

Doing Nature: River Elbe under Discursive Construction¹

Sybille Bauriedl, Sabine Höhler

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Abstract

The debates about “sustainability” have brought “nature” back into an urban planning discourse which for years had been characterized by the optimism of industrial, economic and technological growth and since the 1980s had only marginally negotiated environmental issues. Sustainable nature is now to be a cross-sectional issue of urban politics. The consideration of “nature”, however, has not led to the deconstruction of the classical nature-culture-dualism, but to its renewal: within different discursive relations, so our argument, “nature” has been constructed as a *functional reality*.

We would like to discuss the discursive ways of ‘doing nature’ with the example of the urban development and environmental discourses, focusing on the river Elbe in Hamburg. In our paper, we present examples from current textual and visual communications and figurations of the Elbe. The different ways of representing the Elbe show its different functions: waterway, recreation area, central factor for Hamburg’s business and industry locations, sewer etc. We hold that within these simultaneous and at times competing representations the discursive landscape of the “Elbe” becomes manifest and is perceived as material “nature”.

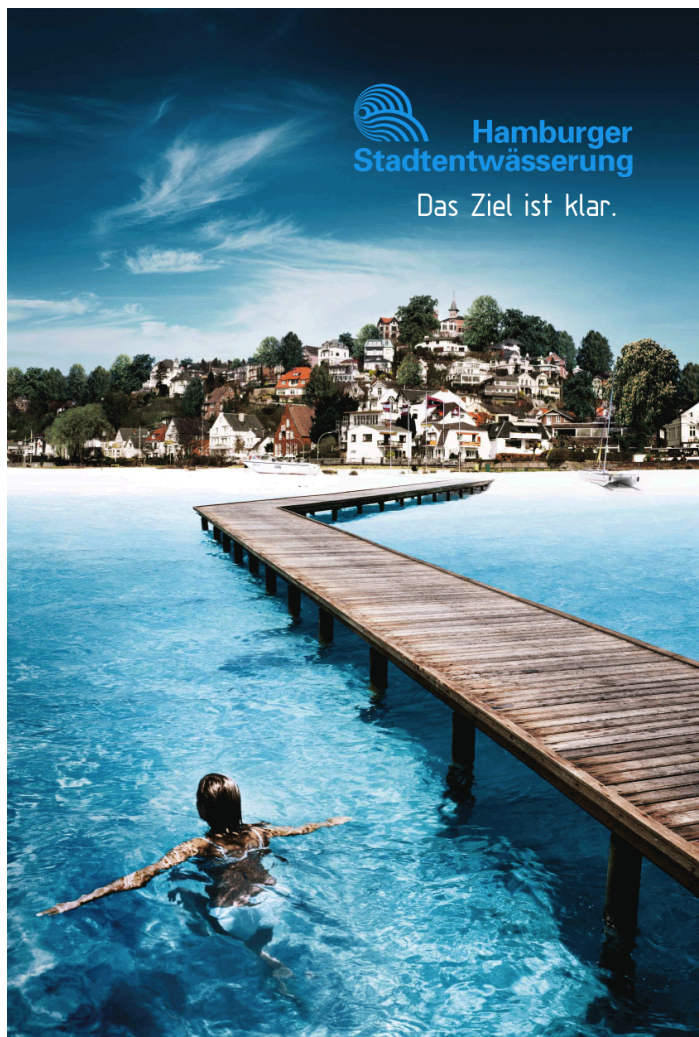
Taking two leading images from urban development politics, “sustainable city” and “growing city”, we will focus on two processes, which appear contradictory on the first glance: first, the process of ecologizing the Elbe (in the sense of “sustaining nature” [Macnaghten/Urry]) within a sustainability discourse dominated by environmental politics; secondly, the process of economizing the Elbe (“greening nature”) within a sustainability discourse ruled by a policy of economics. Thus, different discursive processes merge into a “reality” of the Elbe as a *construction* – in the sense of juxtaposition – of contributions of situated actors which become powerful within the sustainability discourse.

It is our aim to show that discourse “matters” where the “nature” of the river Elbe represents the meandering flows of knowledge. Furthermore, “matter” articulates itself discursively, since “done” natures form discursive corridors which constrain the meanings and political possibilities of “sustainability”.

