goes wrong. Planners, urban designers and architects cannot fulfil all the promises of happiness projected and imposed on urban planning, urban design and architecture. Their power, qualifications and resources are limited – by the very nature of both the human and urban condition (Duhl, 1989; Harvey, 1990). Cities are sites and mechanisms for the production and consumption of many kinds of goods, services and activities (economic, social, cultural, etc.), and they are arenas for the struggle over the distribution of power, resources and recognition (of values, ideas, innovations, etc.). Women as a group, their emancipation from narrowly defined gender roles are an example for these struggles, the (sub)urban component of which will be discussed in the following section.

### *Gender relations*

It took decades of feminist critique of urban planning until "gender mainstreaming" became an institutionalised part of the planning process in many, mainly Western, countries (Adam and Bergmann, 2006; BMVBS and BBR, 2006;

Terlinden, 2003). In Germany and Australia, for example, substantial progress has been made in many fields of private and public policy, including urban design and planning – though the goal of equal opportunities in all spheres of life is still a long way from being achieved. Margaret Alston (2009), for example, shows that official drought management strategies, which aim at supporting financially troubled farms in rural Australia, still remain gender blind. Thus, she calls gender mainstreaming with regard to drought policy an “empty signifier” and argues that there is need for utilising more international and national expertise, for collaboration and coalitions of various actors in order to achieve the goal of gender-sensitive policy development. In many cases the organisational culture of departments and other agencies must also be changed, while broader institutional settings need to be reconsidered (see also Hankivsky, 2008).

Feminists have demonstrated that the interests of women are often neglected in urban planning (Terlinden, 2003). Radical feminists even argue that in patriarchal societies planning is a means of controlling women, regulating, in particular, their movement in space. Suburbia has often been criticised in a similar vein. It has been contended that women are locked away in suburban areas, isolated from the diverse activities, opportunities, and everyday amenities located in the city centre. As a result of this isolation, and excluded from the bustling urban life, their life chances are limited, with lifestyle choices often restricted to housekeeping and child rearing. There is some empirical evidence to support this view (Frank, 2003). Men do not necessarily benefit from this socio-spatial constellation. With traditional gender arrangements, men and women alike can feel trapped in suburbia – even though they initially desired to live there (and

even though men as a group may have been the main protagonists in shaping this suburban social reality). This is brilliantly displayed in a movie directed by Sam Mendes called “Revolutionary Road” (USA, 2008; German title “Zeiten des Aufbruchs”). Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio play a married couple living with two children in American suburbia of the 1950s. The couple happily moves to suburban Connecticut before their two children are born, assuming they will break out one day and move to Paris or simply break out another way. In the film, the name of the city serves as a signifier for an exciting life. “Paris” is both a concrete destination and a recurring appeal to change the way life is lived. The attentive observer notices that gender arrangements rather than the actual spatial location are at the heart of the problem. Life in suburbia only contributes to the Catch-22 situation. Disenchantment, dissatisfaction and a feeling of having been misled or having deluded oneself emerge, especially if accessing services and amenities is difficult, as is the case with many locations at the urban fringe (Clapson, 2003, ch. 6).

Throughout many decades, traditional gender roles (who keeps the house, who raises the children, who goes to work, who is allowed to do what in the public, etc.) have been reinforced by the “ideal” of suburban life as promoted by many politicians, mainstream public opinion, the zeitgeist, the churches and the media:

*“Mass culture celebrated the new suburban ideal. In Life magazine’s special 1956 issue on American women, the most space was devoted to a suburban woman, aged thirty-two and mother of four. A high school graduate who had married as a teenager, Life’s model mother sewed her own clothes, and entertained fifteen hundred guests a year, and was supported by her husband’s middle-class income.*

142 *In her daily rounds she attends clubs or charity meetings, drives the children to school, does the weekly grocery shopping, makes ceramics, and is planning to learn French,' Life revealed as it followed the housewife from domestic chores to social events. Born in the Depression, most suburban homemakers appreciated the security and standard of living represented by a suburban lifestyle" (Chudacoff and Smith, 2005: 275).*

What is described above appears to be an outdated ideal today. The quote highlights the journey from a shared dream of the past to an anticipated nightmare of today's more emancipated people (see also Clapson, 2003, ch. 6). However, as pointed out earlier, it does not reflect the total picture of suburban life in the 1950s. Rather it portrays the public and media image of white middle-class suburbia that influenced people's views in those days. The reality of American suburbia was far more diverse: there were rich and poor suburbs, segregated predominantly white or black suburbs, and ethnically as well as socially mixed suburbs (Hanlon, Short and Vicino, 2010).

From what has been said so far, it can be concluded that criticism of suburbs is often not so much a critique of suburbs as a built form, but an expression of the dissatisfaction with everyday life in suburbia. In particular, white middle-class lifestyles "out there" that allegedly include gender-stereotyped behaviour, egocentrism, cocooning, and apolitical as well as non-urban attitudes serve as an object of criticism. However, these forms of behaviour and attitudes are not necessarily tied to a suburban location. Ultimately they can be found everywhere. Moreover, attitudes, behaviour and lifestyles will not automatically change as a consequence of relocation. This, in fact, leads back to a classic insight

in urban studies: a person from the countryside will very often remain a person from the countryside (in the way he or she feels, thinks and behaves), even when he or she moves to the city. Thus, much of suburban critique is essentially a critique of particular lifestyles and grand delusions (e.g. ideologies reinforcing consumerism and traditional gender roles). The fact that some people who live in the suburbs are living a lie, are susceptible to self-delusion and may, for this or other reasons, experience disillusionment one day, is often attributed to the location – as if suburbia were the (sole) cause of disappointment or would determine life. Both, the exaltation of suburban life and the disenchantment with suburbia are often examples of cause and effect confused. In psychological terms, suburbs as a built form serve as an object of projection, upon which positive or negative feelings, thoughts, behaviours and experiences are projected. For that reason, suburbia is an ambivalent signifier of the good life. It is even used as a scapegoat for things that go wrong in life (fig. 3).

Another problem with much of suburban critique is that there is an inherent tendency to ignore or degrade what women do in the suburbs. In the very attempt to defend and revive urbanity by criticising suburbanization women's (suburban) life-worlds – gender-stereotyped or not – appear as inferior to those of men. In her review of Lynn Spigel's book "Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs" Erin Smith writes:

*"Spigel argues further that scholarship on postwar suburbs is fundamentally flawed by an uncritical acceptance of this gendered binary between public (masculine) and private (feminine) space. There is a long tradition of critical and scholarly scorn for postwar, mass-produced*

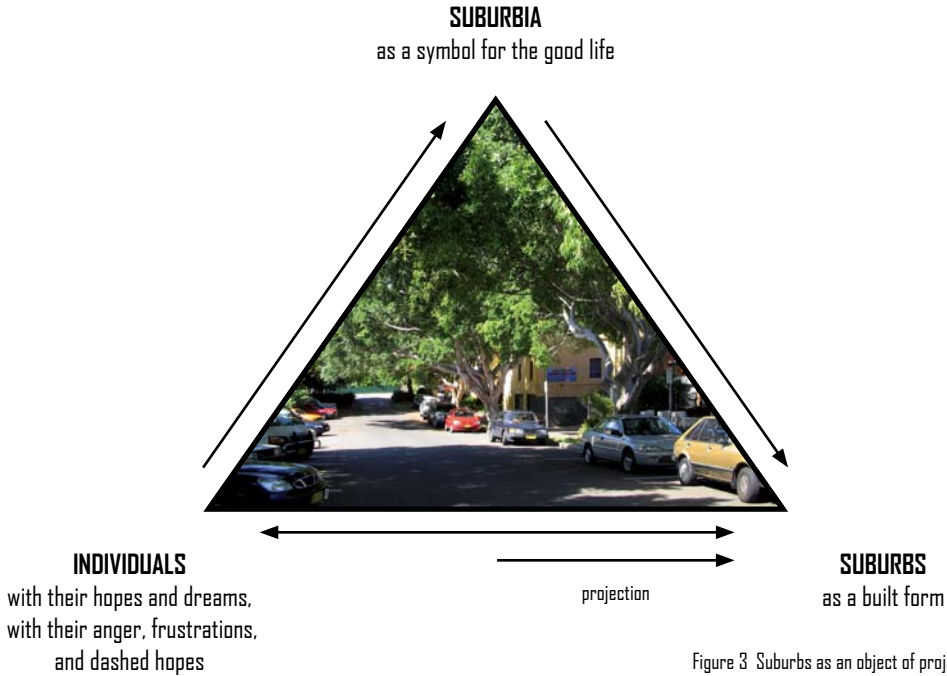


Figure 3 Suburbs as an object of projection  
Source: B. Stratmann

*suburbs. In this tradition, the suburbs emerge as a dull, domestic, feminine, consumption-centered intellectual wasteland, while the city is the domain of masculine reason, enlightened public life, and authentic production of culture. The suburbs, Spigel argues, are much more interesting and complicated than this, and the acceptance of overly simplistic, misogynistic ways of thinking have disguised the ways women, the mass media, and suburbs have all participated in the creation of cultural and intellectual life. Spigel investigates the ways gendered binaries of production and consumption structure our ideas about craft, art, and mass culture to render invisible the kinds of cultural production women do in suburban homes and related community spaces. She is also curious about the conditions of possibility for breaching or trespassing these powerful cultural hierarchies” (Smith, 2002: 361).*

### ***Urban Australia: towards liveable and sustainable cities***

Despite an abundance of space about 60 per cent of all Australians live in the five major cities: Sydney (4.4 million inhabitants), Melbourne (3.9), Brisbane (1.9), Perth (1.6) and Adelaide (1.1).<sup>23</sup> These cities are all located on the coast, a result of the colonial history of urbanisation in Australia. Most other large cities are also coastal cities leaving the outback sparsely populated with only some small urban centres (often mining towns), rural communities, remote homesteads and farms. A well known exception is Canberra (346,000 inhabitants), a planned city, built inland on its own territory (Australian Capital Territory, ACT) as the national capital. Fig. 4 provides details on the location of cities, states and territories as well as on the distribution of

**144** the population across the continent – the only continent in the world to form one federal state, the Commonwealth of Australia.

**23** Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Estimated Resident Population at 30 June 2008, cat. no. 3218.0 – Regional Population Growth, Australia, 2008–09, released March 30, 2010

Australian cities tend to sprawl as they are surrounded by rings of inner and outer suburbs. The lifestyle is, therefore, more suburban than urban. Like America, Australia is called a “suburban nation” with the majority of its inhabitants living in suburban rather than urban or rural areas (Chudacoff and Smith, 2005; Davison, 1995; Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck, 2000; Forster, 2004; Forster and Hamnett, 2008). In general, Australian cities do well in terms of health care, social welfare, safety and security, economic performance, standard of living, public amenities (drinking fountains, restrooms, urban furniture, etc.), open and green spaces, public services and transport, cultural offerings, leisure facilities and the overall quality of life. This is also reflected

in Mercer’s “Quality of Living worldwide city rankings 2010” (Tab. 1).

Nevertheless, as in other countries, important problems and challenges remain (Cox, 2009; Forster and Hamnett, 2008; Droege, 2008; Habibis and Walter, 2009; Hulse and Burke, 2009; Kelly, 2010; Thompson, 2007; Troy, 2000). These include:

- affordable housing (availability, quantity and quality)
- suitable housing, e.g. for frail elderly people and large (migrant) families
- responding to climate change (mitigation and adaptation)
- flood, drought and water shortage management
- reducing the dependence of cities on fossil fuels, e.g. through a move towards “solar cities” or “renewable cities”
- social and health problems such as alcoholism
- and substance abuse, gambling, isolation, depression, obesity, fall injuries, exclusion and poverty.

Table 1 Mercer’s 2010 Quality of Living Worldwide City Rankings

1 Vienna	7 Frankfurt**	21 Perth
2 Zurich	7 Munich**	32 Adelaide
3 Geneva	9 Bern	34 Paris
4 Vancouver*	10 Sydney	36 Brisbane
4 Auckland*	17 Berlin	39 London
6 Düsseldorf	18 Melbourne	49 New York City

\* joint fourth; \*\* joint seventh





Figure 4 Australia: states, territories, and geographic population distribution  
Source: Commonwealth of Australia (Geoscience Australia), 1996, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia Licence

The latter problems in particular create special housing needs (including the need for institutions), increase the demand for social services, and can reinforce socio-spatial segregation if they are not adequately dealt with. As a consequence, policy development is taking place in all these areas, with constant attempts made to adjust policies to both, an ever changing social, economic and political environment and the conclusions drawn from new findings about the challenges and problems mentioned above. In the process, globalisation is a major force for change, which involves new risks as well as new opportunities for urban development (Braun and Schüttemeyer, 2008).

24 Adele Horin, Homeless by default, through no fault of their own. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 7, 2008, p. 4

In Australia, housing policy and housing markets are very hot topics, thoroughly analysed by researchers, discussed and disputed in the media and a regular subject of conversation. On an almost daily basis, Australian newspapers report on mortgages, a fact reflective of mortgage anxiety and the desire to escape from rack rent. Compared to some European countries, protection of tenants (including rent control) is not that well established in Australia. One-year leases are quite common, and yearly rent increases of 5-6% have been reported for many areas in Melbourne and Sydney in recent years. Large families face particular problems in finding accommodation as most flats and houses are not designed for them. In the February 7, 2008 edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald* there is a photo by Dallas Kilponen (p. 4) of a family of two adults and six children.

The related article describes how the family is on the brink of becoming homeless because their “landlord has defaulted on a mortgage to [a trustee company], and now the company wants the property, free of tenants, in order to sell it.”<sup>24</sup> The article was published just four days before the date fixed in the notice to vacate. For months the family has been trying to find a new place to live, but given the high demand for rental housing and the large size of the family, they had been unable to find suitable and affordable accommodation.

According to the 2009–10 Year Book Australia around 98% of all Australians live in “private self-contained dwellings such as houses, flats or units” (ABS, 2010: 318). The remaining 2% live in institutional settings ranging from hostels, boarding houses and staff quarters to prisons, nursing homes and the like. “Of the 8.1 million households living in private dwellings in 2007-08, 78% were living in separate houses, 13% in flats, units or apartments, and 9% in semi-detached, row or terrace houses or townhouses” (ibid.). With regard to the types of dwellings there are marked regional differences, most prominently among the major cities and between most urban centres and non-metropolitan areas:

*“For Australia’s five most populous cities (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide) the proportion of households living in separate houses ranged from 61% in Sydney to 81% in Brisbane. The average across all eight capital cities was 73%. Outside of capital cities, the proportion of households living in separate houses was higher – more than 85% in all states except Queensland. Higher density housing was most common in capital cities, particularly in Sydney, where approximately one in four households were living in flats, units or apartments in 2007–08” (ABS, 2010: 318).*

Whereas in Germany the size of a house or flat is usually described by the number of rooms (not counting the kitchen and the bathroom, but including the living room in this figure) and the total floor size of the dwelling (e.g. 75 sqm, 3 rooms plus kitchen, bathroom and balcony), in Australia and other Anglo-Saxon countries the number of bedrooms is usually mentioned first in advertisements or daily conversation. The figure then might be further detailed by adding “spacious”, “large”, medium-sized” or “small” to the dwelling description (e.g. large three-bedroom house), and people usually have a good grasp of what is meant by these signifiers. Talk of a three-bedroom house will imply that there are, additionally, a lounge (living room), a kitchen (often designed as a *kitchen area* only partially separated from the lounge) and at least one bathroom. Thus, a three room flat in Germany would resemble a two-bedroom flat in Australia (as in the latter country the lounge is implied and therefore not counted). The three-bedroom house dominates the Australian housing market:

*“Separate houses are generally larger and have more bedrooms than other dwelling types. Typically, separate houses have three or four bedrooms; semi-detached houses have two or three bedrooms; and flats, units or apartments have one or two bedrooms.*

*The three-bedroom house is by far the most common type of dwelling in Australia. In 2007–08, 41% of all households were living in separate houses with three bedrooms, while a further 28% were living in houses with four or more bedrooms [...]. In total, 76% of households were living in dwellings (mainly houses) with three or more bedrooms; 20% were living in two-bedroom dwellings (houses, row or terrace houses, townhouses, flats, units or apartments); and 4% were living in one-bedroom dwellings (mainly flats, units or apartments)” (ABS, 2010: 318f).*

Population growth in the major cities (average rate of 2.3% in 2008–09) took the form of:

- inner city growth
- urban infill (change of urban land use to residential purposes or from lower-density to higher-density housing)
- outer suburban growth.

Thus, there is some evidence of reurbanization alongside the ongoing suburbanization (see also fig. 5).<sup>25</sup> The still strong preference for a single-family detached house is the major driver of suburban growth because this type of dwelling is hard to find in inner cities. Even the majority of those who rent live in detached houses, let alone home owners:

*“Australia’s preference for a free-standing house on its own block of land is most evident among home owners. Of the 5.5 million households that owned their home in 2007–08, 88% lived in separate houses [...]. Over a half (56%) of all renter households lived in separate houses; 30% lived in flats, units or apartments; and 14% lived in semi-detached dwellings” (ABS, 2010: 322).*

25

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), cat. no. 3218.0 – Regional Population Growth, Australia, 2008–09, released March 30, 2010

As mentioned earlier, the prevailing type of dwelling has been challenged on grounds of the sustainability of the urban form it produces. However, the criticism itself is contested on the same as well as other grounds (see the two previous section). The Australian debate can be illustrated by making the following comparison, which, for the sake of making a point, is slightly



Figure 5a Common style of houses, Adelaide



Figure 5b Common style of houses, another example from Adelaide



Figure 5c Heritage building, Adelaide



Figure 5d Modern "Bauhaus style" home, Adelaide



Figure 5e Sandstone home with landscaped garden, Adelaide



Figure 5f Newington, former Sydney Olympic village



Figure 5g Semi-detached house, recent style, Adelaide



Figure 5h Living upmarket on piers, Sydney



Figure 5i A court in Adelaide



Figure 5j Medium density, West Hobart



Figure 5k Recent marketing promotes new high-end, high-rise developments, example from Sydney



Figure 5l More examples from Sydney: high-rise offering harbour views



Figure 6 Leafy suburbs: Hobart (top left) and Sydney (all others)  
Photos: B. Stratmann

stereotyped. Imagine that a photo of a leafy suburb (fig. 6 and 7) was shown to representatives of three different groups of people: “most Australians”, “conventional” urban planners, and LOHAS<sup>26</sup> and “unorthodox” urban planners. What would they see?

“Most Australians” would see an area:

- very desirable to live in, especially with children or when retired
- where successful, happy people live
- where low levels of air pollution, little noise, a low crime rate, friendly neighbours and good schools can be expected
- that is an ideal place to relax, for leisure and to entertain friends.

Many “conventional” urban planners would see an area where:

- valuable land is being wasted
- per capita costs for infrastructure and public services are very high (roads, public transport, electricity supply, sewage system, etc.)
- housewives and mothers are locked away, excluded from participation in public life, and isolated from the opportunities the city centre offers
  - and an urban form
- which creates a high demand for travel
- where car dependence is fostered.

Many LOHAS and “unorthodox” urban planners would see an area:

- requiring retrofitting, remaking and reinvention
- that offers chances for change (solar panels on rooftops, rainwater tanks at the houses, front yards for communication, etc.)

- that provides opportunities for the realisation of new and individual ideas (control over space as an asset, e.g. for free thinkers and “backyard ecologists”)
- that needs to be better designed and better connected to public transport
- where good governance, participation and community development can make a difference
- which must and can offer more opportunities for connecting people, work, leisure activities, shopping and living
- where public open and green space of high quality can be integrated more easily than in inner city areas.

The suburban lifestyle most Australians enjoy has become an issue in regional and national place marketing and thus has an effect on migration strategies and decisions about moving. Whereas the Federal Government’s Department of Immigration and Citizenship informs migrants on a web page that it might be difficult and/or expensive to find housing in Australia<sup>27</sup>, the South Australian government points to the affordability of housing as one of the advantages of a move to South Australia. The web page “Housing” of the official “Why move/Make the Move” section even includes five pictures of typical Adelaide housing.<sup>28</sup> Four of the five dwellings displayed show different types of single-family homes. The text next to the pictures informs the reader about, among other things, the closeness of these dwellings to the inner city of Adelaide; the furthest is a 15 minute drive away. The information provided is certainly helpful to those potential migrants who have little knowledge about what housing looks like in Adelaide, the capital city of South Australia. It is also smart marketing, as studies have shown that people who are toying with the idea of moving to another country find

the chance of owning a house very appealing. This includes migrants from Asian countries, to whom home ownership is an important reason for migration, with the home being a symbol of success in life. In fact, people from a large number of countries and a variety of cultural, social and religious backgrounds tend to think similarly on this matter. This accounts for, among other things, the global success of suburbanisation. In fact, the web page just referred to is meant to appeal to both, people from overseas (potential

**26** LOHAS stands for “Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability”. The acronym is also used to name people who try to live according to the ideal of a lifestyle, which is simultaneously healthy, comfortable and ecologically sound. LOHAS do, therefore, consume goods and services that fit these categories (fair trade products, organic food, solar power, sustainable tourism, etc.). Many members of the global LOHAS movement call themselves a LOHAS (see, e.g. [www.lohas.com](http://www.lohas.com)), but there are far more people who, at least in part, live according to the principles without having heard the term (Stratmann, 2010).

**27** see [www.immi.gov.au/allforms/pdf/994i.pdf](http://www.immi.gov.au/allforms/pdf/994i.pdf), retrieved July 10, 2010

**28** see [www.migration.sa.gov.au/sa/why\\_move/housing.jsp](http://www.migration.sa.gov.au/sa/why_move/housing.jsp), retrieved July 10, 2010



Figure 7 Leafy suburbs: view from Flinders University, Adelaide. Viewed from the hill, the trees almost hide the houses. Photo: B. Stratmann

152 immigrants) and people from interstate (i.e. the other Australian states and territories). It aims to convince both groups that home ownership is a goal much easier achieved in Adelaide than in most other major Australian cities. Adelaide's comparatively lower housing prices serve as an argument and incentive to attract new residents. In particular, a larger share of future migrants might therefore consider Adelaide a place of residence – instead of the highly popular migrant destinations Sydney and Melbourne.

In Australia, as the data provided above clearly show, "home ownership" usually implies the possession of a separate house on its own block of land (though most home owners first have to repay a mortgage before they become outright owners). In recent years there have, however, been more and more advertisements in newspapers and other media promoting ownership of luxurious flats in medium density estates or high-rise apartment blocks. These buildings are either located in favoured locations close to the city centre or at popular (suburban) beaches "offering spectacular views and a lifestyle" (as it sounds in marketing language). Especially in the major cities with their enormous spatial expansion people who work in the CBD and enjoy urbanity for leisure can save much time otherwise spent on commuting if they decide to live in an apartment in the inner city. If one were to encourage more Australians to live in central locations, one would have to make sure that inner city urban environments offer higher residential qualities and that the flats available in inner city and inner suburban neighbourhoods can be a home. At present, the association between house and home seems to be much stronger than the one between home and flat (see fig. 8). If this were changed, medium density housing would no longer be seen as a threat to the Australian way of life (Davison, 1999).

Resilient cities, however, will not have to be medium-density all over. A variety and mix of residential densities as well as construction heights is part of the urban character (i.e. that what makes a city a city, what makes it recognisable in its quarters and distinguishable from other cities). It also allows for citizens to easily find their way around and does cater for a variety of housing needs for an increasingly diverse urban population. Furthermore, the current debate on urban form, as detailed in this paper, has demonstrated that sustainability and suburbanisation are not necessarily at odds with each other. The current urban structure of Australian cities is more sustainable than is often assumed, *as alternatives are less sustainable than is often proclaimed*. This can be illustrated with reference to the wishful thinking surrounding the argument that an increased urban density will lead to an automatic decrease in emissions:

*"The mathematics of traffic and densification is that unless each additional resident drives minus kilometres and minus hours, there will be more traffic, even before considering the impacts of intensifying commercial and heavy vehicle traffic. [...] The fact is that higher densities are strongly associated with more traffic [...], which means greater traffic congestion. The additional 'stop and go' traffic produces greater pollution on the roads adjacent to where people and their children live. It also means more greenhouse gas emissions because fuel consumption increases as traffic congestion intensifies"* (Cox, 2010: 1).

This is not to say that there is no need to improve public transport or retrofit suburbia in many areas and many ways. Reducing the dependence on fossil fuels is another crucial issue to be tackled. Furthermore, there is a need to



adjust lifestyles to the new challenges of urban resilience (Droege, 2008; Newman, Beatley and Boyer, 2009; Stratmann, 2010). With regard to “natural” disaster mitigation and adaptation, Australian cities face the particular challenges of flooding, sandstorms, the continuing drought and its impact on urban green space, water supply and food production. There is also the growing risk of bush fires reaching the suburbs. These problems may or may not be related to climate change, they nonetheless demand urgent action. If the problems are taken seriously and cities adjust accordingly, this does not mean that future urban life will be based on austerity. On the contrary, there is the chance to build better cities – cities that are more vibrant, economically viable, cleaner, safer and healthier (Downton, 2009; Droege, 2009).

