

Urban expansion re-visited

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This keynote deals with urban expansion, that is, the growth of cities and inner-urban areas, both inside and outside of the dedicated planning perimeters. My aim is to give a brief overview of how this subject matter can be discussed from today’s perspective, with a certain focus on big projects that have evolved in recent decades and are on the rise again. For that purpose, I will situate the subject matter in historical contexts; provide some explanation as to 1980s and also more recent dynamics; and I will discuss how these projects are being managed, implemented. At this point my aim is not to provide answers but to pose questions, in order to provide some food for thought for the debate over this day.

The historian’s take: urbanization as a drama

In his seminal work on European urbanization, Historian Jürgen Reulecke (1985) once presented urbanization in the shape of the classical drama – a sequence of five events (or Acts) that got started in the late 18th century (see Table 1). They brought about what was eventually perceived to be the ‘industrial city’. The first Act was called ‘Exposition’, the establishment of the early foundations for urbanization. It was followed by Act 2, societal modernization, which led to the almost complete transformation (‘Überformung’) of the built environment in Act 3, thus setting the stage for industrial urbanization. The rise of the big industries and their need for resources, most notably workforce, was the main driver here.

	<i>Period</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Main developments</i>
1 st Act	Exposition	1780-1850	Establishing the pathway for industrial urbanisation
2 nd Act	Modernisation	1850-1880	Setting the industry in place
3 rd Act	‘Überformung’	1880-1914	Emerging large-scale urban system
4 th Act	Stagnation	1914-1945ff.	Destruction and recovery
5 th Act	De-concentration	1960s-1980s	Suburbanisation and new towns

Table 1: Urbanisation as a drama (own after Reulecke 1985, p. 9ff.)

Disrupted by the two world wars and recovery (which is Act 4), urbanization took pace in the early 1960s, bringing about the de-centralized settlement pattern that became pre-dominant in a majority of European countries. This Act 5 was constitutional for any post-WWII urban expansion in Europe. At the time of writing and publishing his book (1985), Jürgen Reulecke couldn’t foresee what would happen thereafter, as part of what he coined as ‘post-urban’ developments. He insinuated that, as a follow-up to Act 5, one may (or may not) expect an urban *tragedy* to happen – the dissolution of the city. Was it like that? Where are we now?

Urban expansion in the long 1980s

Urbanization got indeed accelerated before and after the long 1980s. It was changing cities and urban systems, in both quantitative and also in qualitative regards. Initially, there was a notable shift from urban to sub-urban expansion, simply driven by post-WWII growth: When the demand is high, due to population or economic growth or rising standards of living, supply needs to speed up. A template model included the carpet suburbanization of single-family homes. Apart from that, big projects placed at the fringes gained specific momentum as well – even though they were rarely considered to be part of the typical imaginary of suburbia. They comprised shopping malls, like these cases from France and Germany; large-scale housing estates, both in Western and Eastern Europe; or office towns, as Luxembourg's Kirchberg.

In most cases, it can be argued that *specialization* was the trend then, not integration. Discussing Hamburg's City Nord, a template case of post-WWII office towns, a 1980-geography paper had put it this way: "The City-Nord project (...) has demonstrated that the office park can be usefully employed to divert office expansion away from central urban areas." (Husain 1980, 134). Away from central urban areas ... – at that time, functional separation and decentralization were the primers of urban planning.

Urban expansion today

Why do we deal with expansion today, in the 21st Century? Recent urban dynamics are driven by another round of market changes, notably an urban determination of demographics and of economics. This seems evident judging from data on population dynamics in German city regions between 2011 and 2017 (Siedentop et al. 2019, 4). These data concern the net balance achieved by core cities and, in comparison, by suburbs. The recent pattern based on the Stadtregionsmodell (including large urban regions with core cities above 100,000 inhabitants only) seems to reveal an obvious urban bias. However, I would not necessarily speak of 're-urbanization' here, as much of the new demand is generated by international rather than internal migration, not a back-to-the-city movement.

Anyway, we can conclude that, as a result of this, expansion happens in a broad variety of places – at urban cores, fringes, and in-between spaces. This is supported by official statistics on housing production between 2012 and 2017, targeted toward suburbs and to core city areas (Siedentop et al. 2019, 5). Looking at some of the prominent international cases such as *Hafencity*, Hamburg; *Ørestad*, Copenhagen; or *Seestadt Aspern* in Vienna, Austria, mixed neighborhoods with some focus on housing seem to be the norm. Also, large-scale projects became popular for placing research and high-tech, university campuses in particular. My own university, established on the grounds of a former steel mill, gives a good case of this; or let's take the young campus of Merced University in the Central Valley of California, close to Santa Clara County (aka Silicon Valley). Different from 1980s urban expansion, the normative claim that these projects pursue is 'integration', to offer urban amenities rather than being isolated, mono-functional.

We don't know to what degree this integration actually works out. But *why at all* do we see such developments speeding up *right now*? Time and phasing come into play here, apart from changing framework conditions, as city-regional expansion is about to override previous inner-city dynamics. After two decades of extensive inner-urban reconversion of vacant industrial land or military facilities, rail, port or logistics sites, the associated land reserves are running empty. And when there is hardly any waterfront or rail terminal left over for re-development, the pressure automatically shifts to green fields and fringes.

Placing the urban in suburbia

Urban expansion at suburban locales can have some critical outcomes. First, when suburbs are on their way to become urbanised, what sort of social worlds are emerging then? Do these implantations in suburban space fit with existing communities? Second, placing new neighbourhood projects at the fringe of core cities in large scale obviously requires to seek political consent with surrounding municipalities. A striking case here is the hotly debated project at the North Western edge of Frankfurt am Main, where *city-regional* governance is situated between the interests of core city and suburban communities: It looks as if the neighbour municipalities weren't consulted in advance, when the city of Frankfurt started to develop the idea of its most recent urban expansion toward the fringes.