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1 Introduction: Pure “Nature” as Goal and Attraction

To introduce you to the topic of this paper, the Elbe river in Hamburg, we invite you to take a look at a picture of the river and its riverside (Fig. 1). The picture forms a part of the latest advertisement campaign that was launched by Hamburg’s communal sewer system facilities and is directed to the inhabitants of the city of Hamburg. We would like to ask: What can the citizens of Hamburg see in this picture? What are they supposed to see? And moreover, we pose the question: What kind of river is under construction here?



Let us start by listing the elements of the picture: We are shown a part of the Elbe’s northern waterfront at Blankenese. Though the picture does not explicitly identify the site, each Hamburg citizen will be able to recognize this prominent location at first sight by the outstanding Süllberg, the mountain rising in the background. In the foreground, we see a pier reaching far into the water, and we perceive a woman that has gone for a swim. The pier leads to a sun-bleached beach. We can distinguish two sail boats that have been drawn upon the sand.

Figure 1: Bathing Woman in Front of the Süllberg

What does the picture show? The picture presents us an ‘incongruity’ that is very obvious to any observer who fairly knows the city of Hamburg: The picture sets up a *patchwork* combining Hamburg and a beautiful and inviting place of ease and leisure. It is very obvious that even the famous and wealthy Hamburg suburb of Blankenese can offer neither sun-bathing beach nor fit-for-swim water. What is offered as a white-washed coastline is the waterfront of a river that forms a vital part of Hamburg’s industrial infrastructure. Bathing in

the waterway would not only be dangerous, a pier would also be quite inappropriate for the tidal stream Elbe.

What does the picture tell us then? We argue that the combination of text and image is crucial to understanding its meaning: Its title “The goal is clear” [“Das Ziel ist klar”] conveys a double message. For one, it literally aims at supplying clear and clean water to Hamburg’s population. The goal to turn sewage more efficiently into clean water is the obvious message of Hamburg’s sewage facility. Secondly, and much more encompassing, we are presented with a genuine *vision*: clear water will bring an idyllic “nature” back into the city. We are enabled to imagine Blankenese to be a pleasant and peaceful holiday resort located somewhere in the Mediterranean – and reverse: the picture transports the Mediterranean shores to Hamburg’s waterside. Recalling recreative holidays, we are surprised to perceive the city of Hamburg as especially appealing and filled with “quality of life”. Moreover, the blond, beautiful, and healthy woman savoring bathing pleasures signifies that environmental “quality” has reached a high standard. Other pictures from the same campaign seem to ‘verify’ this impression: Pure water will make wildlife come into the city; even penguins that are used to a salt-water habitat have arrived entirely of their own accord (Fig. 2). “Pure water” implies “pure nature”: authentic, uncorrupted, peaceful, and, what is more, in perfect harmony with the settings of the metropolitan city.



Figure 2: Penguins in the Speicherstadt

These pictures ‘work’ although the representations contradict Hamburg’s climatic conditions and collide with alternative physical uses made of the Elbe. The pictures ‘work’ because they address repertoires of meanings and interpretations that connect to broader cultural narratives as well as to their specific local plots and distinctions. The sewage facility’s campaign promotes an image of substantial multiplicity on a rather small scale, an image that has featured for Hamburg’s urban planning policy for many years. The campaign thus

aims at the idea of encompassing the whole world within the city boundaries. Pure water, the campaign communicates, makes this new meaning and its implications feasible.