Increasing urban resilience is a good starting point to this end. It includes the built environment,

which “should be designed, located, built, operated and maintained in a way that maximises the ability of built assets, associated support systems (physical and institutional) and the people that reside or work within the built assets, to withstand, recover from, and mitigate for, the impacts of extreme natural and human-induced hazards” (Bosher cited in Bosher and Coaffee, 2008: 145). This task provides ample work for architects, planners, engineers, social scientists and others. Accomplishing the goal of creating better, sustainable and resilient cities also requires the participation of local citizens. Together with ambitious local politicians and urban managers they can contribute to this overall objective by reconsidering their lifestyles and by developing creative and innovative ideas for the city or neighbourhood they live in. In that, a “new suburbanism” (Kotkin, 2006) and a “new urbanism” could evolve side by side – the Australian way.

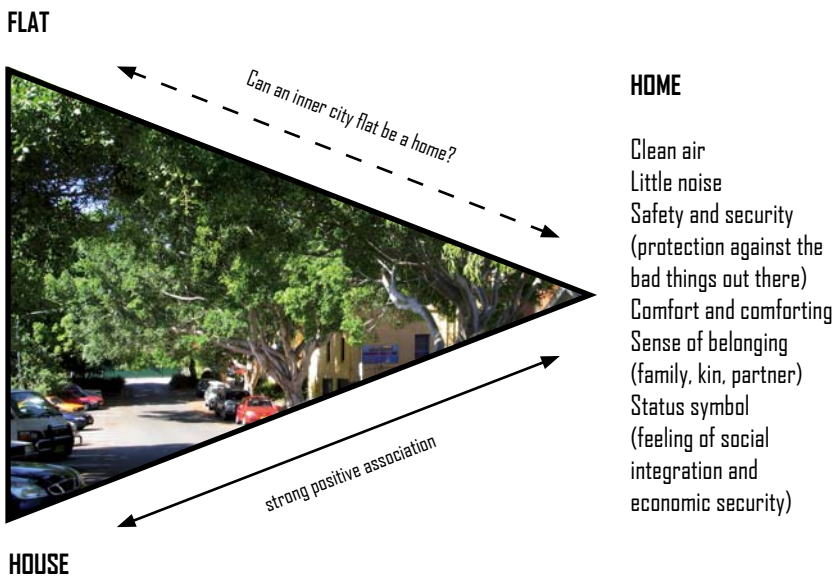


Figure 8 Attributes of home ownership (not house ownership)  
Source: B. Stratmann

## 154 *Conclusion*

“Suburban Dreaming” is the title of a 2009 album by the Adelaide-based band Huckleberry Swedes, and it is also the title of an academic book edited by Louise Johnson in 1994. “Suburban dream” is a term used in countless media stories and numerous academic publications. The concept implies that there is more to a specific built urban form than just housing. Has the dream of the good life been made real in the suburbs? Or what is the world like, if we wake from the dream? Despite the existence of alternatives and much suburban critique, a suburban address is the theme of the Great Australian Dream and a core element of the American Way of Life (Gleeson, 2008a; Nicolaidis and Wiese, 2006). The traditional housing styles of the British aristocracy, the bourgeois villa culture and the exclusive Beverly Hills homes owned by Hollywood celebrities all serve as role models. The detached house on its own block of land is little more than a more modest version of it – and the suburban dream an expression of the desire to experience some of what is assumed to be a happy, easy-going upper class lifestyle. Around the world, high-rise – as prefab or not – is the second choice of housing. Even in emerging markets such as China and India, where large parts of the new middle class live in modern apartments in high-rise estates, those to whom money is not a problem move to medium-density or single-family homes (Campanella, 2008: ch. 7; Pridmore, 2008: 128ff.). The wish of many around the world is clear: “My home is my castle”.<sup>29</sup> In many Western countries a large part of the population is lucky in that they can realise their housing preferences. The “suburban dream”, despite its fallacies and drawbacks, offers a much higher living standard and a healthier living environment than most housing available

to the urban poor in other countries. Would it, however, be attainable to most people in a sustainable manner – and would it correspond to their needs? The dream itself, its semiotics, and the long-term sustainability of suburbs as a built urban form and of suburbia as both, a social reality and cultural expression of modernity have been the core themes of this paper.

It can be concluded that a sea change in perceptions about suburbia is underway. In “the blabberland of urban critique” (Gleeson, 2008a: 2655) much has been said about suburbs, their “nature” and impact on people and places and their alleged pros and cons. With some exceptions the academic discussion on suburbs over the last few decades can be characterised as hostile to its object of investigation. Now the “suburban question” is being asked again and approached in a different way (Kirby and Modarres, 2010; McLean, 2010). Joel Kotkin’s approach to a “new suburbanism” (2006) and a reconsideration of Sylvia Fleis Fava’s study of “Suburbanism as a Way of Life” (1956) are just some of the many starting points for the debate. They are elements of a more fundamental rethinking of the overall sustainability of suburbs as a socio-spatial reality and of suburbia as a cultural phenomenon and cultural achievement (Clapson, 2003; see also McLean, 2010 on a just launched international collaborative research project that is funded by the Canadian Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council. The seven-year project will include more than 40 researchers from Canada and many other countries and is headed by Roger Keil.).

A key issue in the debate has been urban form. It is again high on the international urban research agenda (Jenks and Jones, 2010; [www.city-form.org](http://www.city-form.org)). Here the central question is whether suburbanisation (and ongoing urban sprawl) are in line with the overall goal of creating

a sustainable urban future. Some critics argue that the ideal of the “compact city” (medium to high density housing, mixed land use, clear urban boundaries, etc.) is the only way to achieve sustainability. Other academics maintain that the solution is more complex and that suburbs can be designed in a sustainable manner (Dempsey, 2010; Williams, Burton and Jenks, 2001).

A review of the urban form debate conducted for this contribution clearly shows that current empirical studies on the issue do not allow for a simple answer to the question (Barker, 2009: 222; Holden and Norland, 2005; Jenks and Jones, 2010; Rickwood, Glazebrook and Searle, 2008; Scheurer, 2008). The relationship between urban density and sustainability is not linear. Increased housing density does not necessarily lead to improved sustainability. Institutional settings (see, e.g., Skovbro, 2001 on Copenhagen, Denmark) and social status seem to play an important role. In a study on Santiago de Chile, Christopher Zegras (2010) demonstrates that in comparison to relative location and varying neighbourhood densities income is the single most influential factor in determining car use. The combined effects of all factors are, however, lower (i.e. the likelihood of high income households to drive is reduced by good location and more compact urban settings, though it remains higher than that of lower income households).

The relationship between ecological sustainability and density remains non-linear and equivocal, if one not only looks at energy used for transport, but also includes the operational and embodied energy used for housing. Considering the state of much current architecture and the prevailing lifestyles of the inhabitants Perkins et al. (2009) conclude: “The densification of housing in central locations per se is not a sufficient condition for achieving a reduction in per capita

greenhouse gas emissions in the built environment” (p. 394f.). More generally, what seems to matter are not location and suburbanisation as such, but the actual design and planning of cities and suburbs, including access to public transport, services, and public open space, etc. (Cox, 2009 and 2010; Gleeson 2008a; Lucy and Phillips, 2006). In order to deal with the *existing* suburbs practical solutions are offered, for example, in two influential books: Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson’s book on “Retrofitting suburbia. Urban design solutions for redesigning suburbs” (2009), and Paul Lukez’s “Suburban Transformations” (2007).

## 29

In a recent talk show on German TV (Radio Bremen TV, talk show “3 nach 9”, July 9, 2010) even Berlin-based rapper Sido revealed that his future plans may well include a house with a garden somewhere in a nice suburb. This personal plan is in contrast to much of the messages conveyed in popular music: “In the few remaining record stores, ‘urban’ is code for the swagger of rap and hip-hop; songs about suburbs are paeans to enmity. Indeed, it is easy to use the suburbs as a shorthand for hypocrisy and superficiality in any cultural context [...]” (Kirby and Modarres, 2010: 65).

In spite of everything, suburbia will remain a battlefield of meanings and connotations, since the link between the signifier and the signified is loose, yet not arbitrary. It might turn out that suburbanization as both a process and phenomenon is too complex and diverse to be properly discussed as “one thing” or within the scope of one approach. Meanings and definitions might prove to be too wide for scientific inquiry and unbiased academic discourses. Already today, we can observe a “blurring” of the distinction between cities and suburbs with job growth in some regions concentrating in suburbs instead of cities or crime rates being higher in many suburbs than in their inner cities (Hanlon, Short and Vicino, 2010; Jackson, 2006).

Many urban planners, urban designers and university-based researchers alike criticise continuing suburbanisation and ongoing sprawl (for ecological reasons, because of infrastructure costs, social isolation, etc.). At the same time they often criticise many of the numerous examples of re-urbanisation as involving gentrification leading to the displacement of less affluent inhabitants. These criticisms are not

of an approach based on the acceptance of the reality of the town and country continuum. This and other approaches that deal with the totality of urban experience might lead to “the city reloaded”, as “new urbanism” and “new suburbanism” are not competing concepts (Kotkin, 2006). “If we are to deliver a sustainable built environment, we must create places the people will value and to which they can connect emotionally” (Schwartz, 2010: 525).

**30** A BankWest Quality of Life survey maintains that many of the inner suburbs of Australia’s major cities are among those areas offering the highest liveability in the country (ABC News. Quality of life is better in the city: survey, August 20, 2008; retrieved on July 25, 2010 from [www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/08/20/2341018.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/08/20/2341018.htm)).

contradictory, as both developments do have their specific downsides. Nonetheless questions remain. Where should we concentrate our efforts? What are the fundamental problems, and how should they be approached? What alternatives actually exist –including alternative ways of thinking? This paper has pointed to many roads that might be worth travelling. Suburbia as we know it might come to an end one day. On the basis of the current state of the art of research there is no need to artificially speed up the process. Once again: It is wise and in the very best interest of urban and suburban dwellers not to rush policy, before robust scientific knowledge is available (see also Clapson, 2003: 197; Dempsey, 2010). For the moment strategies to retrofit suburbs (insulation, solar panels, rainwater usage, on-site treatment of suitable wastes, telecommuting, more and better services, areas of mixed land uses, etc.) and to promote sustainable lifestyles in suburbia appear to be appropriate approaches. Thomas Sieverts’ (2003) proposal to qualify the *Zwischenstadt* (“in-between city”) is an example

The Australian housing system has been extremely successful in terms of social and economic sustainability. The combined effects of welfare statism and a housing policy promoting home ownership have contributed to equity. Widespread home ownership is understood as the most visible evidence for the existence of the “fair go”, i.e. distributive justice. The comparatively low rate of homelessness points into the same direction. According to surveys, Australians believe that their living standard is among the highest in the world, that their lifestyle is excellent, and that they are free people (Davison, 1999; Forster, 2004; Lüdicke and Diewald, 2007; Stretton, 1996; see Forster and Hamnett, 2008 as well as the previous section for current trends and challenges). Whereas in the last two decades or so many Australian urban planners have treated suburbia solely as a problem and some even perceived it as a socio-spatial malady, the current academic view on suburbanisation is moving closer to the popular understanding of most Australians. Whether this is just a sign of buckling to reality or whether this altered view is based on a better understanding of sustainability issues, is yet to be determined. At the same time, a growing number of Australians are moving back to the inner city or close to it (inner suburbs, waterfronts, etc.: examples in Melbourne include St. Kilda and the new Docklands, in Sydney most

of the Sydney harbour area, and inner-city suburbs such as Glebe, Surry Hills, and Ultimo, but also the Eastern Suburbs). They are prepared to pay relatively high rents or mortgages in order to live closer to the city centre. Many of them move into medium-density housing or even high-rise for the same reason. If asked, they appreciate a sense of community, an urban lifestyle, the availability of a variety services and short travel distances.<sup>30</sup> Thus, their views on urban form (including those on the character of remote suburbs) are similar to those that frame the “conventional” urban planners’ discourse. For developers, urban designers and architects this trend offers enormous potential – especially if combined with concepts and practices of “green building” (Athens, 2010; Downton, 2009; Droege, 2009). National and international standards, certificates and assessment tools have already been developed.

Clearly, the debate on suburbia is embedded in a much larger, underlying debate on the good life (Davison, 1999; Führ, 2005; Hanneemann, 2010; Koll-Schretzenmayr, Ritterhoff and Siebel, 2009; Selle, 1999). Views on suburbanisation vary a lot. Vested interests, ideologies and untested “plausible” arguments play an important role in shaping these views. Backed by other theories and empirical research, a social semiotic analysis of the issues involved demonstrates that powerful discourses operate in the debate on urban form. With reference to Roland Barthes’s work, Waldheim (2010) points to reasons for the effectiveness of interdisciplinary research and warns against “the linguistic cul-de-sac that confronts much of contemporary urbanism, constructed around a false choice between critical cultural relevance and environmental survival” (p. 114).

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# Reading Mega-Urban Landscape

*A Semiotic Sketch*<sup>1</sup>

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## *The Meaning of Landscape*

The pattern of urbanization is changing substantially in most parts of the world. While in the 19th and 20th century the process of urbanization could be understood as a spatial enlargement consisting of suburbanization and peri-urbanization, with, for example, the grand ensembles in Paris being a form of suburbanization and the new towns around London a pattern of peri-urbanization, we can see now a substantial change. In many cases the process of mega-urbanization not only means that urban areas become bigger and bigger, but in many parts of the world a new type of urbanization is emerging: the mega-urban landscape.<sup>2</sup> If one is crossing these areas by train or car, one will see a flow of housing areas, industrial parks, agricultural fields, unused territories, recreation parks, old settlements, villages and towns, old and new traffic infrastructure, sections of wilderness, rivers, channels, and so on.

The pattern of a mega-urban landscape can be understood as a consequence different land uses. It can be structured in islands, corridors,

1 This paper is a revision and supplement of Ipsen, Detlev, 2008: From Urban Growth to Mega-Urban Landscape. In: Sophie Wolfrum, Winfried Nerdinger (ed.): *Multiple City*. Berlin: jovis Verlag, pp. 19–22

2 For me the study of Rem Koolhaas and his team has been an important starting point in asking if mega-urbanization will produce another type of urbanization as we do know it in Europe and the USA (see Chung, Koolhaas and others 2001). In 2003 an international group of students started with field work in the PRD. For some results see Ipsen, Li, and Weichler 2005.

fields etc. but this will not help us to understand the connectivity of different land uses, the logic of change and the interrelation of the local and the global. We hope that an analysis combining the concept of informality to understand how processes are regulated and the concept of mega-urban landscape to study the spatial effects of informality will lead to a better understanding. Informal processes and the genesis of an urban landscape are analyzed in the context of how the transformation of urban villages takes place. In urban villages both aspects can be studied in a concentrated way because the villages are informal in the context of urban planning and politics and they control most of the land.

To define a mega-urban landscape we start with the concept of landscape. What is the scientific meaning of landscape? Very often landscape is used as a metaphor for traditional images of space. Contrarily we would like to understand landscape in a more analytical fashion. From a scientific point of view a contemporary definition of the term landscape should refer to its dual character: On the one hand, landscape is a material objective structure of space. One part of this material characteristic is natural, the other one is man made. The natural material elements of landscape are the territory with its specific soil, the climate, the vegetation and a particular topography as the outcome of its natural history. The manmade, material character of landscape is the outcome of men's work: the history and present form of agriculture, settlement, traffic infrastructure, water management, etc.

On the other hand, landscape is a subjective, culturally determined form of perception and evaluation of this material structure. The sociocultural history in each part of the world and each period of time correlates with a particular meaning of landscape as one can observe in poems and paintings. To understand landscape we have to analyze the relationship between the material and the perceptual aspects of – at least in the case of the Pearl River Delta – an extraordinarily dynamic process. Given the dualistic character of landscape, this process is marked by a high level of interdependencies. We would like to explain this in a little bit more detail.

Geological formations, geomorphology, water balance, soil and local climate, wildlife – all have inherently natural characteristics and interactions with each other. In reality, landscapes are (almost) nowhere to be viewed as

isolated from human influence. The treatment of nature and its cultivation affect the material flows and modify local characteristics. The use of fertilizer modifies the fertility of the soil, the settlement density the local climate, the canalization of streams the water balance, etc.

The treatment of nature is not only controlled technologically, but is subject to a variety of social rules. This is what we call the social structuring of landscape. Ownership rights or regulations, which restrict the land use, and laws for nature conservation, are examples of the social structure of landscape. All regulations relating to planning law are an important part of the social structure of the landscape. In our model the concept of culture defines the center landscape. Culture is a system of interpretations and meanings; it contains codes, which enable us to understand a landscape and the evaluations, which are tied to landscapes. The image of landscape is probably the most important part of landscape culture. Therefore, regarding the relationship between landscape development and landscape image, the natural conditions and forms of utilization play an equally significant role for both. At the same time, landscape development and landscape image influence each other. The representation of a subtropical river delta has characterized the image of the Pearl River Delta for a long time; soon, as a model of the Mega city Pearl River, it could impact future development.

The following diagram shows the elements of the interdisciplinary concept of landscape. The natural conditions, the use of the land and the social regulations form a triangle. The cultural forms of perception, the interpretations and images are located in the center in order to suggest that culture is as an integrative element (fig. 1).

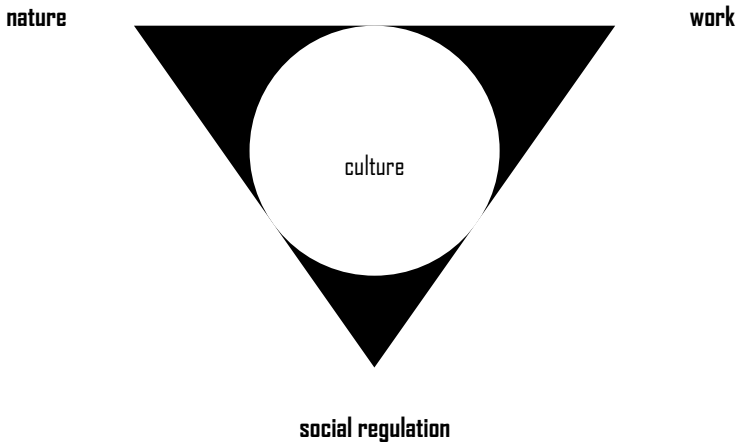


Figure 1 The concept of landscape

With this concept of landscape in mind it becomes clear that landscape does not only relate to rural space; to a large degree, it also relates to urban spaces. Cities as well as rural areas are linked to nature; both contain soil, water, air, and wildlife. In this sense, we speak about urban and rural landscape even if they are significantly dissimilar.

One hypothesis of this research project is that the mega-urban landscape and especially the Pearl River Delta constitute a new form of landscape neither urban nor rural. As a typical spatial form one can find urban corridors in rural areas and rural islands in urban areas. The mixture of industrial areas, villages, housing areas owned by villagers, business districts, traditional markets, highway infrastructure etc. are sometimes the result of formal zoning, sometimes due to informal self-regulation and sometimes the zoning is the formalization of self-regulation. In the Pearl River Delta, containing the most diverse forms ranging from city to country, the usefulness of the term Mega-Urban Landscape will be explored.

### *A Landscape of Disembedding and Reembedding*

As we have already mentioned, one can generally understand landscape and in particular mega-urban landscapes more as a process than a stable constellation. If this general idea is developed, the theory of modernization and the theoretical concept of "landscape in transition" will reveal a way of understanding the interaction of societal and spatial processes much better.

Globalization is understood as a special form and period of modernization. As Giddens argues, modernization means, in part, a process of disembedding. Giddens argues that the process of modernization has a strong impact on the functioning of social networks. Modernization disembeds and alienates people from their traditional social relations and their traditional belief systems. We can see this in the millions of migrants as well as the worldwide flows of capital and goods. But what is the meaning of reembedding to follow the idea of Giddens in a mega-urban landscape. To analyze the process of reembedding we will

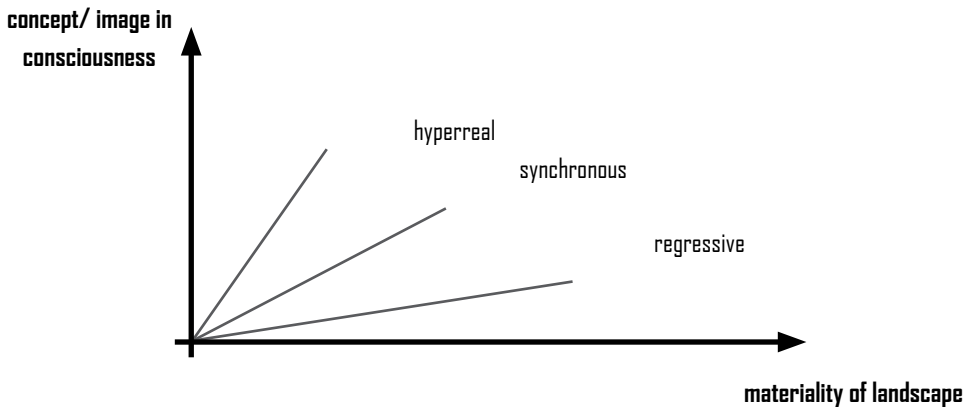


Figure 2 How image and materiality of landscape change

follow the idea of Castells to study both the dialectics of the space of flows (of traffic, goods, capital and migrants) and the space of places. And once again it seems very fruitful to study this in urban villages. Here we find traditional places like markets and modern shopping halls owned by village holdings. And we find a space of flows: most global factories are located in village areas (hypothesis) and most migrants live there. The villages, up until now at least, can be understood as important topos of mega-urbanization in the PRD. But it is necessary to highlight changes in this importance. We observe initial indicators that the roles of the villages are changing and the weight of other organizational forms may grow.

### *Transitional Landscape*

To sum up the discussion about the term landscape in general and the important role this concept will have in the analysis of mega-urban dynamics, we introduce the idea of “Transitional Landscape”.

At the peak of the political ecological movement in Europe the Swiss sociologist Lucius Burckhardt (n.d) struck a sober note. He wrote: landscape is clearly changing. We want to protect the landscape, but we do not know what we should hold on to ... We have to deal with two unstable phenomena: reality changes and, at the same time, the conceptual apparatus that is meant to determine that reality also changes.

Starting from this perspective, we developed the theoretical concept, “Transitional Landscape”. To read transitional landscape excludes simple concepts like the famous Greek formula the “panta rei” – all is flux, get under way. On the one hand, the image of landscape changes both itself and the material reality. On the other hand, reality may change the image of landscape. Concept and reality are certainly related to each other, but are by no means identical. If we examine landscape development, we do well to keep them apart. The concept of landscape can change, but the materiality of landscape must not. And the reality of landscape can change, while the image stays the same.

*The Semiotic Pattern of “High Speed Urbanism”*

The figure above shows the different relations which can develop between the change of concepts and the change of materiality of landscape (fig. 2). The case of a simultaneous change of the reality of landscape and the meaning is only one of the possibilities: we call it synchronous. In the Pearl River Delta one can observe high speed urbanization over the last twenty years. A lot of indicators show how fast agricultural land has been switched to industrial use, housing quarters, traffic infrastructure, business districts. However, we know little about the change of the image, the concept and consciousness of landscape in this period. To find a balance in the planning between economic development and the quality of the urban place it is useful to know more about the image of landscape in the mind of planners and politicians.

We have the hypothesis that the first period of rapid economic growth of more or less simple production industries will be finished very soon. To achieve economic development based on a higher degree of technological sophistication the human capital becomes more and more important. The quality of the urban environment is one important factor in attracting qualified human capital. Therefore the image of the PRD landscape will be a crucial factor for the future development of the region. One of the means to develop quality of life in a mega-urban landscape is the knowledge of ideas and images of landscape (re)development. To locate and understand the image of a territory, whether this is urban or rural or a landscape, it is useful to analyse the semiotic structure and meaning. If one aims to plan and change a landscape and the meaning, the image, one should search for open contradictions and latent qualities. In this sense I understand semiotic analysis as a part of planning.

