Trajectories of urbanisation in Hamburg, 1920-2007.
Source: Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg, Behörde für Stadtentwicklung und Wohnen, 2014.

Urban Expansion Re-Visited

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Abstract

This paper 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 a contemporary perspective, with a certain focus on big projects that have evolved in recent decades and are on the rise again. Towards that end, I will situate the subject matter in historical contexts, provide some explanation as to the 1970s and more recent dynamics, and discuss how large-scale urban projects are being implemented. While big projects pursue different ambitions – such as economic, socio-demographic or ecological goals – they are set in place by a kind of managerial urbanism, often prioritise economic gains and thus challenge urban policy and planning. The paper concludes with a call to contextualise the variegated outcomes of new urban projects and to develop appropriate methods for monitoring and assessing urban life in these quarters.

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For quite a while, the process of urbanisation was based on urban expansion, that is, the growth of cities and inner-urban areas, both inside and outside of the dedicated planning perimeters, and both as concerns demographics and spatial expansion. In particular, the heavy industrialisation of the late 19th/early 20th century has brought enormous powers of concentration of resources, capital, workforce to cities, thus pushing urbanisation to unprecedented levels (Matzerath 1989). Post-war urban development saw a variety of forms and formats to emerge, including the decline of urban centres and a de-concentration of housing and commercial areas, accompanied by scattered suburban development and the punctual practice of urbanity by density. The rising dissatisfaction with the functionalist shape of many cities resulted in the call for a more integrated vision of urban planning, involving issues such as mixed-use developments or affordable housing. After a revival of large-scale developments in the mid-1990s following the German unification, big projects for urban and suburban development are now on the rise again.

In this topical context the paper aims to give a brief overview of how urbanisation can be discussed from today's perspective, with a certain focus on big projects and their management. It further highlights what this means for urban policy and governance. The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: Firstly, I will situate the subject matter in historical contexts and discuss urban development as a drama, inspired by the seminal work of Jürgen Reulecke (1985) on the history of urbanisation in Germany. Secondly, I will provide some explanation as to the shifts of the 1970s and also more recent dynamics of urban expansion. Cities suffered from both growth and decline as well as expansion, taking place in both core urban and suburban areas. Thirdly, in contrast to the classical pattern of horizontal growth of the city-region, the paper emphasises recent forces of globalisation and financialisation of the urban which can be understood as drivers of vertical urbanisation. As many of these dynamics are generated by large-scale urban projects dedicated to the strategic placement of retail and housing, office space and research clusters in urban areas, I will reflect upon how these projects are being managed and implemented. The technicalities that are associated with high risk-investment in big projects provide a certain development imperative which challenges planning goals, such as the just, inclusive or green city.

The empirical illustration that is presented here to substantiate my argument is taken from recent research syntheses on longer-term development trajectories of cities and regions in Europe and beyond, most notably provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD (2020), and a few more sources. As a case in point, I will also refer to some debates and developments in the metropolitan regions of Hamburg and Frankfurt/ Main, Germany, which illustrate the variegated dynamics of the urbanisation process over a couple of decades quite well.

The historian's take: urbanisation as a drama

In his seminal work on the history of urbanisation in Germany, historian Jürgen Reulecke (1985) once presented urbanisation in the shape of the classical drama – a sequence of five events (or acts) that began in the late 18th century (see Table 1). These acts brought about what was eventually perceived to be the industrial city. The first act was called Exposition, the establishment of the early foundations for urbanisation. It was followed by the second act, societal modernisation, which led to the almost complete transformation (Überformung) of the built environment in the third act, thus setting the stage for industrial urbanisation. The rise of the big industries and their need for resources, most notably raw materials and workforce, was the main driver here.

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

Table 1: Urbanisation as a drama. Source: Author after Reulecke 1985: 9ff.

Act 4 indicates the period of disruption of the two world wars and the subsequent recovery. Before and after 1945, this was perceived by some architects and planners as a chance for re-creating the European city from scratch. Urbanisation gathered pace in the 1960s, bringing about the de-centralised settlement pattern that became predominant in a majority of European countries. This fifth act was constitutional for post-war urban expansion in Europe: shifting between centres and peripheries, depending on the demand for space and the political will to provide sufficient supply of space and infrastructure. This task was then to be executed by urban planning. At the time of writing and publishing his book (1985), Jürgen Reulecke could not foresee what would happen afterwards, as part of what he addressed as post-urban developments. As a follow-up to Act 5, he insinuated that one may (or may not) expect an urban tragedy to happen – the dissolution of the city. Writing from the perspective of 35 years afterwards, we have the privilege to address the question whether the author's prediction was right or not, give some consideration as to why it has happened the way it eventually did, and how we can come to appropriate interpretations of the urban and urbanisation.