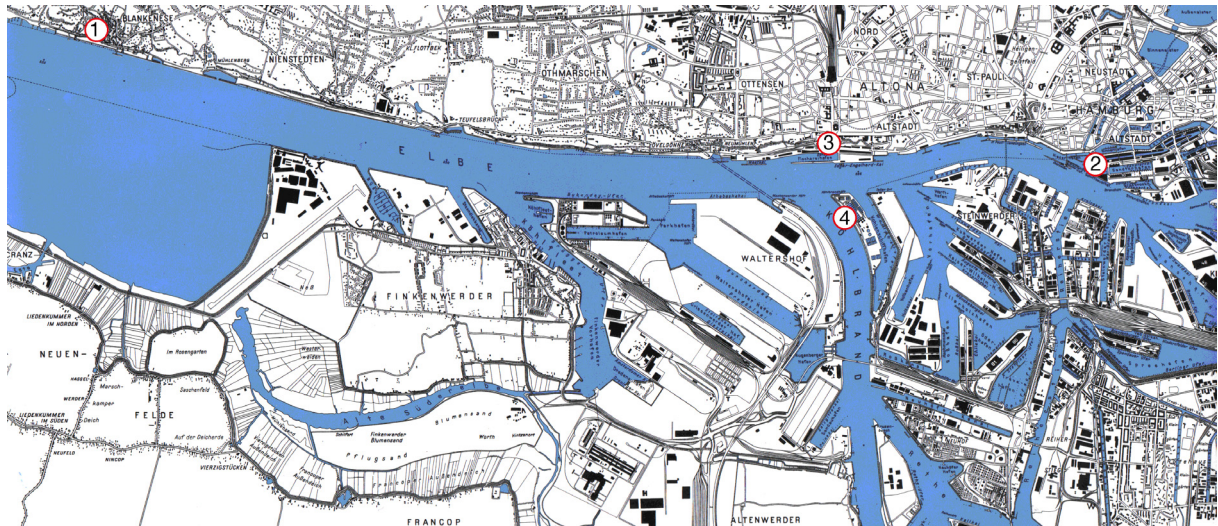
In our paper, we would like to ask, *which* “natures” are addressed in Hamburg’s planning and urban development discourses. We propose that within urban politics, “nature” is called upon as a *functional* category. We will discuss this subject with the example of the Elbe river, since the Elbe is specified as a major factor whenever the shape and the image of Hamburg are concerned. The river expresses the connotations and suggestions of waterway to the North Sea, home of Germany’s biggest container seaport and trans-shipment centre, and location of industry, business and service supplies. Next to the Alster river, the Elbe river serves as Hamburg’s prominent ‘water mark’. In addition, the Elbe river has been and still is the major water resource of Hamburg. Furthermore, the river is addressed as the nostalgic port of adventurous maritime sailing, bold cock-and-bull sailors’ stories, and wanderlust. The Elbe nourishes Hamburg’s city-image of “Gateway to the World” [“Tor zur Welt”]. All these factors form important constituents of regional identity.

2 “City-Nature” as a Functional Concept: Studying ‘Patchwork’ Elbe

Facing these Elbe texts and subtexts, we hesitate to affirm that there is only *one* “Elbe”. Are there perhaps different “Elbes”, which, depending on perspective and presentation, come into existence and actually compete with one another? In our paper, we will pursue the “nature” of “the Elbe” as constructed discursively: we are going to address the multiplicity of the Elbe river as a process of “doing nature” (e.g. Pöferl 2001), meaning that substances of economic growth as well as environmental “quality” and “quality of life” have blended into what materialized as the “nature” of the Elbe.

We will investigate the symbolic and material shapes the Elbe takes within the city region of Hamburg. Especially in Hamburg’s city area, we can perceive a ‘multifunctional’ river: Different discourses have inscribed its features and topics into this river. The discourses frame the perception of the river, the current options of its use, and the visions of its development. The Elbe ‘functions’ as a condition for developing the economic sectors of industry and commerce; furthermore, the Elbe ‘works’ as a source and as an element of the “quality of life” of the resident metropolitan population. By tradition, the river ‘serves’ as an entrance to overseas shipping routes and as a central sign and component of the home affiliation and identity of Hamburg’s inhabitants. Thus, we argue that the “natural landscape” of the river has to be regarded as a ‘discursive landscape’ as well. With the term ‘discursive landscape’, we

propose that the natural river space is constituted by a multiplicity of material and symbolic ascriptions. Attributions of meanings like the visions of the city sewage facilities go along with material conditions and effects. Both empower, adjust, and constrain what becomes perceptible as “the Elbe”.



① Süllberg, Blankenese ② Speicherstadt ③ Elbberg Campus @Itzöna ④ Sewage Plant, Köhlbrandhöft

Figure 3: River Elbe – Speicherstadt to Rissen

The map shows the “current Elbe” between Hamburg’s “Speicherstadt”, the turn-of-the-century area south of the city centre, and the suburb of Blankenese, several kilometers downstream (Fig. 3: Elbe, Topographic Map). Our aim is to show how – spatially highly condensed – different attributions ‘function’ in that discursive processes and practices combine to a ‘reality’ of the Elbe as a ‘patchwork’. We suggest that the Elbe has emerged as a ‘patchwork’ rather than a ‘hybrid’, since the “nature” that has come into being has been constructed from quite definable parts. The river is perceived as a patchwork of purified entities (Latour 1993). Accordingly, we hold that “nature” as a cross-sectional issue in the Hamburg urban planning discourse of “sustainable development” did not effect in dissolving the dichotomy of nature and culture; on the contrary, we state that the city’s “nature” rather strengthened the classical dualism.