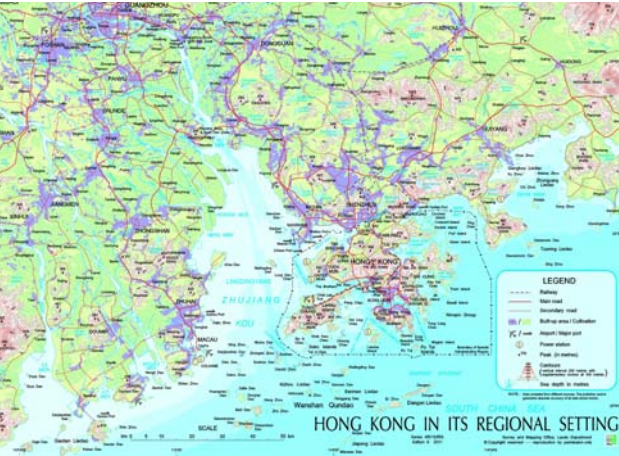
The following maps of the Pearl River Delta show the transformation of the region. Most notably, one can observe “high speed urbanism” (Ipsen 2004) in the delta. In less than ten years the delta has been substantially transformed from a rice chamber of China to an urban and industrial landscape. The first map shows the Pearl River Delta in 1998. Apart from the city of Guangzhou (Canton) and Hongkong/Koowlon most of the area in the delta is used for agriculture, while other parts are natural areas consisting of rivers, plains, hills and mountains (fig. 3a).



Figure 3a Hong Kong in its regional setting 1998

Even more importantly, however, one can now see two new structural forms of an urban landscape: the urban- industrial island and the urban corridor. In the very beginning of industrialization and urbanization the process is organized by generating urban and industrial islands. If the process continuous a pattern of corridors can be found. It seems that in this period the organization of traffic flows is dominant. The map

176 of 2007 seems to me like an inversion of the island structure: now urban and industrial land use is no longer like a set of islands; instead the natural and agricultural forms and land uses take the form of islands (fig. 3c).



Figures 3b & 3c (from top) Hong Kong in its regional setting 2002 and 2007

Theoretically this can be seen as the interaction of two forms of space: the space of places and the space of flows – as Castells (1996a) has argued – are the spatial forms of the information or network society. If this is true it leads to a rather important thesis: urbanization in China and

other parts of the world is not merely a repetition of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century urbanization in Europe and the US but may be developing another form. If urbanization and industrialization take place in a time where information technology is highly developed it should, in turn, be analyzed as part of a global network of flows.

But let us go to the spatial situation five years later. One can use the ‘gestalt theory’ to analyse the change: in 2002 the urbanized parts of the delta look like shape, the non-urbanized areas are the ground. Now one finds the opposite: the urban area is the ground, the open or agricultural landscape is the shape (fig. 3b.).

The map shows that most of the area now is urbanized with islands of hilly or wet parts. The high speed urbanization avoids spaces which are not easy to develop because time and costs are paramount, not density or intensive land-use. This leads us back to Castells: in an informational society time is more important than space. To play a role in the world economy, fast reaction to the change of demands makes the difference between the winner and the loser. Islands and corridors are the spatial expression of this kind of urbanization.

### *How to Read a Mega-Urban Landscape*

To read and to understand the structure of the urban landscape we use the concept of modules. A module is not each kind of a defined territory but a typical part of a whole. The whole consists of a limited number of modules, which one will find again in the space of a particular landscape. Urban landscape can be understood as “desakota” (McGee and Yao-Lin 1992), neither urban nor rural. But this definition is not rich enough. We need to find a substantial definition which accepts



urban landscapes as a distinctively new form and pattern (fig. 4).

The following map shows the urban landscape around Donguan, one of the regions which has been the location of electronic industries since the 1980s. To read this picture one can differentiate between natural elements such as the river, types of land use like agricultural fields, local streets and highways, factories and housing. But simply listing the elements does not help us understand their meaning. To arrive at a more sophisticated interpretation one has to know the driving forces behind the use pattern. Some parts seem to be formally planned like the highways. Other parts like the villages reveal a rectangular structure and a high level of density. Is this a formal structure, planned like the highways? This is not the case but to better interpret this semiotic structure one needs historical, descriptive knowledge. The rectangular and dense pattern of the villages goes back to Mao's revolution. To gain the villagers support for the communist revolution, the farmers and only the farmers got the right to own private land which they were meant to use as gardens. Nowadays the farmers do not use this private land for gardens to produce vegetables to feed their families. Rather, the farmers use this 10 by 10 meter pattern to build houses which are mainly rented out to the families of migrant workers. The farmers now often make their living as landlords. Therefore to understand the semiotic meaning of space, theoretical and descriptive knowledge is required to develop a sophisticated interpretation.

The intellectual instruments employed to read the modern cities in Europe and the US are well-developed because the genesis of this modern form of urban area has been occurring since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The theoretical work of Simmel and Louis Wirth gave us the idea of density, social

heterogeneity and innovative potential. But the high speed urbanization in some parts of Africa, South America and Asia have different driving forces and produce other types of urbanity. One of these forces might be the different relation of the space of place and the space of flows (Castells 1996b). In the cities of the West the systems of places and flows are highly and formally regulated. In the West, flows of traffic, energy, water and information are part of the general infrastructure and housing areas or business districts are formally defined parts of space. Land use is seen as functional, connected to the network.



Figure 4 Aerial view of Donguan

In the case of China this seems not to be the case. If one analyses the following picture, one can see that the urban landscape is constituted through a particular interaction of the space of flows and the space of places. The space of flows and the space of places are important for any form of urban area. We can see the highway as a space of flows and some village buildings as the space of places. A characteristic of the mega-urban landscape is not that these two forms of spaces exist, but that they are not integrated at all.

178 The mega-urban landscape can be described with reference to different strata of physical and social forms, which are not developed or planned as an integrative system. The one strata is influenced by the other and vice versa, but this is not planned, it just happens.

At the front of the picture one see parts of gardens with some fruit trees and flower beds. In the background, some new apartment building, normally rented out to migrants. Buildings and gardens are the space of places. But there is no reference and no relationship (fig. 5).

The space of flows and the space of places are always changing but not necessarily in the same direction. It is possible that population and industry will grow in the next 10 years in this area. Another possibility is destruction, shrinking or the emergence of fallow land. In this sense it is an open landscape, which is flexible, adaptable and structurally under-defined.

## *Resume*

The analysis of the semiotic language of high speed urbanization and industrialization led to some tentative findings. Methodologically speaking, a semiotic analysis requires theoretical and descriptive background information. We find it useful to understand the mega-urban area as a landscape, which denotes the interaction of social, cultural and natural aspects of an area. In relation to semiotic forms, this paper formulates the idea that islands and corridors will change their function: in the very beginning urbanization takes the form of islands. In a second period, the process resembles the formation of corridors. The next step may be a substantial inversion. In the beginning industry and urban settlement acquire the form of islands and corridors, while later natural areas and agricultures come to take the form of islands or corridors. Last but not least, the analysis of semiotic meanings reveals the problem of integration and connectedness. However this may not only be negative, but might also provide the opportunity for flexible and open development of the processes of urbanization and industrialization. This paper has not discussed the consequences of these results for planning. Nonetheless it seems evident that the dialectics of islands and corridors, integration and disintegration, flexibility and structural order may be the field of a special form of complex planning.



Figure 5 Bridge at Shalo

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# Urbane Semiologie im Feuilleton: *Siegfried Kracauers Stadtlektüren*

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## *Reading the City*

Woher stammt eigentlich die *prima vista* unwahrscheinliche Vorstellung, eine Stadt sei etwas, das man lesen könnte? Sie geht nicht auf die Semiologie zurück, nicht auf Roland Barthes<sup>1</sup> und nicht auf den *linguistic turn*, sie ist überhaupt nicht wissenschaftlichen Ursprungs, sondern sie stammt aus dem Feuilleton des 19. Jahrhunderts. 1822 schildert der Journalist und Schriftsteller Ludwig Börne den Zeitunglesern im provinziellen Deutschland seinen Enthusiasmus, einmal aus einer richtigen Metropole berichten zu dürfen: „Ein aufgeschlagenes Buch ist Paris zu nennen, durch seine Straßen wandern heißt *lesen*. In diesem lehrreichen und ergötzlichen Werke, mit naturtreuen Abbildungen so reichlich ausgestattet, blättere ich täglich einige Stunden lang“ (Börne 1964: 34). Ganz bewusst sei hier von Enthusiasmus die Rede, denn das Zitat verrät auch einen libidinösen Kern: sich der – mindestens für einen Deutschen dieser Zeit – sozialgeschichtlich neuen Erfahrung der Großstadt auszusetzen, ist nicht nur „lehrreich“, sondern eben auch höchst „ergötzlich“ – so ergötzlich wie vormals vielleicht

das „Wandern“ durch die Natur. Das Zitat gibt sich damit auch als Abkömmling der Rede vom „Buch der Natur“, in dem zu lesen sei, zu erkennen – dem alten literarischen Topos (Blumenberg 2003) von der „Lesbarkeit der Welt“. Zugleich – und das wird bei der Diskussion dieses Topos zumeist übersehen – bedeutet die Rede

1 „Die Stadt ist ein Diskurs, und dieser Diskurs ist wirklich eine Sprache: Die Stadt spricht zu ihren Bewohnern, wir sprechen unsere Stadt, die Stadt, in der wir uns befinden, einfach indem wir sie bewohnen, durchlaufen und ansehen“ (Barthes 1988: 202).

vom Stadtwandern als Lesen auch einen folgenreichen semantischen Umbau (Bollenbeck/Knobloch 2001). Das vormals müßiggängerische Flanieren wird zur Lektüre veredelt. Als Zeitvertreib sei es ebenso lehrreich für das stadtwandernde Subjekt wie mitteilenswert für andere. Das ist der Trick bei der Metapher von der Stadt als Text, die hier präfiguriert ist: dass sie nämlich weitere Texte erforderlich macht. Texte über die Stadt, die mitteilen, was in diesem Buch der Stadt

182 geschrieben steht. Texte, die zu schreiben jenen professionellen Pflasterrettern vorbehalten sein soll, die in den Städten sich aufhalten, um über sie zu berichten – den Journalisten. Die florierende Textproduktion über die Stadt ab spätestens den 60er-Jahren des 19. Jahrhunderts ist ohne das Zeitungsfeuilleton nicht zu denken. Man könnte sagen: Ein Ressort erfindet sich sein Sujet. Damit soll nicht gesagt sein, dass die Stadt, allzumal die große, keinen wirklichen Berichtsanlass darstellt. Aber hier geht es um die medien-geschichtlichen Randbedingungen, die eine Affinität von Stadt und Feuilleton wahrscheinlich werden lassen. Das gilt für Börne, aber in jedem Fall für die vielen journalistischen Stadtbeschreiber in der Weimarer Republik: für Joseph Roth, Alfred Polgar, Bernhard v. Brentano, für Kurt Tucholsky, für Heinrich Hauser, Egon Friedell, Egon Erwin Kisch, Franz Hessel, Arnold Höllriegel oder eben für Siegfried Kracauer, um nur die bekanntesten unter ihnen zu nennen. Die Weimarer Republik war ohne Frage – in qualitativer wie in quantitativer Hinsicht – die Hoch-Zeit des Großstadtfeuilletons.

### *Großstadt und Feuilleton*

Zunächst noch ein paar grundsätzliche Bemerkungen zum Feuilleton, bevor hier die Texte von Kracauer im Mittelpunkt stehen sollen. Der Begriff Feuilleton wird zumeist in einem doppelten Sinne verwendet: Er meint dann a) ein Zeitungsressort – den Kulturteil der Zeitung, anfänglich noch auf jeder Seite unter dem berühmten „Strich“ zu finden – ebenso wohl wie b) eine Textsorte, einen bestimmten Schreibstil, der sich gegenüber dem in den härteren Ressorts wie Politik oder Wirtschaft gepflegten durch eine besondere Form der Subjektivierung und Literarizität des

Ausgesagten auszeichnete: die berühmte „Kleine Form“, in der sich die journalistischen Textsorten wie Glosse, Kritik und Reportage mit literarischen Formen der Kurzprosa wie Anekdote, Aphorismus oder Erzählung vermischen.

Obwohl ursprünglich als unterhaltendes Gegengewicht gegen die stärker nachrichtlich geprägten Ressorts konzipiert, gilt das Feuilleton von Beginn an – und im Übrigen bis heute – gerade wegen seiner thematischen Unbestimmtheit bzw. Offenheit, der Lizenz zum Subjektiven, seinem Sinn für das „Allerlei“ wie das „Nebeneinander“ (Stalder 2003: 71f.) des Verschiedenen als wichtiger Ort der Meinungs- und Profilbildung einer Zeitung. Unser Interesse hier soll aber vor allem der Hoch-Zeit des Großstadtfeuilletons in der Weimarer Republik gelten. Allein die nackten Zahlen machen die eminente Bedeutung des weitestgehend konkurrenzfreien Printjournalismus für die damalige Öffentlichkeit kenntlich: 1928/29 gab es in Berlin wenigstens 93 sechsmal wöchentlich, 18 zwei bis fünfmal und 29 wöchentlich erscheinende Zeitungen, von den Tageszeitungen an die 10, die bis zu dreimal pro Tag erschienen (Schütz 2009). So sprach Walter Benjamin von den „Heuschreckenschwärme(n) von Schrift, die heute schon die Sonne des vermeinten Geistes den Großstädtern verfinstern“ (Benjamin 1972: 103), und Joseph Roth spot-tete: „Die Zeitungen sind schneller als die Zeit, nicht einmal das Tempo, das sie selbst erfunden haben, kann ihnen nachkommen. Atemlos rennt der Nachmittag dem Spätabendblatt nach und der Abend dem Morgenblatt vom Morgen“ (Roth 1929).

Für das Verhältnis von Text und Stadt in Hinsicht auf die Bedingungen der Möglichkeit, eine Stadt zu lesen, hat diese besondere medien-geschichtliche Konstellation mindestens zwei Konsequenzen:

1) Zum einen erzeugt die singular hochfrequente Thematisierung der Metropole Berlin im Feuilleton das, was der gegenwärtig wichtigste deutsche Feuilletonforscher Erhard Schütz den „Fließtext“ Berlin (Kauffmann/Schütz 2000: 21) genannt hat: Mehr noch als in Romanen wie Döblins *Berlin-Alexanderplatz* konstituiert sich der Gegenstand des Großstadtfeuilletons – die große Stadt – gerade erst durch den Umstand seiner fort- und im Grunde unausgesetzten Beschriebenheit. Berlin-Feuilletons von morgens bis mitternachts: Im aufgeschlagenen Buch Berlin wird nicht noch wie bei Börne einige ergötzliche Stunden, sondern quasi rund um die Uhr gelesen, und damit entsteht jenseits der Grenzen des Einzeltextes ein fortlaufender Fließtext, in dem die Stadt lesbar gemacht, gleichsam feuilletonistisch erfunden wird. Der Begriff des Fließtextes zielt darauf ab, sich von der Betrachtung einzelner eminenten Texte zu lösen, stattdessen das ganze Ensemble von in der Tagespresse seinerzeit publizierten Stadttextrn in ihrem diskursiven Zusammenhang zu untersuchen.

2) Mitte bis Ende der 1920er-Jahre steigt das Selbstbewusstsein der Großstadtfeuilletonisten ins Unermessliche. Joseph Roth verwarft sich gegen die Unterstellung, er sei in der Zeitung nur für das literarische Amusement zuständig: „Das Feuilleton ist für die Zeitung ebenso wichtig wie die Politik“, schreibt er an seinen Chefredakteur. „Ich bin nicht eine Zugabe, nicht eine Mehlspeise, sondern eine Hauptmahlzeit. Mich liest man mit Interesse. Nicht die Berichte über das Parlament. Ich mache keine witzigen Glossen. Ich zeichne das Gesicht der Zeit.“<sup>2</sup> Dies ist eine Formulierung, die dann auch Kracauer für sich in Anspruch nehmen sollte. Sie bezeichnet den Universalitätsanspruch des seinerzeitigen Feuilletons: die „Ausweitung der Kulturberichterstattung zur Sozialreportage“, nicht selten sogar mit gesellschaftskritischem Impetus (Prümm 1988: 81).

Das ist in etwa das publizistische Umfeld, in das hinein Siegfried Kracauer seine Texte platziert.

Er scheint besonders prädestiniert, die Stadt zu lesen und zu beschreiben: Er ist studierter Architekt, hat im Städtebau gearbeitet – und beginnt seine journalistische Karriere Anfang der 1920er-Jahre mit Architekturkritik. Bezeichnenderweise findet er nicht den Weg von der Literatur zum Großstadtfeuilleton, sondern von einer professionellen Perspektive auf umbauten Raum und Raumwirkungen des Gebauten.

2 Roth an Benno Reifenberg vom 22. April 1926 (zit. n. Eckert/Berthold 1979: 160f.).

Seit 1921 arbeitet er als festangestellter Redakteur regelmäßig für eine der Qualitätszeitungen der Weimarer Republik, für die *Frankfurter Zeitung*: von 1930 bis 1933 als deren Berlin-Korrespondent. Diesen Job hatten vorher Joseph Roth, danach Bernard v. Brentano inne. Dass er nicht für den Tag allein schreibt, sondern dass seine Texte bleibenden Ansprüchen genügen, dessen ist er sich bewusst. Er sammelt die Texte und konstatiert sie für den Nachdruck im Buch – so entstehen 1929/30 *Die Angestellten*, seine Darstellung einer neuen großstädtischen Sozialformation aus einer Artikelserie in der *Frankfurter Zeitung* heraus (Kracauer 1971).

Hier soll nun im Folgenden anhand von drei Beispieltextrn ein Vorschlag dazu unterbreitet werden, wie man die Stadtlektüren Kracauers systematisieren könnte. Die Beispieltextrn stehen jeweils für einen Typ, für ein Modell von *Reading the City*, das in sich je eigene literarische Traditionslinien aufweist und – so wird hier behauptet – bis heute auch für manche nicht-literarische Formen der Stadtbeschreibung in

- 184 Großstadtethnologie, Geschichtswissenschaft und Urbanistik nach dem *Spatial Turn* maßgeblich geblieben ist (Döring/Thielmann 2008).
- das Modell *Flaneur als Erzähler*,
  - das Modell der *Vedute*, also der Stadtbeschreibung als Landschaftsbeschreibung,
  - das Modell der Stadtreportage als *in-situ-Soziografie*.

3 Zum Begriff des „Durchgangsortes“ vgl. Augé (1994).

### *Der Flaneur als Erzähler*

Dieser Typ Großstadtfeuilleton bei Kracauer zeichnet sich unter anderem dadurch aus, dass hier der Erzähler als eine Art Flaneurfigur etabliert wird. Zur Veranschaulichung sei hier der Text „Die Unterführung“ aus der *Frankfurter Zeitung* vom 11. März 1932 herangezogen, ein berühmter unter den Berlin-Feuilletons von Kracauer (wie überhaupt alle drei, die hier behandelt werden, zu den ganz kanonischen Kracauer-Texten gehören...) Er beginnt wie folgt:

*„Dicht beim Bahnhof Charlottenburg zieht sich unter den Gleisen eine schnurgerade Straße hin, die ich oft passiere, weil an ihr jenseits des Bahndamms der Bahnhofseingang liegt. Ich gestehe, daß ich diese Unterführung nie ohne ein Gefühl des Grauens durchmesse. Es könnte von ihrer Konstruktion herrühren, aber ich glaube nicht einmal, daß sie allein das Grauen verursacht; obwohl sie von einer finsternen Strenge ist, der jede Heiterkeit fehlt. Backsteinmauern grenzen die Unterführung ein, verrostete Mauern, die mit zwei Reihen eiserner Stützen zusammen die niedere Decke tragen. Diese Decke besteht aus*

*zahllosen Eisenträgern, die einander in winzigen Abständen folgen und mit unendlich vielen Nietnägeln versehen sind [...] Viele Menschen eilen durch diese Unterführung. Ich sage eilen und meine es wörtlich. Denn sei es, daß die Passanten nach Hause oder zum Zug müssen, sei es, daß ihnen das kellerartige Wegstück Unbehagen einflößt [...].“ (Kracauer 1987: 38)*

Inwiefern und durch welchen Raumschnitt ist hier die große Stadt überhaupt thematisch? Sie wird repräsentiert durch einen ihrer Durchgangsorte – einen Ort, der dafür da ist, durchquert zu werden.<sup>3</sup> Der Erzähler gehört selber zu denen, die diesen Ort oft durchqueren. Zum einen ist hier also gesagt, dass die subjektive Perspektive maßgeblich ist; zum anderen, dass, um die Stadt zu lesen, man in ihr unterwegs sein muss. Nicht notwendigerweise müßiggängerisch wie der klassische Flaneur, vielleicht genauso geschäftig wie die anderen Passanten. Aber die Erkenntnis der Stadt scheint in jedem Fall eine peripatetische zu sein. Zugleich gibt der Erzähler auch das *Movens* für diesen Text zu erkennen: Er will sich selbst (und damit den Zeitungslesern) erklären, warum ihn dieses Grauen befällt: ein subjektiver Schreibanlass, gedacht als Affektmodellierung – eine Selbstaufklärung mit dem Anspruch, sie anderen mitzuteilen. Es fällt noch auf: Der Erzähler beschreibt zunächst das Material und die Statik, die Konstruktion dieses Durchgangsortes – ganz wie ein Experte, der sich auch auf die Ingenieurskunst versteht. Dann aber stellt sich heraus: Der Ort wird von den Subjekten, die ihn bevölkern, gar nicht nur als Durchgangsort angeeignet. Es gibt so etwas wie eine Unterführungsgesellschaft: Menschen, die sich dort notgedrungen oder freiwillig länger aufhalten.



„Zwei eiserne Stützen nahe beim Ausgang umrahmen einen weißgekleideten Bäcker, der Salzbrezeln feilbietet, die niemand kauft. Tiefer im Innern halten sich Bettler auf, die von der Backsteinmauer, an der sie stehen und kauern, kaum noch zu unterscheiden sind. Alte längst verwelkte Mauerblümchen, beschäftigen sie sich damit, irgendeinen Schlager zu dudeln, dem nur die Nietnägel lauschen, oder murmelnd auf eine Gabe zu warten.“

Was in mir jenes Grauen hervorruft, ist aber auch nicht eigentlich die entsetzliche Unverbundenheit aller genannten Personen. Ich weiß natürlich, daß sie vorhanden ist [...].“ (Kracauer 1987: 38f.)

Hier zwingt sich der Erzähler, gewissermaßen den Blick des Flaneurs einzunehmen: Er hastet nicht durch den unwirtschaftlichen Ort hindurch und schaut beiseite wie die übrigen geschäftigen Passanten. Und obwohl er deren Unbehagen dem Ort gegenüber teilen mag – stärker noch: er spricht von „Grauen“ – verweilt er in der Unterführung, um die dort versammelten derangierten Subjekte zu beschreiben. Er setzt sich diesem Grauen intentional aus, aber mit der Selbsterklärung seines Grauens ist er noch nicht an sein Darstellungsziel gelangt:

„Es ist wohl der Gegensatz zwischen dem geschlossenen, unerschütterlichen Konstruktionssystem und dem zerrinnenden menschlichen Durcheinander, der das Grauen erzeugt. Auf der einen Seite die Unterführung: eine vorbedachte, stabile Einheit, in der jeder Nagel, jeder Backstein an seiner Stelle sitzt und dem Ganzen hilft. Auf der anderen Seite die Menschen: auseinandergesprengte Teile und Teilchen, unzusammenhängende Splitter eines Ganzen, das nicht vorhanden ist. Sie können aus Mauern, Trägern und Stützen einen

Verband schaffen, aber sie sind unfähig dazu, sich selber als Gesellschaft zu organisieren. Kraß und schrecklich wird durch das vollkommene System toter Stoffe die Unvollkommenheit des lebendigen Chaos enthüllt [...].“ (Kracauer 1987: 39)

Die Pointe deutet darauf hin, was hier mit *Reading the city* gemeint ist: Der Flaneur als Erzähler erklärt sich und uns Lesenden sein Grauen durch das Missverhältnis von „Belebtem und Unbelebtem“ (Prümm 1988: 102), von Perfektion des Baukörpers im Unterschied zu der Desintegration des darunter versammelten Gesellschaftskörpers. Dies ist beileibe kein plumper Raumdeterminismus, der sich in dieser Analyse kundtut, so, als ob die Konstruktion für die Fragmentierung der Subjekte verantwortlich sei. Vielmehr handelt es sich hier um eine dichte Beschreibung der Mensch-Dinge-Anordnung an einem eher ephemeren Ort der großen Stadt, einen, der wohl in keiner Architekturkritik vorkäme.