Urban expansion in the long 1970s and today

While cities as such were considered to be in demise for some time during the 1960s and 1970s (the 5th Act according to Reulecke, see Table 1 above), urbanisation got accelerated in more general terms, when looking at urban regions as a whole. Having taken off already in the 1960s and lasting until the 1980s, this period could also be understood as the long 1970s. Economic growth unfolded in expanded territorial relations, thus changing cities and urban systems in quantitative and qualitative regards. Initially, there was a notable shift from urban to sub-urban expansion, which was already driven by post-WWII growth. During times of high demand, due to population or economic growth or rising standards of living, it is rather logical that the supply needs to accelerate, in order to cater to rising needs for development. The city of Hamburg gives a good illustration of such urban expansion for most of the 20th century. Figure 1 highlights the visible outcome for the period between 1920 and 2007: a pattern of growth stretches alongside major transport axes and close to the existing built environment, but also clustering at certain localities beyond the border of the city-state. The more or less invisible reasons for that process relate to the complex, evolutionary interplay of property rights, planning intentions and development that eventually makes urban expansion happen.
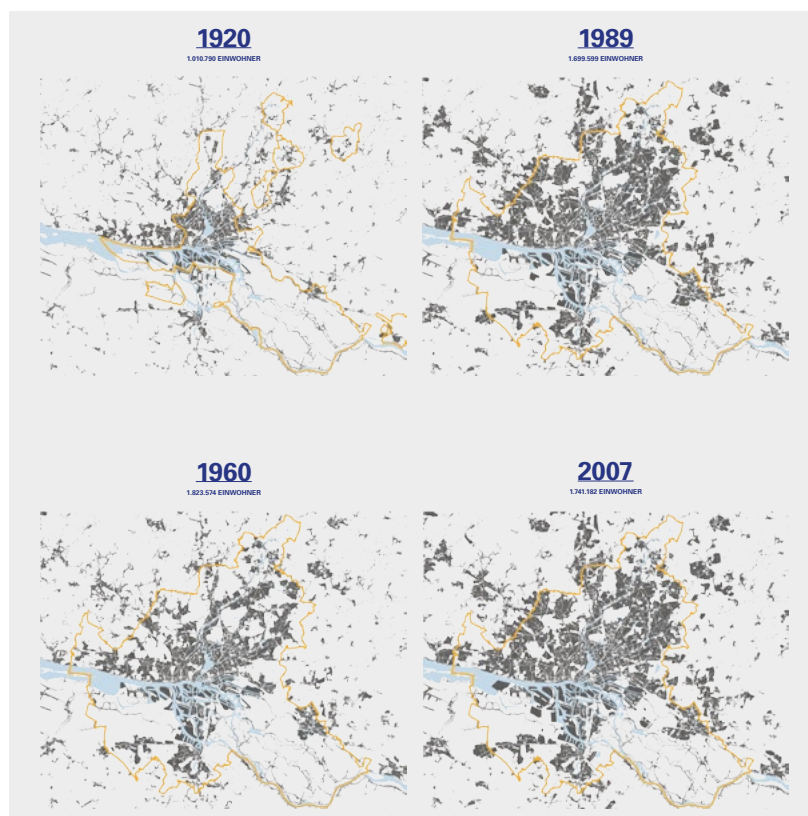

Figure 1: Trajectories of urbanisation in Hamburg, 1920-2007.
Source: Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg, Behörde für Stadtentwicklung und Wohnen, 2014.

Suburban areas accommodated the demand for housing in different shapes, such as single-family homes, terraced houses, and also multi-storey dwellings and high risers – even though the latter were rarely considered to be part of the typical imaginary of suburbia (Keil 2018).

While the suburbanisation of manufacturing had already taken place earlier, post-war suburbia became more variegated. It comprises big-box shopping malls and entertainment complexes; large-scale housing estates, popular in both Western and Eastern Europe; and office towns, such as Eschborn near Frankfurt, Germany, or Luxembourg's European and banking district Kirchberg. In most cases, it can be argued that specialisation was the underlying paradigm at that time, not integration. When discussing the example of the City Nord in Hamburg, Germany, which is a template case of post-war office towns, a 1980 geography paper 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). This notion of "away from central urban areas" is key here, as it clearly indicates that specialisation, functional separation and decentralisation were still the watchwords of urban planning when these projects were conceived.