In the following sections of the paper we will explore how “the Elbe” was constructed from different abstract concepts and from textually and visually communicated image. We will identify the order of the Elbe discourses by means of material from past and present Elbe representations as manifested in Hamburg’s urban planning policy, environmental policy, and

in the Elbe architecture since the 1980s. Analytically, we differentiate between discourses, narratives, and local story lines.

With the term “discourse” we signify temporally and spatially specific ensembles of statements and practices of cross-regional emergence. Discourses can be of national or global order, but they can also be focused to frame and develop local conditions and possibilities. In a first step, we will identify those discourses which structure and envelop specific issues of urban planning in Hamburg. Making use of Hamburg’s urban development programs since 1980, we will single out a discourse of “economic location”, as discourse of “growth”, and a discourse of “sustainability” as the dominant discourses that carve out the landscape and architecture of the Elbe.

Discourses instigate and in turn are powered by “narratives”. Narratives will be our term for broad and long-living culturally shared stories, which comprise and express cultural and social agreements. Narratives make up the repertoire from which collective stories can be formulated, interpreted, and understood. Accordingly, narratives are quite stable and slow to react to local changes and reconstructions. Concerning the Elbe, the relevant narratives are firstly, that of “nature” as serving the regenerative needs of human beings, and, secondly, the positive image of inexhaustible scientific and technical progress.

Locally specific discursive characteristics, condensed and solidified into simple semantic entities with strong reference to local actors and local actor constellations, we label “local story-lines”. We thereby focus more on the local features of Maarten Hajer’s (1995) concept of story-line. Local story-lines enclose and organize the local components, foundations, and expressions of specific discursive issues. For instance, the account of the “Holiday resort Blankenese” would be a story-line which works only locally, since it is not taken from the common, transregional and transtemporal cultural stock of stories. In the second part of our paper, we will investigate how two local story-lines significantly vitalized the Elbe discourse and redesigned what became perceptible as “the Elbe”.

3 Considering Discourse: Constructing River Elbe as Locational Factor

The Elbe has been and still is an important factor of Hamburg’s character as business location. *First*, the Elbe is frequently called upon as a “natural” locational factor. The river sets geographic and morphologic conditions to city development. Hamburg thus entails a geographically based identity that refers to the glacial valley [“Urstromtal”] of the Elbe. Hamburg’s sea port as business location is tied to its place through the river as the main route

of transportation. Elbe morphology has formed a specific coherent perception of the city (slope of the Geest, inflow of the Alster river, cleavage of the Elbe). Nonetheless, the city perception has been strongly formed by anthropogenic designs (retaining the Alster, recessing the navigation channel of the Elbe, regulating and straightening the Elbe waterway by massive aggradations in the harbor area). In recent years, other usages of the waterfront have added to those “natural” locational factors. The specific form and shape of the city along the waterfront has been discovered as a physically favored space for certain highly preferred new branches of industry.

Second, the Elbe is frequently considered a “hard” locational factor when pointing to its fundamental capacities within traffic and transportation infrastructure and to its indispensability as a resource to the resident heavy industry, carrying its process water and sewage water (e.g. metal processing industry, petro-chemical industry). “Hard” locational factors are connected to the local economic and infrastructural terms. In the process of canvassing and settling new companies and qualified employees, “hardness” accentuates competitiveness.

Third, the Elbe has gained importance as a “soft” locational factor through its highly valued possibilities for local recreation. “Soft” locational factors are used to refer to social and ecological aspects making up what is called the “quality of life” of a specific city. The Elbe river is considered a “quality of life” factor for the resident and much sought-after working population (Pfähler/Tiedemann 1998).

Facing these different meanings and functions of the Elbe as “hard”, “soft”, and/or “natural”, we will now identify and discuss the discursive strands of the urban planning policy with a focus on the discursive construction of the use of the Elbe and its waterfront. Our material is taken from Hamburg’s planning guidelines [“Leitlinien”] of urban development between 1980 and the present. We consider the planning documents of city and regional development of particular interest, as those plans have declared and asserted the major concepts of chosen courses and options for action. The plans present the discursively dominant and politically placeable arguments available at their specific historical moments.