Flanerie heißt hier mithin wie bei Franz Hessel „eine Art Lektüre der Straße, wobei Menschengesichter, Schaufenster (...) Autos, Bäume (hier müsste man ergänzen: Backsteinmauern und Stützpfiler; J.D.) zu lauter gleichberechtigten Buchstaben werden, die zusammen Worte, Sätze und Seiten eines immer neuen Buches ergeben“ (Hessel 1929: 129). Das Großstadt-Feuilleton bei Kracauer schließt hier mit der Imagination eines anderen Ortes. Die Stadtpaziergänge des Flaneurs führen nicht zurück ins Reich der Kindheit wie bei Hessel, sondern münden in eine Gesellschaftsutopie. Auch das ist ein Indiz für das gestiegene Selbstbewusstsein der Feuilletonisten gegen Ende der Weimarer Republik. Wie häufig bei Kracauer, dem flanierenden Architekten, ist diese Gesellschaftsutopie vermittelt über eine städtebauliche Fantasie:

„Immer wieder packt mich dasselbe Grauen, wenn ich durch die Unterführung gehe. Und ich denke mir manchmal wie zum Trost bessere, schönere Konstruktionen aus. Solche, deren Baumaterialien nicht nur aus Eisen und Backsteinen, sondern gewissermaßen auch aus Menschen bestünden. Dann brauchten sich die Menschen nicht zu beeilen, und die Musik wäre kein Wink für die Barmherzigkeit.“ (Kracauer 1987: 39)

Soweit das Modell Flaneur als Erzähler, das auf sehr viele Stadtttexte Kracauers anwendbar ist.

### **Großstadt-Vedute: Berliner Landschaft**

Der zweite Texttyp, in dem die große Stadt gewissermaßen wie eine Landschaft beschrieben wird, ist dem Flaneursmodell insofern entgegengesetzt, als hier die Stadt zur Sprache kommt ganz ohne die Menschen, die sie bevölkern. Das soll hier veranschaulicht werden an dem für diesen Texttyp gewissermaßen programmatischen Text „Aus dem Fenster gesehen“ aus der *Frankfurter Zeitung* vom 8. November 1931. Wir behandeln auch hier zunächst den Anfang des Feuilletons:

„Man kann zwei Arten von Stadtbildern unterscheiden: den einen, die bewußt geformt sind, und den anderen, die sich absichtslos ergeben. Jene entspringen dem künstlerischen Willen, der sich in Plätzen, Durchblicken, Gebäudegruppen und perspektivischen Effekten verwirklicht, die der Baedeker gemeinbin mit einem Sternchen beleuchtet. Diese dagegen entstehen, ohne vorher geplant worden zu sein. Sie sind keine Kompositionen, die wie der Pariser Platz oder die Concorde ihr Dasein einer einheitlichen Baugesinnung zu verdanken hätten, sondern Geschöpfe des Zufalls, die sich nicht

zur Rechenschaft ziehen lassen. Wo immer sich Steinmassen und Straßenzüge zusammenfinden, deren Elemente aus ganz verschiedenen gerichteten Interessen hervorgehen, kommt ein solches Stadtbild zustande, das selber niemals der Gegenstand irgendeines Interesses gewesen ist. Es ist so wenig gestaltet wie die Natur und gleicht einer Landschaft darin, daß es sich bewußtlos behauptet. Unbekümmert um sein Gesicht dämmert es durch die Zeit [...].“ (Kracauer 1931: 40)

Die expositorische Geste des Textes besteht nun gerade nicht in einer Beschreibung des konkreten Stadtbildes, das etwa vom Fenster aus betrachtet würde, sondern in einer allgemeinen Bestimmung: der Unterscheidung „bewußt geformt(er)“ Stadtbildervon den „absichtslos(en)“, den ungestalteten, unbekümmerten, „bewußtlos“ sich behauptenden. Der Text mündet nicht in eine Unterscheidung, sondern geht von einer solchen aus, die der sich anschließenden Stadtbildbeschreibung gleichsam als Leseanleitung vorangestellt wird. Auch dies ist ein Hinweis auf das zeitdiagnostische Selbstbewusstsein des Feuilletonisten. Er vertraut darauf, dass seine Darstellung – die Beschreibungsleistung am konkreten Phänomen – schon wird einlösen können, wovon die allgemeine Bestimmung handelt. Das ist insofern bemerkenswert, als man die Textgattung Feuilleton eher mit dem umgekehrten, wenn man so will: induktiven Verfahren der Evidenzproduktion in Zusammenhang bringt.

Der Begriff des *Stadtbildes* jedenfalls wird hier nicht in seiner geläufigeren, weiten Bedeutung gebraucht (als cursorischer Ausdruck für die Wahrnehmung der *Gesamtheit* ortsspezifischer Bestandteile eines urbanen Raumes bzw. eines besonders charakteristischen Merkmals<sup>4</sup>), sondern mit mittlerer Reichweite: Gemeint ist offenbar ein definierter Ausschnitt der Stadt (das

Bild eines Platzes, eines städtebaulichen Ensembles, die standortgebundene Wahrnehmung einer je spezifischen urbanen Konfiguration aus „Steinmassen“ und „Straßenzügen“), der durch seine „bewußt geformten“ bzw. „absichtslos“ sich ergebenden Anteile gekennzeichnet sei. Das Interesse des Beobachters für die beiden Seiten der Unterscheidung ist dabei durchaus ungleich verteilt: Es gilt in erster Linie den ungestalteten Stadtbildern. Für die „bewußt geformten“ bleibt der Baedeker zuständig, sie sind sattem bekannt. Damit stellt sich der Beobachter in die Tradition des Feuilletonisten als Spezialist für das Ephemere, für das optisch Unbeachtete, für die Banalisierung des Besonderen („Pariser Platz“, „die Concorde“) bei gleichzeitiger Besonderung des Alltäglichen (hier: die zufälligen Stadtbilder) – als Ausgleich dafür, dass dieses „selber niemals Gegenstand eines wirklichen Interesses gewesen ist.“

Die Aufwertung des „absichtslos“ sich ergebenden Stadtbildes wird auch dadurch unterstrichen, dass es im letzten Satz der Exposition metaphorisch belebt wird („Unbekümmert um sein Gesicht dämmert es durch die Zeit“). Es wird zu einer Art *Tableau vivant*, aber eines, das sich keinerlei ästhetischer Gestaltung verdankt. Am „bewußt geformten“ Pariser Platz ist die Stadt Objekt der Planung – zum Subjekt einer unbekümmerten Selbstbehauptung hingegen wird sie erst in ihren absichtlosen Konfigurationen (– wenn es heißt, das zufällige Stadtbild gleiche „einer Landschaft darin, daß es sich bewußtlos behauptet.“). Auch wenn Kracauer hier nicht den psychoanalytischen Begriff des *Unbewußten* bemüht, soll die Stadt gleichwohl durch die metaphorische Verlebendigung ihrer Bilder in die Rolle eines Analysanden gerückt werden. Und der Feuilletonist wird ihr Analytiker sein.

Welches Stadtbild aber wird im Hauptteil des Textes konkret beschrieben?

„Vor meinem Fenster verdichtet sich die Stadt zu einem Bild, das herrlich wie ein Naturschauspiel ist. Doch ehe ich mich ihm zuwende, muß ich des Standorts gedenken, von dem aus es sich erschließt. Er befindet sich hoch über einer unregelmäßigen Platzanlage, der eine wunderbare Fähigkeit eignet. Sie kann sich unsichtbar machen, sie hat eine Tarnkappe auf. Mitten in einem großstädtischen Wohnviertel gelegen und Treffpunkt mehrerer breiter Straßen, entzieht sich der kleine Platz so sehr der öffentlichen Aufmerksamkeit, daß kaum jemand auch nur seinen Namen kennt [...]“ (Kracauer 1931: 40)

4 So wie man sagte: ‚Das Stadtbild von Siegen ist geprägt von witterseitig verschieferten Hausfassaden.‘

5 Die Kracauer-Philologie hat den Standort, von dem aus das Stadtbild der „Berliner Landschaft“ beschrieben wird, genau rekonstruiert. Es handelt sich um den Blick aus Kracauers Arbeitszimmerfenster im 4. Stock seiner Wohnung in der Charlottenburger Sybelstraße, Blickrichtung Nordwest: vom Holtzendorffplatz über die S- und Fernbahngleise bis hin zum Berliner Funkturm in etwa 1,5 Kilometer Entfernung (Stalder 2003: 165).

Die Rede von der Stadt als „Bild, das herrlich wie ein Naturschauspiel ist“, gibt Aufschluss darüber, was Kracauers Vorstellung vom Stadtbild noch mit einem Bild zu tun hat. Die erste Satzbestimmung („Vor meinem Fenster“) gilt der unhintergehbaren *Positionalität* dieser Wahrnehmung. Das Stadtbild, so wie es beschrieben sein wird, bedarf eines bestimmten Betrachterstandorts und wird ihn immer mitkommunizieren – hier die mittlere Distanz vom Fensterplatz zu einem bestimmten städtischen Horizont. „Zufällig“, „absichtslos“ mag das Stadtbild sich zeigen, insofern damit sein *propositionaler Gehalt* gemeint ist – „Steinmassen“, „Straßenzüge“, hier im Folgenden vor allem Bahngleise, Züge, Signalmasten und ein Rundfunkturnm<sup>5</sup> –, dessen

188 spezifische *Form* hingegen erweist sich als in hohem Maße vermittelt. Das Stadtbild, wie es sich zeigt, wird durch den *Fensterausschnitt* gerahmt. Anders gesagt: Erst der (Fenster-)Rahmen gestaltet den Stadtraum zum Bild, das betrachtet und beschrieben werden kann. Schon das Verb „verdichten“, das Kracauer in diesem Zusammenhang benutzt, verrät die konstruktiven Anteile dieser Wahrnehmung. Es heißt nicht etwa: ‚Vor meinem Fenster zeigt sich die Stadt, herrlich wie ein Naturschauspiel‘, sondern: „[...] *verdichtet sich* die Stadt *zu einem Bild*, das herrlich wie ein Naturschauspiel ist.“ Das Stadtbild entsteht zuallererst durch die Aufmerksamkeit des Betrachters, der beim Blick durch den Fensterrahmen eine ungeplante „Komposition“ erkennt, die „so wenig gestaltet“ sein soll „wie die Natur“, gleichwohl „herrlich wie ein Naturschauspiel“ sei. Hier wiederholt sich ein für das Großstadt-Feuilleton der Weimarer Republik charakteristischer Topos: die bejahende Identifizierung von Stadt mit Natur – gleichsam als Umwertung der modernisierungskritischen, teils apokalyptischen Stadtnatur-Beschwörungen des Expressionismus. Für die Weimarer Feuilletonisten ist die Großstadt (umständehalber in Deutschland vor allem Berlin) ein Laboratorium, in dem experimentell die Reaktionen auf die Verheißungen bzw. Zumutungen der Moderne erprobt und beobachtet werden, in dem sich Modernisierungserfahrungen *verdichten* – so sehr, dass sie – je nach Temperament – entweder emphatisch (Bernhard von Brentano) oder kritisch (Joseph Roth) als zweite Natur beschrieben werden (Prümm 1988; Bienert 1992; Schütz 1992; Scharnowski 2006; Scharnowski 2008).

„Das Stadtbild selber nun, das bei diesem Plätzchen beginnt, ist ein Raum von außerordentlicher Weite, den ein metallischer Eisenacker

*erfüllt. Er klingt von Eisenbahngeleisen wider. Sie kommen aus der Richtung des Bahnhofs Charlottenburg hinter einer überlebensgroßen Mietshauswand hervor, laufen bündelweise nebeneinander und entschwinden zuletzt hinter gewöhnlichen Häusern. Ein Schwarm von glänzenden Parallelen, der tief genug unter dem Fenster liegt, um seiner ganzen Ausdehnung nach übersehen werden zu können [...].“* (Kracauer 1931: 40f.)

Das Naturschöne von Kracauers Berliner Landschaft besteht aus Verkehr, Lichtern, Schienen, Masten, wohingegen die erste Natur (vielleicht besser: Kulturlandschaft) überhaupt nur auf metaphorischer Ebene präsent ist: „ein metallischer Eisenacker“; der „Schwarm von glänzenden Parallelen“ (gemeint sind die Gleise); der „helle Häuserstreifen“, der die „Ruhe der eisernen Fläche“ (gemeint ist die Bahntrasse) nicht „anders auffängt *wie ein Waldrand enteilende Wiesen*; schließlich das Blinklicht des Funkturms, das nachts, „wenn der Sturm heult, [...] über *die hohe See* (fliegt), deren *Wogen* den Schienenacker umspülen“ (Kracauer 1931: 41; Hervorhebungen J. D.)“

Neben der Natur fehlen in diesem Text-Stadtbild, so „herrlich wie ein Naturschauspiel“, die Menschen – und das bezeichnet den entscheidenden Unterschied zu den Großstadtfeuilletons des ersten Texttyps. Der Betrachter beschreibt hier von seinem Fensterplatz stattdessen lieber euphorisch geometrische Formen, dort, wo Unterführung und Schienenstrang sich kreuzen, das „laufende Querband“ von Automobilen auf der Durchgangsstraße, die horizontale Begrenzungslinie des Häuserstreifens gegenüber, die bildkompositorisch eminente Vertikale des Funkturms, „ein senkrechter Strich, der mit der Reißfeder dünn durch ein Stück Himmel gezogen ist“ (Kracauer 1931: 41). Verlebendigt wird das

Stadtbild nicht durch die Subjekte, die es bevölkern und die man fraglos auch aus mittlerer Distanz vom Fensterplatz hätte in den Blick nehmen können. Verlebendigt werden solche Stadtbilder rein metaphorisch als „Geschöpfe des Zufalls, die sich nicht zur Rechenschaft ziehen lassen“ (Kracauer 1931: 40). Kracauer malt sein Sprachstadtbild von der Berliner Landschaft wie eine Vedute des Industrie- und Massenverkehrszeitalters.

*„Diese Landschaft ist ungestelltes Berlin. Ohne Absicht sprechen sich in ihr, die von selber gewachsen ist, seine Gegensätze aus, seine Härte, seine Offenheit, sein Nebeneinander, sein Glanz. Die Erkenntnis der Städte ist an die Entzifferung ihrer traumhaft hingesagten Bilder geknüpft.“* (Kracauer 1931: 41)

Wenn in der Schlussformel dieses Feuilletons gleichwohl von „Erkenntnis der Städte“ die Rede ist, wird damit zugleich ein analytischer Anspruch verknüpft, den – das hat die Analyse von „Berliner Landschaft“ gezeigt – dieses Feuilleton mehr behauptet als einlöst. Die Stadt als Analysand folgt – freudianisch gesprochen – der psychoanalytischen Grundregel und äußert „bewußtlos“ und unzensiert manifeste Traum Inhalte. Eine „Entzifferung der traumhaft hingesagten Bilder“ aber – sprich: eine Übersetzung in den latenten Traumgedanken, welcher Aufschluss gäbe über die psychosoziale Realität des Träumers – steht dahin. An einer solchen Analyse, die das Raumbild demgegenüber – im Sinne seines Lehrers Georg Simmel – auch als „soziale Tatsache“ begreift, versucht sich Kracauer in dem Text „Über Arbeitsnachweise“, der hier als Beispiel für den dritten Texttyp figurieren soll.

### *Raumbilder als „Träume der Gesellschaft“: In-situ-Soziografie*

Dieser Text entspräche der hier vertretenen These zufolge dem dritten Modell, was es für Kracauer hieße, eine Stadt zu lesen: eine dichte Beschreibung städtischer Räume, die sogar beansprucht, zu wissenschaftlichen Formen der Soziografie in Konkurrenz zu treten. Der (aber mal sehr berühmte, viel behandelte) Text „Über Arbeitsnachweise. Konstruktion eines Raumes“ erschien erstmals in der *Frankfurter Zeitung* vom 17. Juni 1930.

**6** Gemessen an Zeichenzahlen, ist er länger als die größten Formate im heutigen Tagesjournalismus (in der Regel das klassische „Seite drei“-Hintergrund/Reportage-Format). Auch für Weimarer Zeitungskontexte, auch gemessen an den Umfängen, die Kracauer üblicherweise eingeräumt bekam, ist es ein ungewöhnlich langer Text.

Formal entspricht der Text den Grundbestimmungen der Reportage als journalistischer Gattung: Ihr Autor besucht einen Ort oder mehrere (hier: mehrere Berliner Arbeitsnachweise des Frühsommers 1930) und schreibt darüber zeitnah (nicht unbedingt: tagesaktuell) und aus der Perspektive des Augenzeugen, der „Ich“ sagen darf und mit der Lizenz zum subjektiven Ausdruck ausgestattet ist. Nicht zuletzt die exorbitante Länge von „Über Arbeitsnachweise“<sup>6</sup> spricht für den Stellenwert, der solchen Texten „unterm Strich“ im Kontext der Gesamtzeitung mittlerweile eingeräumt wurde. Selbstbewusst vertritt hier der Reporter den Anspruch, in Konkurrenz zur Wissenschaft sogar die bessere Gesellschaftsdiagnostik zu betreiben. Sein Darstellungsziel ist – ganz unbescheiden –

„zu ermessen, welche Stellung die Arbeitslosen faktisch in dem System unserer Gesellschaft einnehmen. Weder die verschiedenen Kommentare zur Erwerbslosenstatistik noch die einschlägigen Parlamentsdebatten geben darüber Auskunft. Sie sind ideologisch gefärbt und rücken die Wirklichkeit in dem einen oder anderen Sinne zurecht [...]“ (Kracauer 1990: 186)

Darin bekundet sich mithin nicht nur so etwas wie Ressortkonkurrenz gegenüber Leitartiklern und Kommentatoren. Auch Kritik an der gesellschaftspolitischen Relevanz von Statistik, quantitativen Erhebungen zur Sozialstruktur ganz allgemein, insofern sie zum Gegenstand politischer Entscheidungsfindung werden. Demnach beansprucht Kracauers Text auch Geltung als qualitative Sozialstudie, die – gleichsam *in situ* – die soziale Realität valider, unparteilicher beschreiben kann als die Zahlenwerke der Parlamentsdebatten. Kracauer tritt damit nicht zuletzt – wohl gemerkt im Kontext journalistischer Formen, wohl auch im Bewusstsein um deren Öffentlichkeitsmacht – in Konkurrenz zu wissenschaftlichen Formen der Soziografie.<sup>7</sup>

Vgl. dazu den ausgezeichneten Aufsatz von Niefanger (1999).

Doch Kracauer ist noch ehrgeiziger: Er will in „Über Arbeitsnachweise“ nicht nur der Sozialstatistik eine gehaltvollere Soziografie gegenüberstellen, sondern auch im Medium der Reportage die Reportage kritisieren. Das zeigt der Satzteil aus der Exposition von „Über Arbeitsnachweise“, der der Formulierung des Darstellungsziels vorangestellt ist:

„Ich habe mehrere Berliner Arbeitsnachweise besucht. Nicht um der Lust des Reporters zu frönen, der gemeinhin mit durchlöcherterem Eimer aus dem Leben schöpft, sondern um zu ermessen, welche Stellung die Arbeitslosen faktisch in dem System unserer Gesellschaft einnehmen.“ (Kracauer 1990: 185f.)

Man darf sich nicht täuschen: Die hier geäußerte Kritik an der Reportage dementiert keineswegs den pragmatischen Kontext der Reportage, dem Kracauers Text weiterhin zugehört. Allerdings ist Kracauer seit seiner Serie über *Die Angestellten* auch auf einen Distinktionsgewinn gegenüber den (wie er meint: von den Zeitläuften über Gebühr hofierten) Sozialreportern aus. Eine Parallelstelle aus den *Angestellten* macht das kenntlich, die hier zitiert und kommentiert sei, weil sie sowohl für den Bildbegriff Kracauers in „Über Arbeitsnachweise“ als auch für sein Verständnis von „Konstruktion“ (zur Explikation des Untertitels: *Konstruktion eines Raums*“) maßgeblich ist:

„Seit mehreren Jahren genießt in Deutschland die Reportage die Meistbegünstigung unter allen Darstellungsarten, da nur sie, so meint man, sich des ungestellten Lebens bemächtigen könne. Die Dichter kennen kaum einen höheren Ehrgeiz als zu berichten; die Reproduktion des Beobachteten ist Trumpf. Ein Hunger nach Unmittelbarkeit, der ohne Zweifel die Folge der Unterernährung durch den deutschen Idealismus ist. Der Abstraktheit des idealistischen Denkens, das sich durch keine Vermittlung der Realität zu nähern weiß, wird die Reportage als die Selbstanzeige konkreten Daseins entgegengesetzt. Aber das Dasein ist nicht dadurch gebannt, daß man es in einer Reportage bestenfalls noch einmal hat [...] Hundert Berichte aus einer Fabrik lassen sich nicht zur Wirklichkeit der Fabrik addieren, sondern bleiben bis in alle Ewigkeit

*hundert Fabrikansichten. Die Wirklichkeit ist eine Konstruktion. Gewiß muß das Leben beobachtet werden, damit sie erstehe. Keineswegs jedoch ist sie in der mehr oder minder zufälligen Beobachtungsfolge der Reportage enthalten, vielmehr steckt sie einzig und allein in dem Mosaik, das aus den einzelnen Beobachtungen auf Grund der Erkenntnis ihres Gehalts zusammengestiftet wird. Die Reportage fotografiert das Leben; ein solches Mosaik wäre sein Bild.*“ (Kracauer 2006: 222)

Was die Sozialreportage den dürren Daten der amtlichen Statistik an Realitätsgehalt voraus hat, wird hier nicht verhandelt, vielmehr schon vorausgesetzt. Kracauer geht es um den Erkenntnisanspruch der Reportage, der sich in Realismusansprüchen nicht erschöpfen dürfe. Er definiert die Anforderungen dafür, dass aus der Sozialreportage eine gehaltvolle *in-situ*-Studie wird, welche wissenschaftlichen Formen der Soziografie Konkurrenz machen könnte: statt Reproduktion des Beobachteten seine analytische Durchdringung. Für diese Unterscheidung guter von schlechter Soziografie wählt Kracauer einen für die Reportagediskussion der Weimarer Republik geläufigen Vergleich: Die Reportage (als schlechte Soziografie) „*photographiert* das Leben“, sein „Bild“ hingegen (als Ausdruck für eine gelungene Soziografie) stiftet allein ein „Mosaik“ aus Einzelbeobachtungen, dem eine „Erkenntnis ihres Gehaltes“ notwendig vorausgehe. Der Vergleich der Reportage mit der Fotografie bezieht sich kritisch auf Egon Erwin Kischs in der Vorrede zu dessen Reportagesammlung *Der rasende Reporter* 1925 lancierten These, der Reporter habe grundsätzlich „keine Tendenz, nichts zu rechtfertigen, keinen Standpunkt“, und seine Texte seien reine „Zeitaufnahmen“, „Bilder“, zu einem „Album“ gefügt (Kisch 1982: 10).<sup>8</sup> Unabhängig davon, ob ausgerechnet Kisch die weltanschauliche

Standpunktlosigkeit wirklich abzukaufen wäre, kritisiert Kracauer schon die epistemologische Anspruchslosigkeit des Kisch'schen Reportagekonzeptes, sich mit einem *photographischen Abbild* der Wirklichkeit zu begnügen. Demgegenüber wird der *Bild*begriff in Stellung gebracht – und das könnte auch ein Hinweis sein auf den Bedeutungshorizont von „Raumbild“ in „Über Arbeitsnachweise“.

8

Vgl. auch die Anm. der Hg. in Siegfried Kracauer (2006: 346).

Die dem Vergleich zugrunde liegende (auch zeitgenössisch reichlich unoriginelle) Diskreditierung der Fotografie als Abbild im Unterschied zum allein darstellungsmächtigen Bild soll hier nicht weiter historisch aufgefächert werden. Auffällig nur, dass Kracauer zur Kennzeichnung seines soziografischen Verfahrens ausgerechnet den *Mosaik*begriff bemüht, um den Konstruktionscharakter seiner Wirklichkeitsbeobachtungen zu betonen, und nicht etwa die (seinerzeit debattenkurrente) filmische *Montage*. Das spricht dafür, dass Kracauer die Materialbasis seiner Wirklichkeits-„Konstruktion“ als möglichst kleinteilig beschreiben wollte, bei der jeder Bestandteil – das einzelne Stein- oder Glasstückchen des Mosaiks – für sich betrachtet keinerlei Realitätseffekt in sich berge – anders als etwa das filmische Einzelbild oder die filmische Sequenz (als Materialbasis der Montage).

Den Untertitel *Konstruktion eines Raumes* von „Über Arbeitsnachweise“ im Lichte dieser Parallelstelle gelesen, lässt sich jetzt vorläufig sagen: „Konstruktion“ kann zumindest zweierlei bedeuten: a) im vorgeordneten Wortsinne die Beschreibung der Konstruktionsweise eines architektonischen Raumes und b) im epistemologischen Sinne die textliche Konstruktion einer sozialen Realität.