This makes the issue certainly more than delicate, and the way such developments are on the way to be implemented poses certain questions: Do we always have a clear idea on whether these projects are *urban* by nature, or are they more *suburban*? What would that mean? How would they fit with their fringe locality – or do we simply copy dense urban layouts and transplant them to the fringes? How about actual integration and mixed use when projects are elevated to the city-regional, not urban scale?

One more change: the rise of vertical urban expansion

For quite a while, urban expansion could be understood as a horizontal process, one that adds to the built urban fabric, as part of a longer trajectory of growth and differentiation. The city of Hamburg gives a good illustration of such patterns of urban expansion between 1920 and 2007. What we now observe is that the city is becoming part of *vertical* arrangements – not high-risers but its insertion in the global economy, stimulated by financial markets. Driven by forces that are not specifically urban (financial crises, interest rates, austerity, economic competition), big money and big politics have leashed the financialization of urban policy, often to the detriment of the city. As a consequence of financialization, the city is being fundamentally transformed: It is no longer the mere site of economic activity, but the city itself – most notably land and property – is becoming subject of value creation and profit maximization.

It is interesting to recall here that the late Neil Smith, in his very first academic paper published in 1979, already stated that the new interest in urban centres is not necessarily caused by the movement (or return) of people, but by the influx of money (Smith 1979). As the financial economy now increasingly decouples from the real economy, more and more investment capital is flowing into property. Land becomes extensively traded, and speculation

determines the playing field in rather abstract ways, as the case of foreign investment, share-deals and money bunkering in tax havens has revealed for Berlin (Hesse 2018). This is meanwhile accepted to be one of the most important threats to the inclusive city. It also sheds new light on 'gentrification', by reflecting a broader pattern of societal inequality, rather than just displacement driven by urban upgrading. Large-scale neighborhoods are probably not free from that risk. How do cities deal with it?

Big projects, self-induced shocks ...?

Last but not least, a few words on the implementation of big urban projects and the rise of managerial urbanism. It is important to reflect upon market imperatives that exert high pressure on planning, the bigger the projects are becoming. Related attitudes from business practice have set a new standard for implementation: project management. As a consequence of a compartmentalized, contract-based planning practice, technocratic management attitudes and centralized control have become more common for implementation. This observation has triggered a critical debate on related forms of knowledge production and application in the context of urban planning (Raco/Savini 2019).

It complements earlier critiques of the governance structures of large-scale urban projects that are held suspicious of creating new quasi-governmental frameworks and practices. Moreover, following colleagues Gernot Grabher and Joachim Thiel from Hamburg (Grabher & Thiel 2014), large-scale projects can also be considered the means of 'self-induced shocks'. With these shocks, planning bodies and local governments aim at dissolving lock-ins and inertia at local levels, in order to speed up the development process, increase housing production or attract big events to their locale. Such incidents occur partly accidentally, partly deliberately. However, they are likely to threaten open planning processes and also delimit options for urban integration.

Coming to my conclusions

What are the current challenges? Can cities that are targeted by growth, in-migration and large-scale development be considered winners of the game, as Ed Glaeser suggested not so long ago (2011)? I remain skeptic. As Historian Jürgen Reulecke (1985, 10) wasn't clear then whether to expect a tragedy or not in the future: the whole picture of urban expansion and transformation is obviously more complicated than that we could simply assume urban renaissance to be the norm. Looking at particular retailers like the once template suburban big-box IKEA, which is now discovering urban markets, things look even more contradictory. It is actually paradoxical to see that urban *success stories* can turn out immensely painful. This is perfectly visible in the case of Munich, reading this exciting story by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 30th October (SZ 2019) – over a couple of decades, an endless series of growth cycles happened to occur. In this light, it seems no longer useful to distinguish cities that are *successful* from those that are in *decline*. Today it looks to me as if the divide separates a range of cities that *suffer* – those that are suffering from decline, and the many that have in common that they *struggle with success*. This is a real challenge.

Finally, I would like to address three critical points, or questions, which could inspire further debates: *First*, we need to interrogate large-scale projects as ideal-types: are they catalysts for innovation, or do they trigger self-induced blows, ruling by disruption? How can we accommodate expansion while ensuring quality of life? How green is “green enough”, and how far should urban upgrading go, before it reinforces social inequality? *Second*, are there any productive lessons to be learned from and for “Bestandsentwicklung”, that is, to assess the long 1980s (or even the 1960sff.) and look at the ongoing change of large-scale urban projects. Can we get some takeaway from there for today’s debate and practice (see Jessen 2004 on new urban neighbourhoods in the 1980s and 1990s)? *Third*, when urban expansion moves beyond the municipal boundary and creates city-regional dynamics, it not only gives space to big projects and thus urbanises the fringes, it also challenges traditional modes of decision making. What does that mean for the long debated but hardly implemented city-regional governance? And how can we link state and urban policies more coherently than it is done so far?

As an observer, I don’t have any recipes or recommendations to give here. One important consequence for *research* could be to invest more in the observation, monitoring and ‘*Wirkungsanalyse*’ of the new quarters, in order to provide critical, independent and constructive evidence as to their outcomes. My feeling is that particularly the latter point – to contextualize, analyze and evaluate the variegated outcomes of new projects, and to reflect upon appropriate methods – seems largely underdeveloped in planning studies.

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