The *urban development concept of 1980* aims at balancing growing claims to the city going along with an increasing population density and at harmonizing conflicting interests by presenting a unified concept of shaping the city. The central concern is to come to terms with social problems in the quarters and to support traditional branches of the economy. The Elbe comes in where the extension of the harbor and the waterway is concerned. Ecological issues

stand back behind unobstructed navigation. However, a re-evaluation concerning water quality is taking place. The sewages of industry and households are to be processed and purified conforming to higher standards, and the Elbe is to be used as on-site preflooder only in exceptional cases (SteK 1980). The main arguments of this document can be allocated to a discourse of controlling and of technological progress. A scientific discourse gains dominance regarding the ‘gaps’ of scientific knowledge about ecological interrelations that are to be closed. Yet, neither nature conservation nor landscape protection is a factor in the program.

The drawing up of the *urban development concept of 1996* was stimulated notably by external impulses. In the course of the reorganization of Europe, Hamburg experienced a major transformation of its population and its economic development. The acknowledged goal of the concept is to regulate these new dynamics. Hamburg is presented as a “traffic crossing” to Eastern Europe and to the Baltic Sea. Furthermore, Hamburg is depicted as the “green city” [“grüne Stadt”] to its growing tertiary-sector-population. The focus lies on social integration with the intention to balance growing disparities within the inner city districts. The industrial sites of the Elbe are no longer included in the pronounced visions for Hamburg’s future. Though the harbor is to be turned into a logistics centre and to be expanded for further surface intensive container handling, this strategy plays only a minor role in the over-all concept. Rather, the waterfront [Hafenrand] is to be reconstructed to accommodate new branches of economic activity. The northern waterfront of the Elbe in the inner city area is claimed as the “string of pearls” [“Perlenkette”] to realize the idea of revitalizing the riverbank for new uses. Hamburg’s domestic port is depicted as the new district center of commercial services, while the southern waterfront of the Elbe near Finkenwerder is to be extended for the settlement of an aviation industry plant (SteK 1996). These changes of utilization are combined with a growing interest for the Elbe and its riverbank slope as landscape quality. The arguments related to these developmental concerns support a new discourse of “location”, aiming at the changing uses of the riverside. On the one hand, we can distinguish a discourse of expansion and growth, whenever capacity, that is: the surface extension of the harbor and the Elbe as a waterway is called for. On the other hand, we can identify a discourse of integration, whenever the negotiation of social, ecological, and architectural compatibility of planning decisions is addressed. These contradictory discourses become obvious when dealing with single projects. This demonstrates that the negotiations of restructuring measures and of competition regarding the location are governed by a discourse of conflict. Rather than in favor of landscape preservation, competitions regarding the use of the northern Elbe riverbank

slope are to be decided in favor of habitation/residency, work/employment, and transportation/infrastructure.

The *regional development concept of 2000* releases strong impulses for external orientation. The stated goal is to gain a differentiated regional profile within a trilateral cooperation combining science politics, labor politics, and surface use politics (Petersen 2000). The goals are hardly substantiated as an overall concept; rather, they are formulated on the basis of guiding projects. Within these mission statements, the Elbe is discovered as a landscape with a high value for urban planning. Its uses are now barely calculated with respect to the industry and transportation sector; rather, the improvement of water quality as the ecological basis for life and the enhancement of the river's recreational appeal have moved into the center of debate. Above all, the Elbe is to contribute to the quality of life of the city core, as "lifeline Elbe" ["Lebensader Elbe"] (REK 2000). This planning concept is based on a competition and marketing discourse in which the river landscape figures prominently as the trademark of the green metropolis. This competition and marketing discourse is related to a location discourse which strongly highlights the Elbe as a "soft" locational factor and an important element of regional identity. The environmental discourse is present only with the argument to preserve single local features. The effective nature conservation is to be enabled by a network structure ("nature" is designed as a theme park), adapted to the directives of the European Commission for an ecological network „Natura 2000“. A sustainability discourse is emerging; however, this discourse is connected to the issues of the Agenda 21 only sweepingly and generally, it is substantial only with regard to a cutback on resources by means of technological intervention. Conflicts between economic, ecologic, and social dimensions of development are not a subject of the concept.