Meine These dazu lautet nun, dass Kracauer in den Arbeitsnachweisen einen Gegenstand findet, der es ihm ermöglicht, beide Bedeutungen von „Konstruktion“ operativ miteinander zu verschränken: Sein Text konstruiert die soziale Realität dort, wo sie sich räumlich formt. Dabei kommen ihm seine architektonischen Kenntnise bzw. Darstellungsregister zur Beschreibung architektonischer Phänomene ebenso zugute wie der gesellschaftsdiagnostische Anspruch, den er mit der soziografischen Reportage verbindet. Er spricht über architektonische Konstruktionen, und dies nicht im Sinne einer Abbildung der sozialen Wirklichkeit ihrer Nutzer oder Bewohner, sondern um ein „Bild“, eine Konstruktion des *Gehalts* zeitgenössischer Sozialräume zu geben.

Am Ende der Exposition zu „Über Arbeitsnachweise“ steht die am häufigsten zitierte Passage des Textes, die hier bislang vor dem Hintergrund ihres äußeren Kontextes wie ihrer expositorischen Einbettung diskutiert wurde. Sie bedarf abschließend einer genaueren Re-Lektüre – unter Berücksichtigung ihres inneren Kontextes: „Jeder typische Raum wird durch typische gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse zustande gebracht, die sich ohne die störende Dazwischenkunft eines Bewußtseins in ihm ausdrücken“ (Kracauer 1990: 186). Hier wird zunächst die große Streitfrage in der Geschichte der Sozialgeografie – ‚Macht der Raum den Mensch oder der Mensch den Raum?‘ – bündig entschieden: Ganz im Sinne seines Lehrers Simmel optiert Kracauer gegen einen plumpen Raumdeterminismus. Es sind „typische gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse“, die typische Räume hervorbringen. Zugleich aber wird hier eine Aussage darüber getroffen, warum ausgerechnet Räume als Gegenstand der Analyse gesellschaftlicher Verhältnisse sich besonders eignen: Weil in gebautem Raum sich bestimmte gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse materialisiert haben,

(in Grenzen) beständige Form angenommen haben – gleichsam als ein besonderer Aggregatzustand des Sozialen. So weit, so unproblematisch. Kracauer sagt aber zudem, dass der Raum als Container typischer gesellschaftlicher Verhältnisse für die Analyse ein besonders aufschlussreiches Korpus darstellt, weil in ihm gerade das gesellschaftliche Unbewusste sich verkörpere, weil sich die soziale Realität ohne die „störende Dazwischenkunft des Bewußtseins“ in ihm ausdrücke. Wer auch immer an der Produktion gesellschaftlicher Verhältnisse beteiligt sei, wird hier behauptet, wisse nicht darum, dass diese Verhältnisse in einer Raumgestalt sich besonders unzensiert darböten: „Alles vom Bewußtsein Verleugnete, alles, was sonst geflissentlich übersehen wird, ist an seinem Aufbau beteiligt.“ Als Allaussage über die Produktion architektonischer Räume kann das nicht gemeint sein: Schließlich handelt – wie zu sehen war – ein Gutteil von Kracauers Architekturpublizistik in der *Frankfurter Zeitung* von „Baugesinnung“, also gerade von den höchst bewussten „Aufbau“-Absichten professioneller Raumproduzenten. Sinn macht die Aussage nur, wenn man eben nicht an baukünstlerische ‚Leuchttürme‘ denkt, sondern gerade an die architektonische Massenproduktion – seriell geplante, gesichtslose Durchschnittsräume, denen man prima vista keine „Baugesinnung“ ablesen kann, die nicht bewohnt, sondern wechselnd genutzt werden, die (wie heutige „Investorenarchitektur“) nichts anderes *darstellen* wollen als eine bestimmte Aufwands- und Kostenrationalität. Gerade diese kruden Räume seien für die Analyse typischer gesellschaftlicher Verhältnisse besonders aufschlussreich, sagt der Raumspezialist Kracauer als Soziograf – eben solche Nicht-Orte, Durchgangsräume wie die, in denen ein soziales Massenschicksal wie Arbeitslosigkeit in der Weimarer Republik verwaltet wird.



Wenn es im Folgesatz apodiktisch heißt: „Die Raumbilder sind die Träume der Gesellschaft“, dann kann im Lichte des skizzierten Satzkontextes mit *Raumbild* nicht die Bildlichkeit einer bestimmten Architektur gemeint sein. Schon gar nicht im bildwissenschaftlichen Sinn ein konkretes *nicht-flächiges* Bild. Vielmehr wird der Begriff bei Kracauer ganz offenbar metaphorisch gebraucht – zum einen in erkenntniskritischer Hinsicht, um das Text-Mosaik einer soziografischen Wirklichkeitskonstruktion in seiner qualitativen Differenz zu den möglichen, „bloß“ abbildlichen *Raumfotografien* der Sozialreportage zu umschreiben; zum anderen mit Bezug auf eine Semantik des Unbewussten, die die gesamte Passage bestimmt, um der Produktionsweise des Unbewussten metaphorisch zu entsprechen. So wie der Traum Bilder produziert, produziert er auch Raumbilder, in denen das „vom Bewußtsein Verleugnete“ mitgebaut hat. Die Rede von der „Entzifferung“ einer „Hieroglyphe“ betont zudem die Übersetzungsbedürftigkeit dieser Raumbilder. Auch das spräche für eine orthodox-freudianische Lesart der [Text-] Stelle: Die Raumbilder bedeuten nicht, was sie manifest darstellen, sondern sind Ergebnis eines vom Träumer selbst undurchschauten Entstellungsvorgangs. Kabatek verweist in seiner Interpretation auf den die Hieroglyphe auszeichnenden intermedialen Kode, bei dem je nach Kontext die phono- oder ideogramatischen Zeichenanteile bedeutungskonstitutiv sind: „Mit einer zeittypischen, gehörigen Portion Zeichenoptimismus ist für Kracauer die Hieroglyphe eines Raumbildes die sichtbare Repräsentanz einer lediglich dem flüchtigen Blick nicht erkennbaren Struktur“ (Kabatek 2003: 202). Kracauers Raumbilder stehen demnach für einen hybriden „Text“, der gelesen, übersetzt und gedeutet zu werden vermag. Es ist vor diesem Hintergrund verwunderlich, dass Kracauer

bislang noch nicht als Repräsentant einer „spatialen Hermeneutik“ in Anspruch genommen wurde, wie sie im Kontext des *Spatial Turn* vor allem von Karl Schlögel (2003) diskutiert und vertreten wird. Dessen titelgebendes (eine Formulierung des Anthropogeografen Friedrich Ratzel anverwandeldes<sup>9</sup>) Programm „Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit“ wird auch in Kracauers soziografischen Reportagen, vor allem aber in „Über Arbeitsnachweise“, beherzigt.

## 9

Zum Kontext des Schlögeltitels vgl. Döring/Thielmann (2008: 22).

Betrachtet man nun, welche konkrete Praxis der Raumbeschreibung diesem programmatischen „Raumbild“-Begriff entsprechen soll, dann zeigen sich deutlich zwei wesentliche Unterschiede zu dem Raumbild z.B. aus „Berliner Landschaft“:

a) Der spatiale Hermeneut der Arbeitsnachweise nimmt keinen erhöhten Beobachterstandpunkt ein wie den Fensterplatz im 4. Stock am Holtzendorffplatz, sondern er muss sich im Raum und durch ihn hindurch bewegen, um ihn entziffern zu können. Als Analytiker solcher Räume muss er ein Peripatetiker sein; b) „Über Arbeitsnachweise“ beschreibt kein abstraktes Raumbild, sondern eine ganz spezifische Raum-Mensch-Anordnung, bei der die Anwesenheit von Menschen im Raum nicht nur zur Kenntnis genommen wird, sondern als bedeutungskonstitutives Element zum Tragen kommt. Der Gegenstand der Beschreibung entspricht in etwa dem, was in humangeografischer Definition im Unterschied zum abstrakt-metrischen Raum ein *Ort* genannt wird: nämlich ein bewohnter, ein angeeigneter Raum (Agnew 2005; obwohl man sich schwertut, den Aufenthalt der Arbeitssuchenden an diesem Ort als „Bewohnung“ oder „Aneignung“ zu qualifizieren. Entscheidend

194 aber für den Ortsbegriff ist der unverzichtbare Aspekt von *agency*, wie passiv und fremdbestimmt auch immer ...). Das Raumbild, so wie es hier konstruiert wird, setzt sich aus den unterschiedlichsten Bestandteilen zusammen, und sein Aufbau orientiert sich sequenziell an der Erschließung des Ortes durch den spatial-hermeneutischen Reporter.

Zunächst wird die stadträumliche Umgebung beschrieben: „die nähere Umgebung“ zeigt sich „mit Zillefiguren bevölkert“ und nicht als „der geeignete Aufenthalt für edle Karosserien“ – gemeint sind jene der Arbeitgeber, die aus Angst um ihre „kostbaren Wagen“ den Weg zum Arbeitsnachweis scheuten, um eine Stelle anzubieten. Dann beschreibt Kracauer die Situierung des Raums im Gebäudekomplex: Die Arbeitsnachweise sind in der Regel in Hinterhäusern und -höfen untergebracht. Sein Beispiel ist der Arbeitsnachweis im dritten Stock eines Hinterhauses, zu dem man sich erst „durch die endlose Geruchszone einer Volksspeiseanstalt durchzuarbeiten“ hat. Zu der räumlichen Deklassierung der Arbeitssuchenden gehört offenbar auch eine Geografie des Olfaktorischen. An solchen Details bewährt sich die teilnehmende Beobachtung des Reporters als Soziografen. Der Rückschluss von den gesellschaftlichen Verhältnissen auf die Räume, in denen sie sich ausdrücken, folgt auf dem Fuße – und bislang ist der zu beschreibende Raum noch gar nicht von innen betreten:

*„Daß er [der Arbeitsnachweis; J.D.] den Eindruck eines an die Hinterfront verstoßenen Speichers macht, hat durchaus seine Richtigkeit. Auch die Arbeitslosen harren an der Hinterfront des gegenwärtigen Produktionsprozesses. Sie scheiden aus ihm als Abfallprodukte aus, sie sind die Reste, die übrig bleiben. Der ihnen angewiesene Raum kann unter den herrschenden Umständen kaum ein anderes Aussehen als das einer Rumpelkammer haben.“* (Kracauer 1990: 186f.)

Die Beschreibung des Innenraums nimmt die soziale Topografie seiner Ausstattung in den Blick: das erhöhte Podest, von dem aus ein Beamter die ausgeschriebenen Stellen bekannt gibt – umdrängt von dichten Scharen von Arbeitssuchenden, die den Verkündigungen lauschen, die „aus der Höhe des Arbeitsgeberreiches auf sie niederträufeln“ (Kracauer 1990: 187). Kracauer registriert das Mobiliar der Arbeitsnachweise und seine massennutzungsrobuste Beschaffenheit, bestehend „aus Tischen und Bänken, solider rechtwinkliger Ware, die einen derben Puff schon verträgt“. Der Innenraum ist also schon in Erwartung von möglicherweise mangelhaft affektmodellierten Benutzern ausgestattet. Kracauer konstatiert diese Beobachtung mit einem Schild an der Wand, das – in den räumlichen Kontext der „elenden Tische und Bänke“ gerückt – ein Beispiel dafür abgibt, was mit der aktiven Konstruktion eines Raumbildes gemeint sein könnte. Der Zusammenhang von Mobiliar und Schildaufschrift wird nicht vorgefunden und abbildlich geschildert, er muss vielmehr zuallererst erfasst und hergestellt werden. Das Schild besagt: „Arbeitslose, hütet und schützt / allgemeines Eigentum“. In seinem Kommentar zu dieser innenräumlichen Konstellation greift Kracauer die expositorischen Bemerkungen zu einem räumlich Unbewussten explizit wieder auf. Er differenziert dabei zwischen subjektiv-gemeintem und objektiv-latentem Bedeutungsgehalt des „Raumbildes“ – als unbewusste Fehlleistung der Raumplaner und -gestalter:

*„Bei dem gering entwickelten Sprachgefühl in Deutschland ist anzunehmen, daß die öffentliche Ermahnung harmlos gemeint ist und wohl auch harmlos aufgefaßt wird. Aber die Worte entwinden sich leicht dem Benutzer, der sie nicht zu benutzen versteht, und verraten: nicht was er sich gedacht hat, sondern was ihm so selbstverständlich ist, daß*

er es gar nicht mehr bedenken muß [...] Gewiß, es heißt: allgemeines Eigentum; für die Erwerbslosen jedoch, deren viele gegenwärtig als Objekt der öffentlichen Wohltätigkeit enden, ist auch das allgemeine Eigentum nicht allgemein genug, um den Privatcharakter einzubüßen. Zum Überfluß sollen sie dieses Eigentum, von dessen regulärem Mitgenuß sie ohne ihre Schuld ausgeschlossen sind, noch hüten und schützen. Wofür der ganze Aufwand an großartigen Vokabeln? Für ein paar elende Tische und Bänke [...] So hütet und schützt die Gesellschaft das Eigentum; sie umgibt es auch dort, wo seine Verteidigung gar nicht nötig wäre, mit sprachlichen Gräben und Wällen. Vermutlich tut sie es absichtslos, und vielleicht merkt kaum ein Betroffener, daß sie es tut. Aber das ist eben das Genie der Sprache: daß sie Aufträge erfüllt, die ihr nicht erteilt worden sind, und Bastionen im Unbewußten errichtet.“ (Kracauer 1990: 188f.)

Vergleichbare Deutungen sind der Wandaufschrift „Milch ist gesund. Aber wie genießt man sie? Nie ohne etwas zu essen“ und einem Buntdruck gewidmet, der zur Unfallverhütung beim Umgang des Arbeiters mit der Maschine auffordert mit dem Satz: „Denk an Deine Mutter“: „Nichts kennzeichnet aber die Beschaffenheit des Raumes mehr, als daß in ihm sogar Unfallbilder zu Ansichtskartengrüßen aus der glücklichen Oberwelt der Tariflöhne werden“ (Kracauer 1990: 192).

Zugegeben: Die spatiale Hermeneutik, die Kracauers Text betreibt, bewährt sich vor allem an sprachlichen Elementen der Raumgestaltung, weniger an den im engeren Sinne architektonischen. Auch das ist ein Befund, will man die Praxis der Raumbeschreibung in „Über Arbeitsnachweise“ als Anwendungsfall lesen, in dem der methodische Gehalt der berühmten, „Raumbild“-Sentenz auf dem Prüfstand steht.

Wenn sie bislang kontextualisiert wurde, dann in der Regel mit dem (berechtigten) Verweis auf andere berühmte programmatische Aussagen von Kracauer wie „Die Wirklichkeit ist eine Konstruktion“ aus den *Angestellten* oder – häufiger noch: „Der Ort, den eine Epoche im Geschichtsprozeß einnimmt, ist aus der Analyse ihrer unscheinbaren Oberflächenäußerungen schlagender zu bestimmen als aus den Urteilen der Epoche über sich selbst“ aus dem *Ornament der Masse* (Kracauer 1977: 50). Hier hingegen sollte abschließend gezeigt werden, dass es sich lohnt, auch den inneren Kontext von Kracauers reportagehafter „Konstruktion eines Raums“ zu berücksichtigen.

### Schluss

Das *close reading* in gewisser Hinsicht modellhafter Texte für das Großstadtfeuilleton bei Kracauer und in der Weimarer Republik ganz im Allgemeinen sollte mindestens die Variationsbreite dieser Art der Stadtlektüre veranschaulichen. Die Texttypen Flanerie, Vedute und in-situ-Soziografie weisen über den hier verhandelten Autor Kracauer hinaus und können zwanglos auch für andere Autoren dieses Zeitraums und solcher Textsorten im Zeitungskontext in Anschlag gebracht werden. Holistisch und kontextsensibel – zwei Eigenschaften, die auch das urbanistische *Reading the City* als Voraussetzung hat<sup>10</sup> – sind diese Texte allein schon aufgrund der Ich-Perspektive, die sie einzunehmen sich nicht scheuen. Als Vorgeschichte auch der wissenschaftlichen Stadtforschung nach 1945 wären sie erst noch zu entdecken.

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# Die Sichtbarkeit der Stadt

## *Moderne und gegenwärtige Konzepte des Stadtfilms*

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### *Der Stadtfilm*

Film und Großstadt sind komplementäre Phänomene. Beide sind im 19. Jahrhundert entstanden, beide sind Resultat der industriellen und technischen Moderne, beide haben Wahrnehmung und Wissen neu geordnet, beide beruhen auf der ständigen Herausforderung, Bewegung und Fragmentierung neu zu ordnen und zu synthetisieren (Engell 1992, 21). Filme sind in Städten entstanden und haben dort ihr Publikum und – das Wichtigste – sie spielen in ihrer überwiegenden Mehrheit auch in Städten. Allerdings ist nicht jeder Film, der Städte als Handlungsort aufführt, ein Stadtfilm. Zu einem solchen wird er nur, wenn die Stadt selbst als Protagonist auftritt, wenn sie nicht nur Kulisse, sondern selbst Handlungsträger oder Ort eigener ästhetischer Produktion wird. Dies ist etwa im Film der 1920er-Jahre in besonderem Maße der Fall. Filme wie *Der Mann mit der Kamera* (Dziga Vertov SU 1929), *Berlin, Sinfonie einer Großstadt* (Walter Ruttmann, D 1927), *Ménilmontant* (Dimitri Kirsanof, F 1924) oder *The crowd* (King Vidor, USA 1928) behandeln

die Stadt als ästhetische Konfiguration, die durch den Film herausgestellt oder gar erst hergestellt wird (Fahle 2000).

Der folgende Text fokussiert vor allem den Unterschied zwischen dem modernen Film, der sich ab den 1960er-Jahren etabliert, und dem nach-postmodernen Film ab den 1990er-Jahren. Eine vorläufige filmhistorische Unterteilung könnte nach meiner Auffassung vier Typen von Stadtfilmen unterscheiden. Die Filme der 1920er-Jahre konstruieren vor allem Experimentalstädte, wenn man neben den genannten, die oft Resultat hervorgehobener filmischer Montage sind, besonders auch an *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, D 1926) denkt. Ab den 1930er-Jahren setzt sich das Studiosystem Hollywoods endgültig durch. Die Städte, die dort inszeniert werden, sind vor allem Studiostädte, das heißt künstliche, auf das jeweilige Genre abgestimmte Orte. Herausragend ist sicherlich der „film noir“ mit seinen Schwarz-Weiß-Nuancierungen und Kontrasten, die Städte zum Ort des Verbrechens und der dunklen Leidenschaften machen (Werner 2000). Die Städte im modernen Film ab den 1960er-Jahren, die im nächsten Kapitel genauer untersucht werden

200 sollen, können als fragmentierte Städte bezeichnet werden. Sie entsprechen am ehesten den modernen Stadterfahrungen als Ort vielfältiger und heterogener Wahrnehmung, als fragmentiertes Ganzes, das nur durch Einzelausschnitte erfahrbar wird. Schließlich entstehen die Informationsstädte der Gegenwart, die besonders in Absetzung von modernen Konzepten genauer analysiert werden sollen. Diese Informationsstädte stellen neue Erfahrungsformen des Sichtbaren bereit, etwa indem sie teilweise an Computerspielästhetik anknüpfen (vgl. Fahlé 2006) und indem sie sich vom Konzept der Lesbarkeit und der semiotischen Dechiffrierung, wie sie sich für die Stadtfilme der 1960er-Jahre, wenigstens als Krisenphänomen, noch darstellen, absetzen.

### *Der moderne Stadtfilm*

Ich möchte vier Inszenierungsformen vorschlagen, die den modernen Film ab etwa den 1960er-Jahren in herausgehobener Weise prägen. Diese Formen sind Fragment, Labyrinth, Dechiffrierung und beliebiger Raum. Sie sind von verschiedenen Autoren wie etwa Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 2002) und vor allem von verschiedenen Künsten, etwa der Literatur (vgl. unter anderen Dos Passos 1966), vorgezeichnet, erhalten im Film aber einen eigenen audiovisuellen Charakter. Diese Konzepte sollen nun kurz erläutert werden.

<sup>1</sup> Ich denke etwa auch an Jürgen Böttchers *Jahrgang 45* (DDR 1965), in dem die Stadt als Fragment und Aufbau inszeniert wird.

Fragment bezeichnet die Filme, die Stadt so inszenieren, dass sie nur noch fragmentarisch wahrgenommen und somit nicht mehr als Einheit begriffen werden kann. Dies ist

vielleicht die paradigmatische Form der Stadtwahrnehmung und von der Stadtsoziologie verschiedentlich thematisiert worden (vgl. Böttner 1989). Dort wird die Stadt als Zusammenstellung des Heterogenen verstanden. Ruttmans *Sinfonie einer Großstadt* oder auch Jean-Luc Godards *A bout de souffle* (F 1959) sind recht eindeutige und populäre Beispiele einer solchen Fragmentierung, wie sie vor allem in dissonanten Montageformen, etwa dem Jump Cut, zum Ausdruck kommen. Die Beispiele ließen sich leicht erweitern.<sup>1</sup>

Die Stadt als Labyrinth – zweites Konzept – begreift die Stadt als einen Raum voller Hinweise und Wegweiser, ohne dass jedoch ein klares Ziel anvisiert werden kann. Zum Stadtlabyrinth gehört das Steckenbleiben, die Unwissenheit darüber, welcher Weg tatsächlich zu einem nicht immer klar definierbaren Ziel führt. Klassisches Beispiel ist Fritz Langs *M – Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (1931), aber auch Jacques Rivettes Paris-Filme sind hier einschlägig. Zu denken wäre auch an Martin Scorseses Inszenierungen von New York.

Das dritte Konzept nenne ich Dechiffrierung. Der Begriff ist lose an Walter Benjamin angelehnt, der die Erfahrungswelten der modernen Stadt prägnant beschrieben hat. Beispielgebend für den Dechiffrierer der Großstadt ist der Flaneur. Er streift durch die Straßen vor allem deshalb, um zu beobachten. Die Wahrnehmungsform des Flaneurs kann als „pointillistische Erfahrung“ (Waldenfels 1990, 251) verstanden werden, die sich von ständigen De- und Rekontextualisierungen leiten lässt. Hier könnte man wieder Godards *A bout de souffle* anführen, etwa die Szene, in der eine Leuchtschrift an einem Gebäude Hinweise für den Gang der Handlung gibt, aber auch *Masculin Féminin* (1966) oder *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (1967), beide ebenfalls von Godard. In letzterem wird die Bebauung von



Paris zum Zeichen kapitalistischer Korruption und Entthemung. Auch Wim Wenders' *Alice in den Städten* (D 1974) oder Eric Rohmers *Lami de mon ami* (F 1987) funktionieren in ähnlicher Weise.

Das letzte Konzept schließlich ist der beliebige Raum, den Deleuze im Anschluss an Marc Augé für den Film herausgestellt hat (Deleuze 1989, 151). Hier werden besonders öffentliche Durchgangsorte thematisiert, etwa Bahnhöfe, Flughäfen, Marktplätze, Hotels oder Cafés, die sich vor allem als flüchtige und sich permanent destabilisierende Räume begreifen lassen, die ohne feste Zuschreibungen von Identität und Geschichte auskommen müssen (Augé 1994).<sup>2</sup> Die besonders modernen Montagetechniken, wie wir sie von Godard oder Bresson kennen, aber auch die leeren Straßen Antonionis aus *L'eclisse* (1962) wären Beispiele für die von Filmen inszenierten beliebigen Stadträume, die mit den von senso-motorischen Handlungen entkoppelten Aktionsräumen des modernen Films insgesamt in Verbindung stehen. Herausgehobenes Beispiel zuletzt ist *Terminal* (2004) von Steven Spielberg, der den Flughafen als Nicht-Ort entfaltet, in dem sich Personen aufhalten, die ihrerseits keine rechte Identität aufweisen, allerdings den Flughafen andererseits zu einem Ort der Identitätssuche hervorheben.

Die hier aufgeführten modernen Stadtkonzepte lehnen sich an die Idee einer Lesbarkeit der Stadt an, thematisieren aber zugleich deren Krise. Der Stadtraum legt zwar Fahrten, aber er verweigert sich doch der Lesbarkeit, die in Umherstreifen und Beliebigkeit mündet. Meine These ist, dass sich die Stadtinszenierung vom modernen Ansatz der Lesbarkeit zur Entfaltung von Sichtbarkeit wandelt. Städte sind dann nicht mehr nur Räume, die entziffert werden wollen, sondern selbst in Szene gesetzt werden und eine

eigene Visualität entfalten, die sich noch diesseits von semiotischer Lesbarkeit entwickelt. Räume werden dabei in ihrer Entstehung und Verdichtung gezeigt, mithin auch als variable und permeable Schichten. Neben ihrer Funktion, lesbare topografische Größen darzustellen (Straßen, Parks, Häuser, Zimmer, Gegenden, Favelas etc.), werden sie in ihrer instabilen Konstruktion thematisiert und gleichsam von innen heraus neu erschaffen. Da sich der städtische Raum nicht mehr entfaltet, sondern vielmehr in sich zusammenzieht, möchte ich die damit verbundenen filmischen Konstruktionen als Ästhetik der Dichte bezeichnen.