Shifting spatial dynamics

More recently, spatial dynamics have been shifting again and are now increasingly driven by market changes that foster an urban determination of demographics and of economics; the same applies for real-estate trends on the supply side. A recent analysis by the OECD provides some insight into urbanisation processes that were observed over the last decades in different parts of the world (OECD 2020). Based on population density and the functional urban region concept, it is estimated that global urban population – measured in cities of 50,000 inhabitants or more – has doubled over the last forty years, having increased from 1.5 billion people in 1975 to about 3 billion in 2015 (OECD 2020: 16). This massive urbanisation development had three different underlying logics: by roughly fifty percent, it is considered a consequence of densifying urban space within the planning perimeters. A quarter of this increase is presumably linked to the spatial expansion of existing cities beyond their boundaries, and another quarter of urban growth is associated with a rising population of cities that puts them into the 50k-category (ibid.). As of 2015, the report classifies 48.2 % of the population living in cities, 28.3 % living in towns and semi-dense areas, and 23.5 % in rural areas (OECD 2020: 17).

Accelerated urbanisation seems also evident when 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 compared with suburbs. The recent pattern revealed by analyses based on the Stadtregionsmodell (including large urban regions with core cities above 100,000 inhabitants only) indicates a certain urban bias in contemporary developments. However, the irony of urbanisation is that expansion happens in a broad variety of places – at urban cores, fringes, and in-between spaces; or to put it in the words of David Wachsmuth (2014: 75): "We examine the traditional concept of the city in the context of urbanisation processes that exceed it". This observation is supported by official statistics on housing production between 2012 and 2017 targeted toward suburbs and core city areas (Siedentop et al. 2019: 5) and thus adding to the emerging polycentric city region. Therefore, to speak of re-urbanisation in this context would come short, as much of the new demand is generated by international rather than internal migration, particularly not by a back-to-the-city movement. Also, what was once perceived as a long-standing trend could also turn out to be a rather short-lived exper-

ience, which puts a certain emphasis on the temporalities of development. Hence a proper interpretation of these data requires the careful assessment of recent dynamics in the context of longer-term developments.

Policy and planning strategies

In terms of urban policy and planning, functionalism is now considered outdated, and integration has become the predominant narrative for practice. This is confirmed by analysis of some prominent international development projects, such as Hafencity, Hamburg, Germany; Ørestad, Copenhagen, Denmark; or Seestadt Aspern in Vienna, Austria. Mixed neighbourhoods with some focus on housing seem to be standard practice today, driven by the desire to bring urban spirit to both central and peripheral places. Such urban projects at large scale became also popular for relocating research and high-tech university campuses in particular. The University of Luxembourg's new campus Belval, established on the grounds of a former steel mill, exemplifies a good case of a completely new development for research, higher education and business purposes. Such cases denote a broad range of large urban projects aimed at fostering another phase of urbanisation occurring widely, if not ubiquitously. Different from 1980s urban expansion, the normative claim that these projects pursue is integration, that is to offer urban amenities and full city-ness, rather than being isolated mono-functional settlements.

While we do not know to what degree this integration actually works (see Jessen 2004), we have a certain sense for the reasons why such developments have been speeding up in early 21st century contexts. Apart from changing framework conditions, time and phasing come into play here, as city-regional expansion is on the peak of overriding previous inner-city dynamics. After two decades of extensive inner-urban reconversion of vacant industrial land and military facilities, rail, port and logistics sites, the associated land reserves are now running empty. When there is hardly any waterfront or rail terminal left over for re-development, the pressure automatically shifts to green fields and the urban fringe. Again, the case of Hamburg is instructive here, where the government of the city-state followed this well-worn path of the growing city for quite some time (Ministry of urban Development and Housing 2014). A key strategy was to promote "More City in the City", in German "Mehr Stadt in der Stadt", which means more densification and mixed-use development so as to offer a high quality of life in the existing urban neighbourhoods (Ministry of urban Development and Housing 2014: 14). However, inner-city land reserves are limited per se, while housing costs are much higher than in the outskirts. Hence the search for development options at the outer edge of the existing built environment seems unavoidable. The most important case here is the upcoming new project Oberbillwerder at the city's eastern fringe. Over the course of the next twenty years, a dense urban district is envisaged there, offering 7,000 apartments and 5,000 jobs. Apart from the conversion of port lands or military barracks, this is the first time in recent years that the city-state opts for urbanising a greenfield, not brownfield, area. Even though internal development is still the official priority of the city's planning strategy, the Oberbillwerder project confirms that present and future needs cannot be met without further urban expansion.