We can summarize that the 'economic construction' of the Elbe runs like a thread through the guiding principles which the last 20 years of urban planning concepts have brought up. The rebuilding of Hamburg's economic structure has been mediated with images from discourses of competition, of efficiency, and of economic location. Throughout, the center of reference and benchmark has been the narrative of indispensable and boundless growth. The environmental discourse has been oriented towards economic dominance as well. The rise of nature conservation aims primarily at an increase of life quality of the resident human population – other life forms are secondary at best – to augment the attractiveness of Hamburg as "location". The discrepancy of these discourses is negotiated and balanced by means of the narrative of growth, conflicting interests are discursively harmonized. We might speak of the *economizing* of the Elbe with regard to its immediate use by the industrial sector;

we might speak of the *ecologizing* of the Elbe with regard to its function within a long-term revaluation of Hamburg's economy. We might even speak of the *greening* of the Elbe (compare Litfin 1998; Remmen 2002, Bauriedl/Wissen 2002), indicating that "nature" has been 'refashioned in green' since the early 1990s to meet rising requests for a sustainable "quality of life".

The narratives these "natures" are based upon can be distinguished as, first, a technical narrative of a functional "nature", offering high-quality material for design and engineering, and serving primarily as a resource for human needs and use; second, a romantic narrative of the aesthetic "nature", nutrient of the soul, pure and whole, by all means esteemed, but nevertheless scenery-like. In the next section, we will ask what kinds of local story-lines have been developed to organize Hamburg's dominant local discourses and the broader cultural narratives into a material Elbe architecture.

4 Considering Matter: Standpoints and Views

This section investigates the materializations of the Elbe between the Speicherstadt in Hamburg's center and the suburb Rissen. Until recently, the Elbe was considered a valuable residence location in the west of the city centre only. The bleak northern waterfront of Altona, housing unused former harbor plants, was plainly unappealing. Only the waterfront gangways ["Landungsbrücken"] of St. Pauli could draw from the fascination of the "big, wide world" ["große, weite Welt"]. Accordingly, the Elbe has hardly come of age as a local recreation area of the "green metropolis". Until the 1990s, bathing in the river, contaminated by navigation and harbor industry, was simply unthinkable.

With reference back to the advertisement campaign of the sewage facilities and their message of "the goal" being "clear", we can now discern that there has always been another very obvious goal: Apart from the pure water campaigns of the right (northern) riverside there has been the ongoing fostering of industrial productivity at the left (southern) riverside. The goal to turn the Elbe into a "holiday resort" is as "clear" as the goal to maintain it as "production site". Consequently, to speak of "right" and "left" marks not simply the two sides of the river, it also marks very different standpoints and viewpoints, which enable downright opposing perspectives and views. We might speak of at least *two* "Elbes" that become perceptible. Notably, we hardly observe any collision between those "two rivers". How these viewpoints are reconciled will be the question in this part of the paper.

To substantiate those two sights of the Elbe as both constitutive of Hamburg's city guise, we will present two examples of the "left" and the "right" Elbe 'scenery'. Two local story-lines demonstrate how the Elbe is seen at once as a luxurious residence site, as site and location for new and buoyant tertiary-sector commerce, and as a major location of the primary industrial sector. The two story-lines we present are the "String of Pearls" and the "Harbor Milieu".

White-Collar Encounters: "String of Pearls at the Waterfront"

Around 1985 the urban development of the northern waterfront of the Elbe between St. Pauli and Neumühlen was accepted as a political obligation. Up to this date, the urban wasteland of deserted fishery shanties was interrupted only by the reconstructed Altona fish market ["Fischmarkt"], the only town place opening towards the Elbe and its southern shore. The vision foresaw a new "city front towards the Elbe" ["Stadtfront zur Elbe"]. The plan was not designed as a comprehensive project, but as a line of solitary projects at waterfront, along a length of roughly six kilometers. This concept was termed "string of pearls" ["Perlenkette"] (STEB 2000). The image of threading architectural assets like pearls on a string became a very speaking and meaningful metaphor. It associated the sole construction projects with the notion of highly valuable entrepreneur 'solitaires' in what was now considered a first-quality location. Similar processes were known from other port cities, and the term "Perlenkette" itself had also been used for similar alignments of high-priced areas and private objects. Accordingly, the "string of pearls at the waterfront" ["Perlenkette am Hafenrand"] worked well as a local story-line.