<sup>2</sup> Der These Augés, dass die Transitionsorte Bahnhof, Flughafen, Hotels oder Cafés Orte ohne Identität seien, ist allerdings auf der Tagung, die dem Sammelband zu Grund liegt, mit Recht widersprochen worden.

### *Ästhetik der Dichte oder der Film ab den 1990er-Jahren*

Denken wir an den Beginn von *L.A. Crash* (Paul Haggis, USA 2004): Aus dem nur von einigen verschwommenen Lichtern leicht erhelltem Dunkel heraus spricht der Polizist Graham: „Es ist das Gefühl der Berührung. In jeder normalen Stadt berührt man einander, man rempelt sich an. In L. A. berührt dich niemand. Alles hinter Metall und Glas. Wir vermissen die Berührung so sehr, dass wir erst kollidieren müssen, um etwas zu fühlen.“ Kollision als das unvorhersehbare und fatale Zusammentreffen auf einem Raum, der eigentlich nur für einen und nicht für zwei oder mehrere Platz bietet, beschreibt die extreme Form der Ästhetik der Dichte, die ich im Folgenden – analog zur numerischen Analogie der oben genannten klassischen Konzepte – ebenfalls in vier Punkte aufspalten möchte. Diese

202 vier Konzepte nenne ich Simultanraum, Kontinenzraum, Affektraum und Kontraktionsraum.<sup>3</sup> Kennzeichnend sind die narrativ-experimentellen Verschränkungen verschiedener Erzählebenen, die Episodenstruktur, die Neukonfigurationen des chronologisch-narrativen Schemas sowie insbesondere eine neue Raumästhetik, die an die dichten Räume des Computerspiels erinnern. Betrachten wir die Konzepte genauer.

3 Diese vier Konzepte lassen sich sicherlich erweitern. In einer Diskussion zum Thema kam u. a. der Vorschlag des Steuerungsraums, der schon direkt auf das Computerspiel verweist.

Erstens: Simultanraum. Eigentlich dient der Begriff des Simultanen zur Beschreibung temporaler Verhältnisse. Selten gerät dabei das Räumliche in den Blick. Das ist nachvollziehbar, kehrt sich der Simultanraum schließlich gegen eine Wesensbestimmung des Raums, die Georg Simmel getroffen hat:

*„Wie es nur einen einzigen allgemeinen Raum gibt, von dem alle einzelnen Räume Stücke sind, so hat jeder Raumteil eine Art von Einzigartigkeit, für die es kaum eine Analogie gibt. Einen bestimmt lokalisierten Raumteil in der Mehrzahl zu denken, ist ein völliger Widersinn“* (Simmel 1986, 223).

Die Einzigartigkeit des Raumteils ist eine Grundbestimmung des Raumdenkens. Ein Simultanraum würde jedoch die Einzigartigkeit jedes Raumteils aufheben und es gleichsam vielfältig verfügbar machen. Wenn dies geschieht, greift die Filmtheorie gerne zum Begriff der Zeit. Der Raum ist dann verzeitlicht und kann deshalb gleichsam mehrmals besetzt werden. Dabei geht aber der Blick auf die physische

Veränderung des Raums verloren. Die Frage, wie ein Raum von seinen Bedingungen und seiner medialen Beschaffenheit abhängt, wie er als Gestalt erst sichtbar wird, kann mit der Beschränkung auf unterschiedliche Zeitformen nur unzulänglich beschrieben werden, denn diese schreibt dem Raum einfach unterschiedliche temporale Modi zu und ordnet ihn der Zeit unter. Der Raum als wandelbare Größe kommt so nicht in den Blick. Besonders gut sichtbar wird diese Konfiguration des Raums etwa, wenn er wiederholend dargestellt wird. So ist das zum Beispiel in *Lola rennt* (Tom Tykwer, D 1999) zu beobachten, wenn der gleiche Platz drei Mal von Lola durchrannt wird. Gerade die scheinbar neutrale Durchquerung zeigt die Abhängigkeit des Raums von seiner figurativen Anordnung. Es ist eben entscheidend, ob Lola den Platz einmal gerade und einmal quer entlang der Quadersteine läuft. Ein besonders schönes Beispiel findet sich auch in Episode 2 von *Lola rennt*, wenn Lola Manni fast erreicht hat, bevor dieser den Supermarkt Bolle überfallen will. Der Raum wird vervielfältigt, der gleiche Raum aus zwei Perspektiven sichtbar. Das allein ist noch nicht das Entscheidende, sondern der Übergang, der Moment des Eindringens von Lola in den zunächst anderen Raum, weil erst dadurch der Simultanraum produziert wird. Zwei getrennte Räume werden zu einem, der aber in sich noch einmal in zwei Perspektiven aufgespaltet wird. In *City of God* (Fernando Meirelles, Brasilien 2002) sind es immer wieder dieselben Gassen, in denen die Protagonisten auftauchen. Auch ist die Wandlung des Appartements, in dem der Drogenhandel sein Zentrum hat, hier einzuordnen. Die Veränderung des Raums wird von einem Punkt im Film über drei Rückblenden gezeigt, die zwar narrativ gesehen auf unterschiedliche temporale Schichten verweisen,

visuell aber den gleichen Raum in verschiedenen, kaum unterscheidbaren Varianten zeigt. In *Chungking Express* (Wong Kar Wai, China 1996) ist dies vielleicht am radikalsten durchgeführt: Die Passage, in der nahezu der gesamte Film spielt, ist zeitweise ein einziges verschwimmendes Raumknäuel, das immer wieder neu aus den Bildordnungen hervortaucht.

Zweitens: Kontingenzraum. Diese Kategorie dürfte am ehesten einleuchten und bedarf weniger Erläuterung. Das Nicht-Vorhersehbare ist die offensichtlichste Konsequenz der narrativen Umordnungen, die diese Filme vornehmen. Voraussetzung für Kontingenz ist zudem die Begegnung mit dem Fremden oder die Erwartung des Nicht-Erwartbaren. Auch dies ist normalerweise eine temporale Kategorie, die aber nun im Rahmen des Stadtraums eine entscheidende räumliche Dimension erhält. Denn Kontingenz heißt nun nicht einfach nur grundsätzlich zeit- und ereignisoffen, sondern es bezieht dies vor allem auf räumliche Nähe. Nur weil man sich in der Nähe des anderen aufhält, ist Kontingenz überhaupt denkbar. Die paradoxen Situationen, die in *L.A. Crash* vorgeführt werden – etwa der rassistisch-sexistische Polizist, der die von ihm gedemütigte Frau aus dem brennenden Auto retten muss, oder umgekehrt: der gute, politisch korrekte Polizist, der aus Angst einen unschuldigen Schwarzen erschießt – diese paradoxen Situationen sind dem räumlichen Zusammentreffen geschuldet, die nur die Stadt mit ihrer speziellen Einheit des Heterogenen produziert (hier besonders akzentuiert durch die Enge des Autoinneren). Auch in *Chungking Express* und *City of God* ist jede Handlung durch die Enge der Passage bzw. der Favela provoziert, zu denen es praktisch kein außen gibt. Für die Favela gilt: Wer den Falschen zur falschen Zeit anrempelt, bezahlt dies mit dem Leben.

Drittens: Affektraum. Unter Affekt verstehe ich hier nicht das Verhältnis von Bild und Rezipient, wie es in den meisten Theorien zum Affekt formuliert wird. Es geht also nicht um die emotionale Steuerung des Zuschauers, die der Film mit seinen Mitteln zu produzieren imstande ist. Unter Affektraum möchte ich die Produktion eines bestimmten Bildraums verstehen, der tendenziell die Raumkoordinaten aufgibt und eine Visualität entwirft, die sich zwischen den Bildern abspielt, die Bilder – und ihre Raumstellen – so weit verdichtet, dass diese selbst verschwinden. Es handelt sich dabei also vor allem um Bilder, die sich gegenseitig affizieren – vielleicht ähnlich wie das im Musikclip oft eingesetzt wird. Es ist so, als würden sich nicht nur die Räume emotional aufladen, sondern auch die Bilder, was zu entsprechenden Verdichtungen führt. In der Inszenierung des Raums von *Chungking Express* wird das zum Beispiel sehr offensichtlich. Ein Bild ist dabei durchsetzt von anderen Bildern – gemeinsam produzieren sie einen offenen Raum des Sichtbaren, einen multiplen und variablen Raum. Die Grenzen des Bildes, seine Kadrierungen, werden dabei gleichsam durchstoßen und auftransversale Bewegungen durch die einzelnen Rahmungen hindurch geöffnet. In *L.A. Crash* und *Short Cuts* (Robert Altman, USA 1993) verschwinden die Städte öfter mal im nächtlichen Lichtermeer, einem pixelartigen Panorama, das die Objekte der Stadtwelt (also Häuser und Autos) zu einem visuellen Feld zusammenzieht. Die Gassen, Höfe und Appartements der Favela in *City of God* sind einfach zu eng – die zumeist tödlichen Ereignisse drängen sich dort zusammen. Immer sind zu viele Personen in einem Zimmer oder auf der Straße, so, als müsse man sich zwanghaft aus nächster Nähe erschießen, um ein bisschen Platz zu schaffen. Genau diese Enge der Favela, die in einigen wenigen Szenen mit der Weite der Außenwelt, vor

204 allem des Strandes, kontrastiert wird, erfordert eine schnelle Reaktion nicht nur der Bewohner, sondern auch der Bilder, die im Augenblick ihres Auftauchens auch schon wieder verschwunden sind. Der Affektraum koppelt also die physische Dichte des Stadtraums mit der Ereignisdichte der Bilder.

4 In diesem Rahmen kann man andere Filme heranziehen, die eine Ästhetik der Dichte produzieren und besonders mit der Konstruktion eines informatischen Raums zu tun haben. Der Staatsfeind Nr. 1 (Tony Scott, 1998) ist dafür ein Beispiel, der den Stadtraum in überwachende Informationseinheiten auflöst. Die narrativen Konsequenzen aus dieser Konstruktion zieht der Film allerdings nicht und bleibt brav den Ideen der Überlegenheit des einzelnen Individuums und der linearen Erzählstruktur verpflichtet.

Der Affektraum hat allerdings noch eine weitere Dimension. Alle Filme sind von Bildern anderer Medien durchsetzt. Comics in *Lola rennt*, ganz obsessiv Fernsehbilder in *Short Cuts*, Leuchtreklame in *Chungking Express*, Fotografie in *City of God*. Die Filmbilder stehen also in einem Verhältnis zu diesen anderen Bildern, was jeweils im Einzelnen diskutiert werden müsste. Werden sie von diesen Bildern hervorgebracht, sind sie abhängig von ihnen, stehen sie zu ihnen in Kontrast? – das wären entscheidende Fragen, die hier nicht beantwortet werden können, aber eines wenigstens deutlich machen. Die Filme öffnen selbst einen transmedialen Raum, in dem die Filmbilder nicht mehr dominieren, sondern Bilder unter anderen sind. Die Stadt ist hier ein globaler, multimedialer Informationsraum, in dem sich verschiedene Bilderordnungen kreuzen und affizieren.<sup>4</sup> Genau deshalb, wegen dieser Abstrahierung von gewohnten Raumordnungen, sind das physische Zusammentreffen, die physische Dichte so explosiv. Nichts berührt sich, alles kollidiert.

Damit komme ich – viertens – zum Kontraktionsraum, der vorwiegend mit Auf- und Entladung zu tun hat. Alle angesprochenen Filme haben es mit einer ständigen Abfolge dieser Auf- und Entladungszustände zu tun, die sich von gewohnter Narration unterscheidet. Es geht weniger darum, im Laufe des filmischen Ablaufs zwei, drei Höhepunkte zu inszenieren, auf die der Rest der Handlung ausgerichtet ist, sondern die Filme zielen auf eine Streuung von Höhepunkten über das gesamte Geschehen hinweg. Ruhepausen sind kaum vorgesehen. Der Stadtraum ist dabei wie eine Art dezentrales Kraft- oder Energiefeld zu begreifen, wobei sich die Energie bei Ansammlung und Stauung entlädt und gleichsam an einen anderen Ort weiter transportiert wird, jedenfalls nicht verloren geht. Der abrupte Ausbruch mit nur kurzer Vorbereitung ist dabei ein über den jeweiligen Film häufig gestreuter Topos. Ein Anrempelein von Lola kann eine ganze Lebensgeschichte beeinflussen, wie in den fotografischen Fortsetzungsfolgen jeweils gezeigt; ein falscher Blick kann viele Menschen das Leben kosten, wie in *City of God*, wenn Mané Galinha Zé Pequeno nur einen Moment zu lange ansieht. Oder eine irrtümliche Assoziation in einem engen Polizeiwagen kann in der ethnisch aufgeladenen Atmosphäre von Los Angeles zum tödlichen Schuss führen, wie in *L.A. Crash*. Auch hier ist das permanente Zusammenziehen von Situationen ein Resultat des Zusammentreffens und der räumlichen Verdichtung.

Diese vier Konzepte, Simultan-, Kontingenz-, Affekt- und Kontraktionsraum, ergänzen und dominieren also die Filme der 1990er-Jahre und legen erste Spuren einer Ästhetik der Dichte. Sie schließen dabei durchaus an soziologische Bestimmungen der Stadt an, wenn man etwa Armin Nassehi folgt, der die Stadt als Zusammentreffen des Verschiedenen und Einheit

der Differenz betrachtet, „(...) denn Städte sind letztendlich nichts anderes als soziale Operationen, deren Verbindendes allein in der räumlichen Begrenzung und Verdichtung an einem Ort zu sehen ist“ (Nassehi 2002, 215). Dennoch treiben die Filme der Gegenwart diese Definition weiter, sind doch die Verdichtungsmerkmale der Stadt zunächst noch im Einklang mit der Bestimmung des Raums nach Simmel zu begreifen, in der – trotz Verdichtung – jedes Raumteil einzigartig ist. Der Film arbeitet also an einer höheren Verdichtungsstufe, indem er das Bild in mehrere sich überlagernde Sichtbarkeitsschichten auflöst. Diese neuen Räume (wenn man sie noch als Raum begreifen möchte) sind nicht mehr durch sich überlagernde Objekt- oder Zeichenstrukturen zu verstehen, wie sie die moderne Großstadt vielfach herstellt (etwa Leuchtschriften auf Häuserfassaden), sondern als Grenzgang und Virtualisierung des Raums selbst. Filme beschreiben damit nicht nur konkrete Stadträume (New York, Rio de Janeiro, Berlin, Los Angeles), sondern auch ihre Wahrnehmung im Zeitalter sich überkreuzender medialer Steuerungselemente.

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# Reading in Fragments

## *Toward an Urban Topology of Episodic Films*

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At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, it was possible to observe the rise of a series of city films with an episodic structure, interweaving different storylines and a multitude of characters, while at the same time evoking a wide variety of urban spaces. Episodic films like *NEW YORK STORIES* (Martin Scorsese/Francis Ford Coppola/Woody Allen, 1989), *NIGHT ON EARTH* (Jim Jarmusch, 1991), *SHORT CUTS* (Robert Altman, 1993), and *MAGNOLIA* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999) reveal a complex urban environment that is characterized by a multiple layering of spaces. They reveal expansive urban worlds, where material, social, and symbolic spatial orders are overlapping, forming a dense spatial structure while at the same time giving rise to a new concept of space – a fragmented, ephemeral space of transition. In their disjointed, multi-layered gaze upon the city that continually shifts from one character to the other, from one place to the next, episodic films imply a spatial dynamic that is oscillating between moving both inwards, in order to generate singular spatial fragments that fully contain the city's complexity, and moving outwards, in order to

stretch and to expand the city's inherent boundaries. Any attempt to decipher the way in which episodic films read the city does, then, have to start from these assumptions. It has to take into account that episodic films not merely produce a multi-layered spatiality, but moreover develop a two-sided spatial logic of compression and expansion, of densification and diversification of the city's spatial relations.

If we look at the history of film, and more specifically, at the history of the cinematic city, we can see that the idea of 'reading in fragments,' which is deeply incorporated in this episodic logic, has always formed a significant part of creating and redefining the spatiality of the cinematic city. Already the early cinematic visions of the city show a distinct tendency to isolate and to dissect the different elements of the city, multiplying and serializing urban fragments like rushing trains, crossing cars, and whirling masses on the streets in order to recompose them into a cinematic cross-section of the city – a facet that is most remarkably expressed in the early city symphonies of the 1920s, like *BERLIN. SYMPHONY OF A GREAT CITY* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927),

208 SKYSCRAPER SYMPHONY (Robert Florey, 1929), or THE MAN WITH THE MOVIE CAMERA (Dziga Vertov, 1929). It is important to note, however, that the fragmentation of the urban elements in these early city symphonies eventually aims at a symphonic (re-)construction of the city, orchestrating and synchronizing the daily rhythms of the city and its inhabitants according to the rhythms of cinematic movement and montage.

1 It is crucial to note that episodic narration in film is not an invention of the 1980s and 1990s. On the contrary, as early as the 1920s and 1930s we can observe initial attempts to apply episodic structures in film, like for example in *DIE ABENTEUER EINES ZEHNMARKSCHEINS* (Berthold Viertel, 1926) and *GRAND HOTEL* (Edmund Goulding, 1932), while the adaptation of *LA RONDE* (Max Ophüls, 1950) is widely acknowledged to have marked a crucial turning point in episodic narration.

While in the early city symphonies, the idea of reading in fragments only forms a transitional, ephemeral stage within the overarching attempt to capture a city on screen, and furthermore, to produce a specific cinematic vision of the city, it takes on a very different significance in the context of European post-war cinema. Especially in the city films of Italian neorealism, and most notably in Roberto Rossellini's *PAISÀ* (1946), which forms the first part of his post-war trilogy, the idea of reading in fragments changes in its nature. Here, the episodic, the fragmentary, and the ephemeral no longer assume a provisional, temporary state within the overarching question of creating a cinematic city. Instead, they evolve into the focal point of the entire spatial configuration. In other words, the episodic fragmentation of the urban world in Italian neorealism is no longer being reintegrated into a cinematic collage of

the city. On the contrary, the spatial configuration in these films always remains fragmentary; it remains fragmentary through the alienation and isolation of urban elements that have lost their connections and thus cannot be traced back to the urban 'whole' anymore. As a consequence of this logic of fragmentation, the idea of reading in fragments in Italian neorealism is extended to the entire spatial configuration, uncovering an irretrievably broken and fractured post-war world.

To what extent, then, do the episodic films of the 1980s and 1990s change and further develop this idea of reading in fragments? In my article I will argue that episodic films provide the opportunity to reconsider and to reread the cinematic city at the turn of the century. They incorporate a two-sided spatial dynamic that reflects as much the history of the cinematic city as it anticipates and prefigures the development of the cinematic city in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> In their constant concatenation and overlay of spaces, characters, and storylines, episodic films foster a significant shift in the spatial configuration of the cinematic city as they carry the relationality of space to extremes. In this process, episodic films link their configurations of an overly inter-related world to inwardly disintegrated urban environments that are only graspable and readable through their fragments. Thus in the view of episodic films, the idea of reading in fragments is again being modified and takes on a different quality. The urban fragments are neither rearranged into a cinematic collage of the city, nor do they remain fragmentary, but rather reveal a complex layering of spaces. The urban fragments of episodic films condense and intensify the spatial dynamics of the city, allowing us to observe the urban developments of their time as if seen through a magnifying glass.



As a matter of fact, these brief observations on the transformation of the idea of reading in fragments in view of the cinematic city are in themselves only fragmentary and necessarily incomplete. Nevertheless they allow us to re-evaluate the emergence of episodic films in the 1980s and 1990s, which the film critic Rudolf Worschech once has described as being *the city film* genre of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Worschech 1999: 49). As episodic structures increasingly dominate the city film genre, they inevitably become a decisive factor within the overarching question of how to read the city at this particular moment in the history of the cinematic city. As a consequence, if we want to address the question of reading the city, we have to engage with the specific spatiality of episodic films. We have to take a closer look at those complex spatial arrangements that are engendered by the episodic logic of concatenation and overlay of spaces, characters, and storylines. And we have to address the theoretical implications that arise from the emergence of this fragmented, ephemeral space of transition in episodic films.

In the following and as a precondition for my discussion of the notion of 'reading in fragments' in episodic films, I will start by recalling two crucial aspects that we have to keep in mind if we want to explore the spaces of the cinematic city. In a first step, I will discuss the highly entangled relationship between the cinema and the city in order to define my particular perspective of 'looking at the city.' In a second step, and closely interlinked with that, I will briefly sketch out the specific way in which the cinema is able to read the city. The episodic films of the 1980s and 1990s in particular, as I will argue, engender the dynamics of a genuine *cinematic reading* of the city, that is, a reading in transition, which is continually shifting between a reading through passage and a reading through transformation.

## Cinema and the City: An Introduction 209

If we try to disentangle the relationship between the cinema and the city, we have to define, above all, our conceptual level for looking at the city. In the last decades, the question of the interlinkages between the cinema and the city has been widely addressed – not only within recent publications on the cinematic city (Brooker 2002; Clarke 1997; Mennel 2008; Schenk 1999; Shiel/Fitzmaurice 2001a; 2003; Vogt 2001), but also in films that explicitly reflect on their own relationship toward the city. Scholars in the field of film and urban studies unanimously agree that there exists, without any question, a high affinity between the cinema and the city, which is not least based on their mutual influence within the process of modernization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this context, Mark Shiel notes in his introduction to *Cinema and the City*:

*This book is concerned with the relationship between the most important cultural form – cinema – and the most important form of social organization – the city – in the twentieth century (and, for the time being at least, the twenty-first century), as this relationship operates and is experienced in society as a lived social reality (Shiel 2001b: 1).*

Shiel invokes two concepts that are crucial in disentangling the complex relationship between the cinema and the city: Firstly, movement and mobility, and secondly, space and spatial representations. The correspondences between the cinema and the city are articulated, according to Shiel, in the "correlation between the mobility and visual and aural sensations of the city and the mobility and visual and aural sensations of the cinema" (Shiel 2001b: 1). Second, and even more crucially, Shiel defines film as a medium

210 that is much more based on spatiality than on textuality, which leads him to draw the far-reaching conclusion “that spatiality is what makes it different and in this context, gives it a special potential to illuminate the lived spaces of the city and urban societies” (Shiel 2001b: 6).

2 Original quotation: „Trotz vieler Bemühungen existiert kein Genre des Stadtfilms. [...] Zu vielgesichtig sind die Geschichten, zu unterschiedlich ihre Erzählweisen, als daß sie sich in einem Genre konventionalisieren lassen.“

3 Original quotation: „Das aber ist nichts anderes als das Kino, in dem auf *sichtbare* Weise immer wieder *unsichtbare Städte* gebaut werden. Meist sind sie den realen ähnlich, aber nie mit ihnen identisch.“

This focus on the spatiality of the cinematic city is crucial, because it offers a productive perspective of looking at the city; that is, looking through the eyes of space and spatial relations. Yet what does it mean – given this intrinsic relationship between the cinema and the city – to speak of a genuine *city film* and what conceptual levels does this term imply? Following Knut Hickethier, there exists “in spite of all the efforts [...] no such thing as a city film genre. [...] The storylines are too manifold, the narrative styles too diverse, which makes it impossible to conventionalize them into a genre” (Hickethier 1987: 148).<sup>2</sup> Opposing this general rejection of the city film as a genre, Guntram Vogt suggests three different ways of conceptualizing the relationship between the cinema and the city. In his influential book on the history of the cinematic city *Die Stadt im Film* (2001) he introduces, on a first level, the term ‘city in film,’ where the city serves as a mere backdrop for the narration and is thus deeply incorporated within the idea of *narrative space*. The second level, by contrast,

corresponds with the term ‘city film,’ which according to Vogt mainly encompasses documentary films that display the city as an architectural ensemble, thus emphasizing the impact of *architectural space* within the city film genre. On a third level, and most crucially, Vogt defines the concept of the ‘cinematic city,’ which refers to the specific spatiality of cinema, that is, to the *cinematic space* of the city that not only engenders the idea of cinematic movement and montage, but beyond that continually fosters technical and aesthetic innovations (Vogt 2001: 27ff.). And it is exactly this specific spatiality of the cinematic city that Vogt addresses as he ends his introduction with the words:

*Yet this is nothing else than cinema, where again and again invisible cities are constructed in a visible way. Often they resemble the real cities, but they are never identical (Vogt 2001: 60).<sup>3</sup>*

The fundamental difference between the ‘real’ city and the cinematic city that is addressed in this statement is crucial, for it defines the relationship between the cinema and the city as one which is highly complex and complicated. It is a relationship characterized by entanglement and mutual influence, which clearly transcends and counteracts the idea of an immediate or direct ‘depiction’ of the city in cinema.

Still, the idea of a mutual entanglement between the cinema and the city can be even further developed. In his influential experimental film *LOS ANGELES PLAYS ITSELF* (2003), the filmmaker Thom Andersen offers a critique of the numerous attempts to depict ‘his city,’ Los Angeles. *LOS ANGELES PLAYS ITSELF* is a cinematic essay and moreover, a cinematic cross-section of ninety years of this particular cinematic city, which first and foremost addresses the question of the

relationship between the city and the cinema, trying to disentangle, step by step, the preconditions of filming a cinematic city. On a most basic level, Andersen addresses the *city as background*, that is, a notion of the city as ‘just being there,’ providing the mere background for the narration. Going further, Andersen assembles and discusses those films where the city does not only serve as a mere backdrop, but rather achieves its own impact on the spatial configuration of the city. In their specific sense of place, the films that Andersen subsumes under the category of the *city as object* produce a spatiality that gradually transforms the urban spaces of the city, capturing their atmosphere on screen and thus accumulating a spatial memory of the city. Thirdly and finally, Andersen introduces the category of the *city as subject*, that is, the most advanced and complex category within this triad of the cinematic city, which is mainly defined by its potential to develop its own consciousness and its own form of cinematic critique of the city. It is most important to note, however, that Andersen defines these levels of reading the city as three different categories that are only distinguishable on a theoretical level. In most city films these three categories will be essentially overlapping, as we shall see in the case of episodic films of the 1980s and 1990s. They all create a certain sense of place that is defined by a multitude of interconnections between characters, spaces, and storylines, which at the same time problematize this overly interconnected urban world and formulate a cinematic critique of the city.

In his overall attempt to classify the ever-circulating images of Los Angeles and to create a cinematic cross-section of the cinematic history of his city, Andersen sharpens our view on the historical complexity of the relationship between the cinema and the city. His cinematic

observations reveal that if we deal with the question of the cinematic city, we have to take into account a complex layering of spaces – a layering of spaces that not only refers to the spatial arrangement of one particular film, but that has the potential to evoke the cinematic past of a specific city, of a specific neighborhood, or even of a specific building. Every new attempt to capture a city on screen necessarily re-writes and re-arranges the cinematic history of this city. As a consequence, the historical dimension of the cinematic city always resonates in any city film, while at the same time clearly transcending and counteracting the notion of an ‘unmediated’ spatial representation. Reading the cinematic city thus calls as much for a reformulation of the spatiality of cinema as it does for an awareness of the historical dimension of the cinematic city.

### *Reading the City: From Passage to Transformation*

The reformulation of the notion of reading the city that I will present in my article is developed, to a great extent, with regard to the specific spatiality of cinema. Yet at the same time my remarks on the transformations of urban space are by no means exclusively restricted to the spaces of cinema, for they provide, above all, the opportunity to conceive of space from a different angle. They provide the opportunity to rethink space within a conceptual framework that transcends the notion of a fixed, immovable, and confined space that is still – and in spite of its fundamental questioning in the wake of the Spatial Turn of the 1980s and 1990s (Davis 1990; Harvey 1990; Lefèbvre 1991 [1974]; Scott/Soja 1996; Soja 1989; 1996) – persistent in the discourse of the cinematic city. In the context of my article,

212 however, reading the city becomes a question of transitional movement and passage on the one hand, and spatial transformation and topological overlay on the other. Through this a transformative concept of space is introduced, one that is able to grasp the quintessentially moving, overlapping spaces of the cinematic city.

In his *Passagenwerk* (1927–40), Walter Benjamin delineates his notion of the readability of the world in relation to the dialectical image that “emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast — as an image flashing up in the now of its recognizability” (Benjamin 2002 [1927–40]: 473, N9,7). This idea is crucial, because it allows us to conceptualize the possibility of reading the world, as Georges Didi-Huberman has pointed out with close reference to Benjamin, as being only and exclusively thinkable through the *passage* of an image (Didi-Huberman 2007: 13–15). In the context of cinema these ideas become especially decisive, since cinematic space reveals itself most clearly through the transitory, or more precisely, through a two-sided process that is shifting between a spatial fixation or framing on the one hand and an expanding spatial dynamic on the other, which is constantly crossing and transgressing the inherent boundaries of the image (Frahm 2010: 167–178). And it is exactly this flexible, transformative thinking of space, which points to one of the most essential qualities of cinema: its ability to create a space in between the images, and moreover, the ability to reflect this spatial in-betweenness as a constitutive factor within the process of creating and constructing a cinematic space.

In early film theory in particular, this potential for cinematic movement has been widely addressed; moreover, the manifold movements in front of the camera, the movements of the camera itself and the movements of montage

evolved into a defining moment of the mediality of cinema in the 1920s and 1930s (Engell 2003: 29–32; Fahle 2000). In the context of the cinematic city, however, the idea of reading the city through passage and movement only constitutes one side of the coin within the overarching process of constructing a cinematic city. Because at the same time cinema has the potential to transform and to modify the spaces in a way that exceeds the question of movement and montage. Especially in the case of the cinematic city, the cityscape often appears as a complex “refraction of a refraction’ of reality,” turning the lived spaces of the city into “self-conscious, highly-mediated acts” (Massood 2003: 6f.) as Paula J. Massood has so convincingly shown in her book *Black City Cinema*. Far from merely depicting a particular city, most city films transform and rearrange their city spaces to such an extent that they develop a different spatiality. Following this thought, I will unfold the possibility of reading urban spaces and the spaces of cinema through the *idea of transformation*. Further, I will delineate the conceptual consequences that arise from this shift of perspective, that is, the shift from the question of representation that is predominantly addressed in the discourse of the cinematic city to those processes of spatial transformation that are produced by transforming the city into what I will call ‘cinematic topologies.’

Yet what does the concept of cinematic topology entail and which conceptual consequences arise from this shift of perspective toward the cinematic transformation of the city? At its most basic level, topology is defined as a complex spatial structure, where the spatial properties remain stable under continuous deformations and transformations of objects. According to Joachim Huber, topology was initially developed “even in its most rudimentary form [...] in

order to describe complex, non-representable 'things' by means of a spatial vocabulary" (Huber 2002:35).<sup>4</sup> Topology is a way of describing spaces through the idea of transformation; it is a way of conceiving space as a highly flexible, dynamic structure that is only defined and redefined by its different spatial relations. As a result, topology introduces a way of thinking space through a set of modal, qualitative relations – a facet that one of the founders of mathematical topology, Johann Benedict Listing, in his *Vorstudien zur Topologie* (1847) pointed out as the most basic property of topological space:

*By topology we mean the doctrine of the modal features of objects, or of the laws of connection, of relative position and of succession of points, lines, surfaces, bodies and their parts, or aggregates in space, always without regard to matters of measure or quantity (Listing 1847: 814).<sup>5</sup>*

Listing thus aims for a qualitative way of thinking about spatial positions, which tries to grasp the full complexity of non-metric relations as a "degree of order and coherence of the space of all 'complexions'"<sup>6</sup> (Heuser-Keßler 1994: 8). In its integration of *n*-dimensional spaces and manifolds, topology provides the opportunity of thinking about space as a complex spatial structure, where different topologies are superimposed onto each other creating a dense spatiality.

In developing my view on the episodic films of the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I will further contour this topological, transformative reading of the city in terms of a transgressing spatiality that continually connects and transforms the urban fragments, combining and superimposing them, while at the same time opening up space to the paradoxical and the improbable. The episodic films of this period all coincide, as I will

argue, in their overall attempt to create a highly interrelated urban world. With that, they prefigure the development of the cinematic city in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which further accentuates and stresses the interconnectedness of spaces in the face of an ever-expanding urban world – one could think of *TRAFFIC* (Steven Soderbergh, 2000), *21 GRAMS* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003), *L.A. CRASH* (Paul Haggis, 2004), and above all *BABEL* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006). Yet at the same time, the episodic films of the 1980s and 1990s show a high awareness of the historical dimension of the cinematic city, which is reflected in the way in which they conceive of the urban fragment. In order to advance this argument, I will distinguish three different phases of episodic films in the 1980s and 1990s that all develop distinct and even contradictory notions of reading in fragments. In their different concepts of the urban fragment, there always resonates, or so it seems, something of the history of the cinematic city. More precisely, they connect their notion of the urban fragment with different and overlapping concepts of the cinematic city.

4 Original quotation: „[D]ie Topologie wurde auch historisch in ihrer rudimentärsten Form immer gebraucht und entwickelt, um komplexe, nicht-repräsentierbare ‚Dinge‘ räumlich zu beschreiben.“

5 Translated in: Breitenberger 1999: 916.

6 Original quotation: „[...] der Ordnungs- und Zusammenhangsgrad des Raumes aller ‚Complexionen.‘“

The first reading entitled 'reading the city's fragmentation' addresses both the emergence of a fragmented, transitional space in episodic films like *NEW YORK STORIES* (1989) and *NIGHT ON EARTH* (1991) and its conceptual

214 proximity to the urban discourse of the ‘disintegration of the city’ that widely characterizes the 1990s. In these films the urban fragments are unconnected and distributed to singular episodes that carry their own set of spaces and characters. Moreover, they are transferred to a series of different self-contained microcosms that coexist within the city without intersecting or overlapping. As a result, what we find in these films is, above all, a significant *concatenation of fragments*, which are composed and rearranged into a cinematic cross-section of the city, where the boundaries between these urban fragments are still stable and seemingly unaffected by the occasional overlay of storylines, characters, and spaces.

7 For a recent discussion of the notion of the ‘complex city’ and its conceptual framework see Eckardt 2009, especially: “Konturen einer komplexen Stadtforschung,” pp. 187–231.

8 Early developments of episodic narration have been discussed in Schreitmüller 1983, while the most detailed and comprehensive analysis of episodic films and episodic narration is to be found in Treber 2005.

9 In this context, the Berlin films of the 1990s play an important role in addressing the topos of the ‘fragmentation of the city,’ see for example *DIE ARCHITEKTEN* (Peter Kahane, 1990), *DAS LEBEN IST EINE BAUSTELLE* (Wolfgang Becker, 1997), and *NACHTGESTALTEN* (Andreas Dresen, 1999); Guntram Vogt notes: „Im Unterschied zu frühen literarischen Stadtkonstruktionen [...] und zum späten Film etwa bei Wenders [...], bleiben die Filmfiguren der 90er Jahre (zusammen mit ihren Zuschauern) in meist engen Stadt-Teil-Perspektiven verhaftet, die mit ihren fragmentierenden Konstellationen das Urbane insgesamt vor allem als Bruchstück verschiedener Lebensweisen verstehen. Entsprechend verteilen sich diese Lebensweisen auf eine gewisse Vielzahl von Figuren“ (Vogt 2001: 56).

The first group of episodic films is still based on a strict episodic structure that clearly assigns the different characters, spaces, and storylines to singular, unconnected episodes. In the second

reading, which is entitled ‘reading the city’s relationality,’ I will address a significant shift within the development of episodic narration, which is epitomized by the film *SHORT CUTS* (1993), often referred to as being the first ‘real’ episodic film in film history (Treber 2005: 9f.; Wach 2006: 89). Here the different episodes and urban fragments are not unrelated anymore, but on the contrary, the relations between the spaces, characters, and storylines become the crucial aspect of the entire spatial constellation. *SHORT CUTS* significantly remodels the potential of episodic narration in introducing a series of manifold and complex *interrelations between the fragments*. The episodic narration seizes on the idea of relational space that is solely produced by different relations between objects. Moreover, *SHORT CUTS* reflects on its own (over-)production of relations, which both integrates and disintegrates the urban fragments of the city.

Building upon the first two readings, the third part entitled ‘reading the city’s transformability’ relates to a series of episodic films that emerge toward the end of the 1990s. Films like *MAGNOLIA* (1999) and *TIME CODE* (Mike Figgis, 2000) build on the notion of urban fragmentation and the relationality of space addressed above. Yet at the same time, they introduce a new way of thinking of spatial complexity and overlay. In their constant *overlay of urban fragments*, these films do not only foreground the complexity of urban spaces,<sup>7</sup> but they also address the paradox of the contingency of the city. In particular *MAGNOLIA* reveals an enigmatic urbanscape that in its transformational logic continually opens up space toward the paradoxical and the impossible, thus producing a series of distinct, yet contingent versions of the city that, in their multiplicity, fundamentally question the ‘entity’ of the city.

*Reading the City's Fragmentation:*  
*NEW YORK STORIES, NIGHT ON EARTH*

Within the development of the cinematic city, the episodic films of the 1980s and 1990s mark a significant change. Most importantly, this change is based on the fact that the perceptible transformation of the urban environment is not only visibly inscribed into the imagery of the city but is rather directly integrated into the cinematic construction of space: as the episodic, as the ephemeral, in short: as a *fragmented visibility of the city*.<sup>8</sup> Episodic films introduce a spatiality of fragmentation and displacement, because they no longer conceive of the city as an urban 'whole', which can be transferred to the cinema screen. Instead, they react to the fact that cities have become too complex and too multi-layered, to the extent that only a monumental cinematic experiment like *KOYAANISQATSI* (Godfrey Reggio, 1982) is still able to fully capture them on screen. As a result, the episodic films cut the city into singular pieces and fragments that nevertheless contain the complexity of the city.

Episodic films like *NEW YORK STORIES* (Martin Scorsese/Francis Ford Coppola/Woody Allen, 1989) and *SMOKE* (Wayne Wang, 1995) engender this notion of a highly complex urban world that is only perceptible through its fragments. They construct different microcosms within the city where the spatial relations are narrowed down and condensed – into a single neighborhood, into a single street, or even into a single building. Moreover, this spatial fragmentation and densification often leads to a concentration on private spaces. In fact, the lack of public space seems to be a key characteristic of these early episodic films, which intensifies the process of delimiting the overly complex world outside to a series of private, inner spaces (Treber 2005: 180–183).

If the public spaces of the city are present in these films, they are often concentrated on one singular location – like Lionel Dobie's studio-loft in Soho in *NEW YORK STORIES* or Auggie's cigar shop *Brooklyn Cigars & Co.* in *SMOKE* –, focalizing the urban world outside through the magnifying glass of their own urban microcosms<sup>9</sup> (fig. 1).



Figure 1 *NEW YORK STORIES* and *SMOKE*: creating urban microcosms

A different spatial dynamic, however, characterizes a second group of episodic films that visualizes the fragmentation of the city not primarily via the display of its isolated and separated spaces, but rather via the diversification and distribution of spaces, constantly expanding and subverting the boundaries of the city. *NIGHT ON EARTH* (Jim Jarmusch, 1993) and moreover, *THE GRASS IS GREENER EVERYWHERE ELSE* (Michael Klier, 1989) are likewise building up microcosms – be it the confined space of a taxi drive by night in *NIGHT ON EARTH*, be it a remote barrack in the outskirts of the city in *THE GRASS IS GREENER EVERYWHERE ELSE*. Yet they spread their microcosms all over the world, from Los Angeles, to New York, to Paris, Rome, and Helsinki; from Warsaw to Berlin, and back to New York (fig. 2). It is a particularity of these episodic films that they produce a spatial shift

216 within their cityscapes (Kilb 2001; Mahoney 1997), or more precisely, that they conceive of space only and exclusively through a transitory movement or passage, which not only stretches the boundaries of the city, but at the same time reflects on the processual construction of space in cinema.

city’s inherent boundaries, postulating the ubiquity and the proliferation of the ‘urban condition.’ On the other hand, we find a dissection of those processes that underlie these changing cityscapes, which, for example, Walter Prigge has defined as the fragmentation, the individualization, the medialization, and the suburbanization of the city center (Prigge 1999: 104). The overall shift between center and periphery becomes a decisive process of urban transformation, or, as Robert Fishman puts it: “The real innovations in twentieth century urban space have taken place not in the center but at the periphery” (Fishman 1994: 92).

These coincidences between the urban discourses of the 1990s and the emergence of episodic films and their disconnected, fragmented urban spaces are crucial, because they most clearly demonstrate how these city films actively engage with their cities, thus formulating their very own way of cinematic critique. In turning their view from the city as a ‘whole’ toward a concatenation of singular urban fragments, these episodic films imply a two-sided spatial dynamic of densification and diversification, and with that, two readings of the city’s fragmentation: firstly, a reading of the city as a condensed, self-contained cosmos that seemingly exists without an exterior space, and secondly, a reading of a sprawling city that continuously spreads its spatial fragments all over the world and thus gradually reverses the relationship between center and periphery. On both levels, these episodic films identify the idea of reading the city with a concatenation of fragments – of fragments, however, which condense and contain the complexity of the city, reformulating, in a way, the cinematic program of the early city films.



Figure 2 Passage across an urban world: NIGHT ON EARTH

This cinematic reading of the city through passage is crucial in that it opens up the possibility of perceiving the inversion of the city’s spatial relations through the transitory. That is to say, through a constant movement back and forth between the center and the periphery – a movement that is preeminently addressed within the discourse of the ‘disintegration of the city,’ which centers on the rise of an irretrievably fragmented, disconnected urban space (Breuer 1998; Meurer 1994; Prigge 1996), where the spatial perception is increasingly dominated by so called ‘non-places,’ as Marc Augé has formulated in his influential book *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995). In order to grasp this changing spatiality of the city, we can see on the one hand the emergence of new city concepts in the 1990s like Thomas Sieverts’ *Zwischenstadt* (1997) or Rem Koolhaas’ *The Generic City* (1995), which expand and reverse the



## Reading the City's Relationality: SHORT CUTS

While the episodic films of the early 1990s emphasize the overall fragmentation of the city in order to unfold, within a single neighborhood, within a single street, or even within a single building the complexity of the city, in the following, I will address a second way in which the episodic films of the 1990s read 'their cities.' This second reading resumes the two-sided spatial dynamic of compression and expansion addressed above, yet reverses it in focusing on the relations *between* these dynamics. Using the example of *SHORT CUTS* (1993), which has been considered, time and again, the most influential episodic film of the 1990s (Clark 2000; Grob 2006; Treber 2005: 9f.; 157–177), I will focus on the configuration of an intermediate, relational space that is not only crucial to understanding the spatiality of episodic films, but also gives rise to a new city concept that focuses on the interconnectedness of spaces.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of relational space introduces a way of thinking about space that is exclusively composed of relations between objects. Primarily formulated in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz' correspondence with Samuel Clarke from 1715/16, relational space can be defined as a complex spatial arrangement, and moreover, as an order of coexisting ("spatium est ordo coexistendi"), as Leibniz suggests in *The Metaphysical Foundations of Mathematics* (1714):

Space is the order of coexisting things, *or the order of existence for things which are simultaneous. In each of these two orders – that of time and that of space – we can judge relations of nearer to and farther from between its terms, according as more or less middle terms are required to understand the order between them* (Leibniz 1989 [1714]: 666f.).

Mainly developed in opposition to Isaac Newton's notion of absolute space as an "eternal and infinite being," (Leibniz 1989 [1715–16]: 685) relational space is a way of thinking space as a spatial arrangement, as a set of distances, without regarding its size or proportion. Especially in recent sociological concepts of space, like in Martina Löw's *Raumsoziologie* (2001), the concept of relational space has been used in order to focus on the relational positioning and on the processes of ordering that transcend the dualism between structure and action (Löw 2001: 166).

<sup>10</sup> Most significantly, most of the later episodic films are set in Los Angeles, which has been widely addressed by the Los Angeles School of Urbanism as a "postmetropolis" and as "paradigmatic window through which to see the last half of the twentieth century" (Soja 1989: 223); see also Davis 1990; Scott/Soja 1996.

In view of the episodic films of the 1990s, and particularly with regard to *SHORT CUTS*, I will interpret relational space as a spatial in-betweenness that carries the interlinkages of spaces, characters, and storylines to extremes. Because *SHORT CUTS*, above all, reveals an overly interconnected urban world, where every single person is seemingly linked, at all times, to all the other inhabitants of the city. The complexity of its spatial structure is mainly based on the fact that *SHORT CUTS* not merely produces and reproduces the relationality of the city, but rather creates a series of distinct relations that are precisely orchestrated according to the development of the storylines. Once and again, *SHORT CUTS* challenges the basic structure of episodic narration by continuously interweaving and crossing formerly distinct sets of spaces, characters, and storylines; it transforms the idea of reading in fragments by focalizing not on the different

218 fragments anymore, but rather on the ways in which these fragments are increasingly and almost excessively put into relation, while at the same time transforming the overall cityscape.



Figure 3 A city of relations: *SHORT CUTS*

On closer examination, we can observe that the ensemble of characters is initially introduced by a series of *contiguous relations*, which are based on relations of kinship and vicinity, thus unfolding the spectrum of the different families living in L.A.'s spread-out, diverse neighborhoods and living their separate lives. At the beginning of the film the different ensembles of characters are still coexisting in the city without actually overlapping. These contiguous relations of kinship and vicinity are soon gradually transformed into a series of *chance relations*, where the formerly distinct ensembles of spaces, characters, and storylines begin to intersect; they intersect in the chance meeting in Andy Bitkower's bakery and, most crucially, in the car accident, where the collision between the car driver – the waitress Doreen – and the school-boy Casey Finnigan eventually has fatal consequences. In this context, it is important to note that Robert Altman introduces a series of new connections and interrelations between the different short stories by Raymond Carver that serve as the basis for his film (Clark 2000; Treber 2005: 161–164).

Furthermore, it is a particularity of Altman's film that, apart from creating a series of chance meetings between the characters, it frequently plays with the decisive role of media within the cityscape – be it a TV show that is simultaneously watched by the different characters, be it the omnipresence of broadcast noises in the city, or be it the subtle overlapping of two telephone calls, all of which lead to a significant densification of the spatial relations (fig. 3).

In its complex orchestration of sounds and signals, *SHORT CUTS* constantly intensifies the relationality of the city. As a result, the different urban fragments are not confined to isolated, enclosed microcosms anymore, but on the contrary, they display a complex series of interrelations. Just as the early episodic films, *SHORT CUTS* fosters a multiplication of microcosms; yet it significantly differs from its cinematic precursors in that these microcosms are not conceived as separate entities anymore, but rather expose their interlinkages and intersections. *SHORT CUTS* configures an urban world that is almost excessively based on interrelations and connections – not only on the level of narrative space, but moreover, on the level of cinematic space itself. More than once the camera movement prefigures relations between the characters that will only later reveal their consequences (Treber 2005: 164–167); and more than once the noises and signals of the city play a crucial role in interweaving the different ensembles. Here, *SHORT CUTS* increasingly establishes a series of *direct aural and visual relations*, thereby producing a complex audio-visual configuration of the city, where almost every single movement and almost every single sound resonates or is taken up again in the following sequence.

At the climax of this overly connected and interrelated urban world, however, there is a

moment of conversion; a moment, where these almost excessive relations suddenly change their nature. With the increasing alienation between the city and its inhabitants that paradoxically arises exactly from this overproduction of relations and connections, the direct aural and visual relations are gradually turned into *relations of distance*. Toward the end of the film, the city more and more becomes an unsettling space of dislocation. There is a moment of rupture, where the excessive connectedness between figure and space is transformed into a fundamental disconnection. And it is exactly at this point, where *SHORT CUTS* transforms its diagnosis of the 'urban times' into a cinematic critique of the city – of a city, where the role of media is decisive in creating a multitude of connections between the inhabitants, but which, in the end, have the negative effect of completely overstraining and overpowering them. As a result, the reading of the cityscape, which most significantly started as a reading of its relationality, here eventually evolves into a reading of spatial disconnection. In the face of the individual, social, and natural catastrophes – the deaths, the plagues, the earthquakes –, which are the remainders of this overly connected world, the characters finally seclude themselves again from the interconnected urban world. Thus, at the end of the film, the relationality of space is transformed into a fragile, ephemeral coherence, which, at any point, bears witness of its own inner fragmentation.

### *Reading the City's Transformability: MAGNOLIA, TIME CODE*

The relationality of the city and its subsequent conversion already imply the notion of the transformability of the city that I will develop

in my third analysis of how episodic films read the city. If the construction of cinematic space was hitherto mainly addressed as a transitory process, I will now focus on the idea of cinematic transformation. Cinematic topology, as I have argued earlier, introduces a transformative way of thinking space into the discourse of the cinematic city. Yet it unfolds its transformative character in two different ways: Firstly, with reference to the urban world that is transformed and transferred into a specific kind of cinematic visibility – a visibility that I described in the first reading as a *fragmented visibility of the city*. Secondly, and this question was mainly addressed in the second reading, the transformative character of the cinematic city is articulated through a relational construction of cinematic space that is continually expanding the notion of *spatial in-betweenness*. Seen from this perspective, the first two readings of the city already bear a trace of transformation – although they conceive of the process of transformation in two different ways, shifting between the transformation of the urban environment and the transformation of cinematic space itself.