The upcoming motif and story-line of the "string of pearls" went together with a fundamental sectoral change from industrial settlements (magazines and warehouses, a cold store, and a malthouse) to a pricey location for commerce, service oriented business, and media firms. Today, offices and trade firms take turns with expensive lifestyle cafes and the building of a famous eco-giant, Greenpeace. Additionally, the area was envisioned and planned as a residence location. At the moment, a campus project in Altona is being realized that advertises lodging in "lofts" for so-called "start ups" (Fig. 4: Elbberg Campus @ltona). The "Campus for start ups" addresses successful young professionals with an income allowing to combine work and recreation at the same stylish place. "Start up" conveys the message of thriving, flourishing, optimistic, and trendsetting white-collar employees; the term also affirms Hamburg's favored story of booming ascent, dynamic growth, and limitless capability, realized within this prominent quarter. The "start up" lofts are to be a symbol of



Figure 4: Elbberg Campus @ltona

the “smart city growth”. This message is mirrored in the modern and functional glass architecture in the style of the 1960s. The campus is to be built from single structural elements, unostentatious, pure and stringent, communicating that a successful district can be designed at the drawing table. The aesthetics of the symmetry and efficiency of the “string of pearls” connects to the narrative of technological progress and high-quality growth as well as to the city’s dominant discourses of marketing and competition. It also connects to the narrative of *economizing* nature, turning “nature” into a consumer good. Elbe “nature” has been made a commodity.

Blue-Collar “Milieu”: Hamburg Harbor

The project of the “string of pearls” has brought into existence a left-riverbank ‘panorama’ structure: the entirety of the newly risen real estate can only be seen from a viewpoint located *on* the river. The Elbe provides the only standpoint bringing together the outlook to the expensive residence location on the left and to the industry location on the right riverside. This standpoint located on the Elbe is ‘imagined’ in that it is basically taken up by tourists. It is a spectator’s standpoint. Indeed, both city views are discursively called upon as ‘scenery’. Complementary to the professional residence Elbe is the charm and attraction of the producing sector in close vicinity. The Elbe literally mediates between white-collar “lifestyle” and blue-collar harbor “milieu”. “Harbor milieu” is a story-line which communicates the fascination of dying down sweat and toil in the docks and shipyards.

While in nearly all see port cities, heavy industry has been situated at the periphery, Hamburg offers a veritable ‘close-up’ of the harbor, a “dramatic scenery” [“dramatische Szenerie”]. The notion of “shipyard scenery” [“Werftenkulisse”] is a recurrent discursive figure when referring to Hamburg’s harbor, although the harbor has been a central part of Hamburg’s industry, freight forwarding, and trade, and has been granted much more material impact than

that of a simple scenic setting. Nevertheless, on the right (northern) riverside, industry and harbor ‘nostalgia’ prevails. Certainly, harbor industry has been strongly reclining within the past years. The producing sector is by now the weakest leg of the diversified Hamburg economic structure.

Thus, the Elbe functions not only as a waterway for shipping freights, but also as a divide: the river enables the extremely close approach of harbor industry to the “string of pearls” opposite; the river allows this ‘clash’ of discourses, even makes it desirable. The northern Elbe shore stays very ‘clean’ in this idea and process of expanding the city up to the water by settling marketable, sparkling service and technology commerce. In conclusion, however, we also need to ask about the quality of the Elbe water our paper started out with: Did the Elbe water become clean in the process of ‘greening’ Elbe nature? The town officials assure us that water quality has measurably enhanced. However, disconnected and separated are certainly the material effects resulting from sewage disposal on the harbor area.

The best example of this material disconnection might be the sewage water from Hamburg’s households on the northern shore, which ends up in the “putrefaction towers” [“Faultürme”] on the southern shore (Fig. 5: Hamburg Harbor with Sewage Plant Koehlbrandhoeft). This example brings out very curiously a visualization of the literal ‘cleaning process’ (Latour 1993) between the left and the right Elbe that we started out with. The right riverside stays clean since its sewage is tunneled to the left side. There, it is still close, but so totally integrated into the industry scenery that it does bother neither the “start ups” in their offices nor the bathing city folk in Blankenese.



Figure 5: Hamburg Harbor

front: Sewage Plant Koehlbrandhoeft and Harbor;

back: “String of Pearls” and City Center

6 Conclusions: Discursive Combinations – Material Separations

To summarize, the Elbe river at once combines and separates standpoints and perspectives within the city of Hamburg. The observation that the river summons contradictory discourses at a high spatial density leads us to a number of conclusions concerning the interplay of discourse/discursive politics and matter/materializations. We would like to suggest and discuss three responses to the major conference question, “does discourse matter?”

I. Discourses do without matter

Discursive variety is made possible by making incongruities invisible. The Elbe waterfront as “natural” boundary conceals discursive boundaries. Within the discursive ‘patchwork’, “pure”, non-overlapping areas are realized: the industry harbor, the modern start-up commerce, and the holiday resort enjoying clean water. The patchwork functions by separating symbolic representations from material conditions and effects (Hall 1997, Rose 2002). The bathing water in the Blankenese part of the river is symbolically set apart from the sewage water in the harbor part. A ‘scenic structure’ prevails.

II. Discourses do matter

Visions of urban planning and development which ten years ago collided, like the idea of the “green metropolis” [“Grüne Metropole”] and the idea of “smart city growth” [“Wachsende Stadt”], have formed a discursive coalition. Discursive issues arising from those visions, like “environmental quality”, “industrial nostalgia”, or “architectural aesthetics”, have produced a multiplicity of spatially centered and condensed materializations of the Elbe as harbor river, residential river, or recreation river. A measurable change of “water quality” might have contributed to the wellbeing of the city inhabitants. River discourses and material river landscapes effect one another reciprocally. The development of the northern waterfront has consolidated the shape and form and image of the Elbe within the city for years to come.

III. “Doing nature” as discursive practice

A specific discursive order of the Elbe has brought to existence a specific material “nature”. This “nature” has been “done” in the course of permanent reconstruction. To speak of Elbe “nature” thus refers to a discursive “nature”. The “nature” of the Elbe has not been constant and stable, but has been quite *fluid*, to remain within the metaphor of flow. The term “fluid” does not mean arbitrary, but signifies that matter takes form “channelled” by the narratives, discourses, and local story-lines available and powerful at each historical moment. In this

sense “nature” is contested as matter just as discourses of nature are contested (Macnaghten/Urry 1998).

The sustainability discourse is one of different discourses that have been “doing” the river Elbe. To turn to the main topic of the Hamburg conference, the “sustainability transition”, we suggest that any realizations of a “sustainable” Elbe (and of Hamburg) will require a careful analysis of which narratives and which discourses are dominant, and which story-lines are locally situated at a given time.

Figures

- Fig 1: Bathing Woman in Front of the Süllberg. “Das Ziel ist klar”; Advertisement Campaign of the Hamburg sewage facilities, Picture Series 2001 (http://www.hamburger-stadtentwaesserung.de/index.php?cat_id_sel=11&cat_pos=500;675;0;0).
- Fig 2: Penguins in the Speicherstadt. “Das Ziel ist klar”; Advertisement Campaign of the Hamburg sewage facilities, Picture Series 2001 (http://www.hamburger-stadtentwaesserung.de/index.php?cat_id_sel=11&cat_pos=500;675;0;0).
- Fig 3: The Elbe River between Speicherstadt and Süllberg. Topographic Map: Der Hafen von Hamburg 1:50.000, Wirtschaftsbehörde Hamburg, Amt für Strom- und Hafenbau, 1998.
- Fig 4: Elbberg Campus @ltona. Poster from the Campaign for the Project (<http://www.elbbergcampusaltona.de>). Design: Advertisement Agency Davies Meyer (<http://www.daviesmeyer.de>).
- Fig 5: Hamburg Harbor with Sewage Plant Koehlbrandhoeft. Photography by KH-Automation Projects GmbH, Fulda Brück (<http://www.kh-ap.de/de/Deutsch/Projekte/Abwasseranlagen/Koehlbrandhoeft-Sued.htm>)

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Authors:

Dipl. Geogr. Sybille Bauriedl
 Research Project NEDS – Sustainable Development between Throughput and Symbolism
 Hamburg University
 Department of Geography
 Bundesstr. 55
 20146 Hamburg
 Germany
 Fon: +49 40 428 38-52 17
 Fax: +49 40 428 38-49 67
 Email: Sybille.Bauriedl@NEDS-Projekt.de

Dr. Sabine Höhler
 Research Project NEDS – Sustainable Development between Throughput and Symbolism
 HWP – Hamburg University of Economics and Politics
 Von-Melle-Park 9
 20146 Hamburg
 Germany
 Fon: +49 40 428 38-36 64
 Fax: +49 40 428 38-41 50
 Email: Sabine.Hoehler@NEDS-Projekt.de