This transformative reading of the city becomes particularly decisive in the case of a group of episodic films that emerges toward the end of the 1990s. Highly influenced by the relationality of space in *SHORT CUTS*, films like *MAGNOLIA* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999) and *TIME CODE* (Mike Figgis, 2000) introduce a complex layering of spaces that reaches beyond common spatial categories, and with that, expands and challenges the very boundaries of reading the city in cinema. Unlike the earlier episodic films, they configure cinematic cityscapes that are neither fully graspable through the idea of a fragmented space of transition, nor can they be equated with the concept of relational space.

220 They rather proceed from the assumption that a singular concept of space behind the urban fragments does not exist. Instead, there are multiple forms of spatiality, which are constantly overlapping, creating paradoxical and transformative spatial relations. With that, they introduce a topological concept of space, where the urban fragments are, as John Law has pointed out in his discussion of the relationship between *Objects and Spaces* (2002), only and exclusively thinkable as an “intersection between different spatialities” (Law 2002: 96).



Figure 4 TIME CODE: The simultaneity of space

Taking up this idea of spatial intersection and topological overlay, both *MAGNOLIA* and *TIME CODE* produce a layering of their urban fragments that leads to a transformation of the structure of episodic narration. In the case of *MAGNOLIA*, this layering of spaces is generated by a constant multiplication of characters and storylines that are not only put into relation, but also related to a series of improbable events. From the very beginning on, the narrator of the film reflects on the strange repetition of events and biographies (Treber 2005: 200–203), where the different layers of the history of the city are constantly intersecting. As a consequence, the spatial logic of *MAGNOLIA* seems to be linked, at all times, to a circular notion of time, where the series of unforeseeable occurrences, accidents, and coincidences reveals the paradox of

already being prefigured and predefined. While *MAGNOLIA* links its layering of spaces to a paradoxical circularity of time, *TIME CODE*, instead, reveals a layering that is based on strict simultaneity. *TIME CODE* is a cinematic experiment that is filmed simultaneously with four cameras that are projected on four simultaneous screens (Treber 2005: 306ff.; fig. 4). It engenders a multiplication of screen-spaces that, most crucially, all show the events taking place at one single location – a production studio on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. More than once there are moments of convergence, where the four formerly distinct screens suddenly overlap, creating four different variations of the occurrences in the studio. In the presence of these four simultaneous screens, space is constantly opened up to its own multiplication, producing a variety of different and even contradictory visions of its own confined urban space.

On a second level, both *MAGNOLIA* and *TIME CODE* are characterized by a constant reflection of the very basis of spatial construction in film. In the case of *TIME CODE*, this reflection is articulated in the way in which the film plays with its four simultaneous screens, constantly reflecting the constructedness of cinematic space, trying to dissect its different aural and visual levels, which are, time and again, transformed into an abstract series of signs and signals. *MAGNOLIA*, in contrast, reflects on the transformability of the city in constantly linking its cinematic cityscape to the irrational logic of chance. Already at the beginning of the film, we find a permanent reflection of the improbability of chance, which the narrator relates to a series of three mortal coincidences throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 5). In creating a space of chance and coincidence, *MAGNOLIA* constantly relates its cityscape to the improbable and the impossible.

It confronts its characters with an ungraspable urban world, unable to react in the face of a series of irrational and unpredictable events. In its permanent alignment of the different storylines and biographies as well as in its concatenation of improbable coincidences, *MAGNOLIA* creates a tension between the exemplary and the contingent; a tension that generates a series of paradoxical events – like the devastating frog rain – that render everything that is visibly inscribed into urban space as being already deformed, asynchronous, and asymmetrical. Only the orchestrated choreography of the characters still seems to provide the possibility of self-assurance in the face of the arbitrariness and contingency of a world that has lost its readability, or more precisely, that is only readable through a paradoxical, transformative thinking that transgresses the boundaries of space.

It is a particularity of these late episodic films that they continually link their cityscapes to the contingent, the paradoxical, and the improbable, thus fostering a cinematic critique of a city, which not only has become overly complex, but even entirely ungraspable and inconceivable. This observation is crucial, because it points to a significant shift in the way in which the episodic films read their cities. While the earlier episodic films like *NEW YORK STORIES* and *NIGHT ON EARTH* still seem to aim at grasping the specificity of place, which is narrowed down to singular urban fragments that nevertheless sustain a tension to the diversification of urban spaces, *SHORT CUTS* captures the specificity of the city in exaggerating and overemphasizing its multitude of spatial interrelations. *MAGNOLIA* and *TIME CODE*, in contrast, transfer the idea of reading the city into a multiplication of city images, producing different variations that are put into an order of chronology or simultaneity.

In these late episodic films, the critique of the cinematic city is expressed through a multitude of possible and contingent city images, which reveal, in their interplay, the constructedness and the transformability of cinematic space.



Figure 5 A city of contingency: *MAGNOLIA*

### *Toward an Urban Topology: Complexity and Overlay*

If we try to refocus the question of reading the city in cinema, the episodic films of the 1980s and 1990s may serve, as I have pointed out in my article, as a productive starting point in disentangling the relationship between the cinema and the city – a relationship that has been reinvented and remodeled throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In their active engagement with urban space, they allow us to examine in detail the transformations of their cities at the turn of the century. More than once, their readings of urban space serve as a precise seismograph, detecting even the smallest shifts within the conception of urban space as if seen through a magnifying glass. In this process, they both prefigure future urban developments and reflect on the historical layers of the (cinematic) city. The episodic films of this period constantly read and decipher the signs of their times and thus form a crucial part

222 in reconstructing the traits of spatial perception, or more precisely, of the specific sense of place at the turn of the century.

The episodic films of the 1980s and 1990s actively intervene in the question of how to read a city. Yet their readings of the city are always filtered through the eyes of cinema, or more precisely, the horizon of their urban explorations will always be a *cinematic reading* of the city. Their configurations of a fragmented and dispersed urban world always imply a reflection on the ways in which cinema is able to read the city. For cinema allows us to perceive the city through the transitory, through a passage that constantly interweaves the most diverse urban spaces. Seen from this perspective, the episodic films first and foremost show that the crucial point of all spatial construction in cinema lies in its transitions, in the passage, and in the interlinkages between the different spatial fragments. Yet this reading through passage is incomplete and inconceivable without a reading through transformation: a reading that not only combines the different spatial fragments, but also has the potential to entirely transform the cityscape. While the reading through passage refers to a fragmentary, ephemeral space of transition, which continually shifts from one character to the other, from one place to the next, the reading through transformation is intrinsically linked to a transformative concept of space, which remodels and rearranges the urban fragments into a *cinematic vision* of the city.

The episodic films of this period mark a significant shift within the development of the cinematic city in that they exaggerate and thus criticize the complexity of the city. With that, they not only reformulate the cinematic program of the early city symphonies, but also address the crucial role that different media play within the cityscape. Far from merely depicting their

respective cities, the episodic films of this period create overly complex cinematic cityscapes, where a multiplicity of characters, a multiplicity of spaces, and a multiplicity of storylines are incessantly interweaved and interlinked. In order to fully grasp these spatial tensions, they introduce a two-sided spatial dynamic of fragmentation and expansion, of densification and diversification of the city's relations. Moreover, in their view of a fragmented, yet highly complex urban space in transition, episodic films generate images that are themselves in a state of flux, while at the same time positioning themselves, as films, in relation to this change. In developing a cinematic consciousness toward the urban transformations, they produce highly differentiated readings of a city in transition – of a city, after all, where the full complexity of spatial relations lies within its fragments.

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## Filmography

21 GRAMS  
(Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003)

BABEL  
(Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006)

BERLIN. SYMPHONY OF A GREAT CITY  
(Walter Ruttmann, D 1927)

DAS LEBEN IST EINE BAUSTELLE  
(Wolfgang Becker, D 1997)

DIE ABENTEUER EINES ZEHNMARK-  
SCHEINS (Berthold Viertel, D/USA 1926)

DIE ARCHITEKTEN  
(Peter Kahane, GDR 1990)

GRAND HOTEL  
(Edmund Goulding, USA 1932)

KOYAANISQATSI  
(Godfrey Reggio, USA 1982)

LA RONDE  
(Max Ophüls, F 1950)

LOS ANGELES PLAYS ITSELF  
(Thom Andersen, USA 2003)

MAGNOLIA  
(Paul Thomas Anderson, USA 1999)

NACHTGESTALTEN  
(Andreas Dresen, D 1999)

NEW YORK STORIES (Martin Scorsese/Fran-  
cis Ford Coppola/Woody Allen, USA 1989)

NIGHT ON EARTH

(Jim Jarmusch, F/UK/D/USA/JP 1991)

PAISÀ

(Roberto Rossellini, I 1946)

SHORT CUTS

(Robert Altman, USA 1993)

SKYSCRAPER SYMPHONY

(Robert Florey, USA 1929)

SMOKE

(Wayne Wang, D/USA/JP, 1995)

THE GRASS IS GREENER EVERYWHERE

ELSE (Michael Klier, D 1989)

THE MAN WITH THE MOVIE CAMERA

(Dziga Vertov, USSR 1929)

TIME CODE

(Mike Figgis, USA 2000)

TRAFFIC

(Steven Soderbergh, D/USA 2000)

# (Mis)reading the City:

## *Rethinking Urban Semiology*

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To reduce cities to objects or to see them as texts to be “read” is to fundamentally misread them. In what follows I will argue not only that we should abandon the reading of cities but also that we should abandon the “cities” that we claim to be reading.

While there are a number of issues dealt with in the attempt to create a truly substantive urban semiology, the most important of them is the problem that underlies not only urban semiology but all aspects of urban history, theory, and criticism more generally. This is the question of causality – the ways in which we account for the appearance of built environments. This has been a fundamental issue throughout the history of urban and architectural studies, and the problem reflects broader social, political, philosophical, and religious debates in many cultures. But the “appearance” of cities is only part of what characterizes these extraordinary phenomena.

In the ongoing semiotic bricolage of daily life, we orchestrate anything and everything at our disposal (including our own and other bodies) to create and maintain a meaningful environment. Any sign system is a complexly-ordered

instrument or modality for cueing such perceptions in given sensory channels and in conventional and culturally-specific media.

So the question is: what exactly would it mean to “decode, read, and interpret” the “spatial language” of urban space or built environments – to use the terms of the invitation abstract for our original Weimar symposium – if what we are actually confronted with are situations in which a strictly “spatial language” (or the spatial built environment from which it is abstracted) is itself be only part of the *Umwelt*? This is one of the fundamental challenges to any self-proclaimed urban semiology: the problem of accounting for the totality of multimodal, multifunctional, and multidimensional signification.

There are several implied questions in this. First: What are the methodological implications for accounting for multimodal social communication, performance, or behavior? How can we possibly model such complexities effectively and efficiently? Secondly: What are the possible effects of such investigations: what could or should such information be used for, and for whom under what conditions would it be used?

228 This question has obvious ethical and political ramifications. Thirdly: What exactly is or should be meant by “interpretation”? This is a broad issue with philosophical implications which are beyond the limits of this short paper to adequately address, so I shall pose it in a slightly more manageable way by reframing the question of what is an interpretation by asking instead, When is interpretation? Under what conditions is something interpretative? Can a city interpret itself? Is a city its own interpretation; its own metaphor or allegory?

1 For a brief review of some of the critical history of these issues, see the following: Jan Mukarovsky, “On the Problem of Functions in Architecture,” in J. Burbank & P. Steiner, 1978 (eds.) *Structure, Sign, and Function: Selected Writings of Jan Mukarovsky*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 236–56. Originally published in Prague in the 1930s; a review of this literature may be found in D. Preziosi, 1989: *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Gay Science*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 122–55. See also Martin Krampen, 1979. *Meaning in the Urban Environment*. London, Pion, 1979, and Roman Jakobson, 1960: *Linguistics & Poetics*. In Thomas Sebeok (ed.) 1974. *Style in Language*. Bloomington, London: Indiana University Press, 360–77; and R. Jakobson. 1978. *Coup d’œil sur le développement de la sémiotique: Rapport à l’ouverture du premier Congrès de l’Association internationale de sémiotique*, Milan, 2 juin 1974. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press; and id., 1978. *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning (Six leçons sur le son et le sens)*, trans. John Mepham, with a preface by Claude Levi-Strauss. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

2 Illustrations are all taken from James Mellaart, 1967. *Catal Hüyük. A Neolithic Town in Anatolia*. New York, McGraw-Hill. The site was inhabited from about 7400–6000 B.C.E. Excavations have continued since 1993 under the direction of Ian Hodder both on the first (eastern) mound settlement site excavated by Mellaart, and the more recently uncovered ruins on the later (western) mound settlement. See especially Hodder, Ian, 1999. *Representations of Representations of Representations*. *TenDenZen* 99, Jahrbuch VII, Übersee-Museum Bremen 1999, 55–62.

The situation we face recalls the many attempts to account for the multifunctional and multidimensional nature of semiosis, most notably the long tradition beginning with the Prague School of semiotics through its more recent rethinking in the work of Roman Jakobson.<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of the latter, semiotic perspectives on urban formation are essentially metacritical inflections – which is to say, one of the several co-present perspectives in any communicative or signifying act – the phatic, declarative, conative, emotive, aesthetic, metacritical / metalinguistic functions of a semiotic act.

In his book “Reality and its Shadow” (1987: 7), Emmanuel Levinas observed that “[t]he whole of reality bears on its face its own allegory... In utilizing images art not only reflects, but brings about this allegory.” As human artifacts, cities may always have “borne on their face” their own allegories.

What is seen in the first illustration is precisely this allegorizing, interpretative process. It is an image (fig. 1) of what some archaeologists claim may be the oldest remaining representation of what we would call a “city plan.” It shows what appears to be the plan of the town of Catal Hüyük in the Konya plain of Turkey, dated to about the seventh millennium B.C.E.<sup>2</sup> The square units in the plan (painted on the wall of one unit, what the excavators refer to as a shrine) appear to repeat the form of individual house units, which may have looked like the reconstruction next shown on the screen (fig. 2). The first painting does not represent an exact copy of the actual city, but shows a generic aggregation of many units. The overall “city plan” is shown below what appears to be a bull or a mountain – or perhaps deliberately ambiguously both; large powerful bulls are very prominent in the iconography of wall paintings at the site.

As a mountain, it appears to be erupting, and the excavators have concluded that this is the mountain Hasan Dagh, which is visible today on the horizon, and which was volcanically active at the time. The mountain's own product – the very hard volcanic glass known as obsidian – was the city's actual source of trade wealth, since in the pre-metal-working stone age, obsidian was widely employed throughout the eastern Mediterranean as an essential tool in all aspects of daily life. Traces of obsidian from this particular archeological site throughout the region.

That this painting, this visual piece of the city of Catal Huyuk, is an “interpretation” of the town, may be understood by considering the details of its form. In the overall town (fig. 3) individual units were not separated from each other by spaces between walls, and all house units have physically contiguous walls. Each discrete unit was entered from the roof (fig. 4). So what is being shown is not exactly an iconic image of the material formation of the town as if seen from above, but an interpretation of what are plausibly suggested as discrete functional units. On the basis of associated finds and distinctions in the subject matter of wall paintings, about half of the units served largely domestic functions, and the remainder were considered by the excavators as shrine units, places for offerings to the dead. Each unit is a separate social unit but not a materially discrete entity (fig. 5).

At any rate, one of the things that may confirm the archaeological hypothesis that what you see here is a “representation” of the city itself is that its form is contemporary with analogous wall-paintings in the town, one of which is seen in the next illustration (fig. 6). This painting was plausibly interpreted by the town's excavators as a beehive: you can see schematic images of individual bees

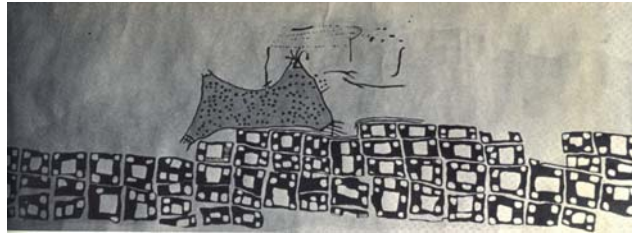


Figure 1 Town plan, shrine VII.14

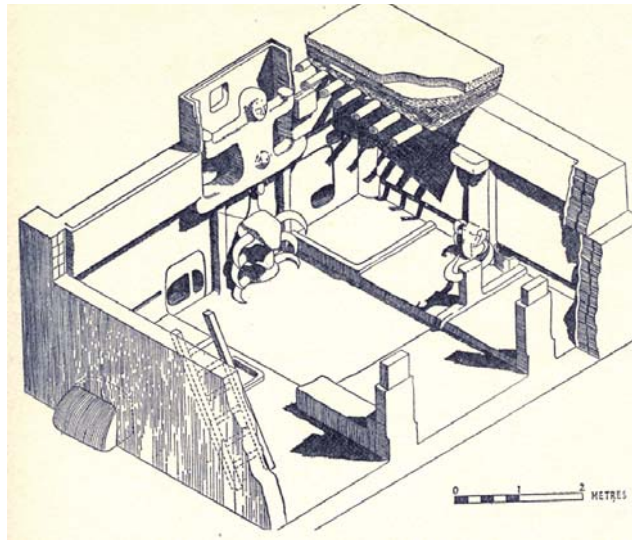


Figure 2 Shrine unit VI.B.1



Figure 3 Plan of building level VI.B

230 in some of the cells of the honeycomb, and the formation overall is surrounded by and appears thereby to be tended by schematically rendered human hands.

Seen in this context, the city plan, representing an agglomeration of individual house units, resembles a beehive: as if the city itself were a (human) beehive; an analogue of a hive. Each self-contained unit was entered from above rather than being interconnected with each other or attached to corridors or exterior streets (there were no streets in this town – or at least none have been identified so far, since only a fraction of the town has been excavated as yet. It may have originally resembled a southwestern American mega-structural pueblo settlement in this respect).

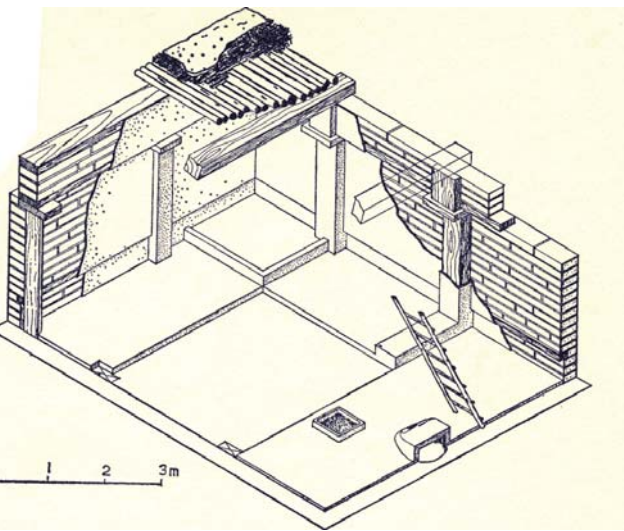


Figure 4 Diagrammatic view of typical unit

The city of Catal Huyuk was in existence from about 7400–6000 B.C.E., after which it was abandoned for unknown reasons. Many are familiar with Catal Huyuk, so I will not say any more about it except that it appears that even in very early times, humans have been attempting

to characterize what we call a city on the analogy of other things – in this case, as if it were like a beehive.

The Catal Huyuk painted image is the mark of the allegory of itself: a fact which has important significance for our meeting in Weimar. Semiotically, any formation is potentially metacodal or metacritical; a commentary or allegory on itself. And – if current archaeological interpretations of formations such as Catal Huyuk are reasonably cogent – this has been an enduring phenomenon in the orchestration of urban behavior. The utility of any metaphor or allegory is of course transitory or temporary, and context-dependent; useful for particular (symbolic, functional, aesthetic, political, etc) reasons. Moreover, there is obviously a semi-autonomous relationship between these, as with all human sign systems.

By calling attention to the artifice of its own fabricatedness, any material entity – such as Catal Huyuk – foregrounds the arbitrariness of itself as mere medium: as something distinct from its “reading.” Which considerably complicates attempts to clearly distinguish or oppose to each other an entity or phenomenon and its “interpretation” as if these were ontologically fixed, rather than relationships mooted between diverse domains of the sensible.

Ultimately, a closer critical attention to the actual multimodal and multidimensional character of signifying behavior may offer contemporary urban semiology a way forward. An attempt to effectively account for spatio-temporal behaviors might usefully begin with accounting for situations where the strict or fixed delineations between subjects and objects, objects and behavior, formation and signification, or indeed the urban and non-urban (however defined) are deeply problematic at best, and of circumstantial and transitory usefulness under certain (also dynamically changeable) conditions.

Observing and recording multimodal, multi-dimensional, and multifunctional uses of space, language, gesture, spatio-kinesis, and object-fabrication and marking of various kinds are extremely difficult and may remain abstract and empty without simultaneously investigating the premises and paradigms of causality supposed to inform the artifacts and events being studied. In addition, we must be very clear about the inherent multifunctionality of all semiotic events whether explicitly intended or not. The most important task for any would-be urban semiology, then, would be that of accounting for the ways in which we orchestrate the actual multimodal, multidimensional, and multifunctional aspects of semiotic behavior. This also entails accounting for semiotic redundancy and indeterminacy, for indeterminacy is itself a natural, relational feature of any multiplicity. This is a corollary of the essential disjunction between intention and effect: once staged, any formation opens up possibilities for “reading” which may not have been “intended” by its fabricators, even assuming that agreement could be reached as to what those intentions might have been.

Does a city’s “meaning” exist as something distinct from, or even prior to, its material artifice? It would seem that we should be not a little wary of assuming that meaning or signification has an existence independent of any embodiments or manifestations. Ultimately such an assumption is theological, and is consonant with explicitly religious beliefs in a real distinction between matter and spirit; between the material and immaterial. What attention to the actual complexities of semiological behavior or activity may then highlight is the very artifice (and the temporal and space-specificity) of this epistemology itself. Which, finally, may suggest a way forward in what we may (or may not) still wish to refer

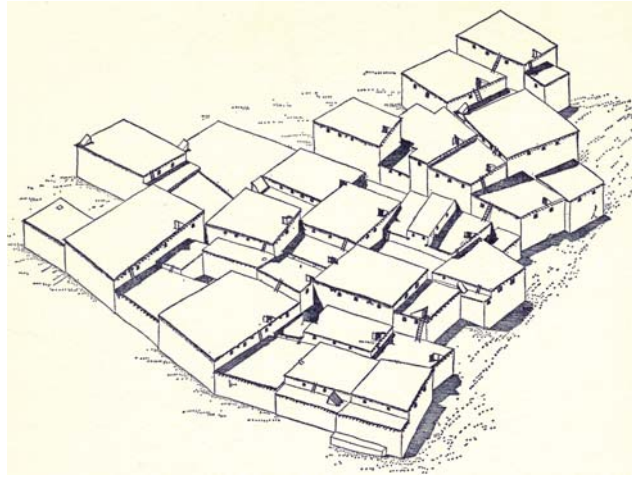


Figure 5 Isometric reconstruction of level VI



Figure 6 Beehive, with hands, shrine VIB.8

to as urban semiology: a semiology or attention to the significant properties of the staging and framing of possible (and impossible) occasions for social behavior

I began by claiming that any reading of a city is always essentially a misreading because of its inevitably reductive nature, and that in order to actually understand urban phenomena, we need to understand why it is also necessary to “forget that city” as a more than allegorical object. If a city is imagined to be an object or a text, it will always be simultaneously read and misread: there can therefore be no proper reading, for all such readings are ultimately moot and problematic. The point is not to find better metaphors or

232 more literally correct allegories for such a phenomenon, but to understand what purposes are served by causally distinguishing allegories and cities in the first place. A city is not an object but an occasion: and this is where and how we should begin dealing with cities.

### *Epilogue*

The spoken version of this paper included examples of the multimodal, multidimensional, and multifunctional orchestration of spatial behavior among Aranda-speaking aboriginal peoples in the Central Western Desert region of Australia, as studied by Jenny Green of the University of Melbourne (discussed in great detail in J. Green, 2009. *Between the Earth and the Air: Multimodality in Arandic Sand Stories*. University of Melbourne: Doctoral Dissertation). A video presentation of this material, given in my spoken paper in Weimar, could not be reproduced in this publication. Green's research clearly demonstrates that the extraordinary complexities and fluidities comprising ordinary space-time behavior – what Anne Haila in the Weimar conference referred to as “urban processes,” or what Michel de Certeau once called the “poetry” we make by walking cities – are indeed understandable in ways that need not be reductive, formalist, or essentialist.