Conflict and tension in the urbanisation of the fringes

Even though this expansion is considered a wise move, urbanisation of the fringes raises some important questions. First, what sort of social worlds are emerging when suburbs are on their way to become urbanised further? It is one of the secrets of suburban expansion as to how the new arrivals fit with existing communities, particularly when planned at large scale. Second, placing new neighbourhood projects at the fringe of core cities in larger estates obviously requires to seek political consent with surrounding municipalities. Tension seems to be the norm rather than the exception in both social and political regards. A striking case here is the hotly debated project at the north-western edge of Frankfurt am Main, Germany, where the city plans for a new neighbourhood to accommodate 30,000 residents (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: New urban district in Frankfurt am Main, North West.
Source: Stadtvermessungsamt Frankfurt am Main, 2016.

Here city-regional governance is exactly situated between the interests of core city and suburban communities. It appears that neighbour municipalities did not feel sufficiently consulted in advance, when the city of Frankfurt started to develop the idea of its most recent urban expansion toward the fringes. Meanwhile the regional planning council in charge of the Frankfurt/Rhein-Main area, the Regional Assembly of Southern Hesse, has put certain limits on the development of open space in the region, including the northwestern edge of the city of Frankfurt (Regionalversammlung Südhessen 2019). However, regional collaboration is easier said than done. Recent metropolitan developments in cases such as Hamburg or Frankfurt reveal diverging interests at stake, which require

careful political co-ordination and inter-municipal cooperation. The mode of such developments on their way to implementation poses planning problems as well: Do we always have a clear idea on whether these projects are urban by nature, or are they more suburban? What happens to new projects when they are elevated to the city-regional not urban scale? It can be argued that, roughly 25 years after the emergence of metropolitan regions as a planning tool, urban fringes still lack a coherent strategy – which would certainly have to be more than simply copying dense urban layouts and transplanting them to the edges of the cities. The amalgamation of city and landscape requires appropriate strategies that reflect the hybrid nature of these areas.

Financialisation, big projects and the move towards managerial urbanism

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. What we now also observe is that cities, particularly the bigger, prosperous ones, are becoming part of vertical arrangements, which is due to their increasing insertion in the global economy (cf. Aalbers 2020, Hesse 2018). The emergence of financial markets and the availability of freely floating capital has rendered cities a relevant subject of international investments, most notably in office real estate and recently in the housing sector as well. Driven by forces that are not specifically urban (financial crises, interest rates, austerity, economic competition), big money and big politics have controlled the financialisation of urban policy, often to the detriment of the city. This phenomenon includes a clash of interests between a city's population and the profit-seeking strategies of financial market actors. As a consequence of financialisation, 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, real estate and (often public) housing – is becoming subject of value creation and revenue maximisation.

It is important to recall here that this development is not totally new. Already the late Neil Smith, in his very first academic paper published in 1979, 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 flows 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 recently illustrated, for example in Berlin (Hesse 2018). This practice has emerged on the grounds of deregulation or gaps in regulation; it is meanwhile accepted to be one of the most prominent threats to the inclusive city. It also sheds new light on gentrification, by reflecting a broader pattern of societal inequality, rather than just leading to displacement by urban upgrading (Lawton 2019). One of the key problems of abstract capital transforming urban housing stock into assets is that the financial agents remain anonymous and hardly ever show up in the target areas of their investment. They are therefore also difficult to reach for the forces of local politics.

Equity issues are particularly relevant when large-scale urban projects are pursued. On the one hand, the implementation of big urban projects is prone to risk, as it requires enormous amount of capital to be invested, and the pressure to provide return on investment is usually higher than in smaller projects. On the other hand, it has an important institutional consequence, paving the way for a managerial urbanism that can now be considered standard practice in urban planning and development. While it is important to reflect upon market imperatives that exert high pressure on planning the bigger projects are becoming, the related attitudes from business practice have set a new standard for implementation: project management. As a consequence of an increasingly compartmentalised, contract-based planning practice, technocratic management attitudes and centralised 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 (Savini and Raco 2019). According to the authors, it would lead to "the re-fashioning of planning's core objectives and purpose from an earlier focus on the value of input-centred forms of deliberation, place-making and social justice to an enhanced concern with output-centred agendas premised on expedited development and growth" (Ibid: 3-4).

The observation of managerial urbanism as a common development practice, and thus a pattern, complements earlier critiques of the governance structures of large-scale urban projects. These are held suspicious of creating new quasi-governmental frameworks and practices. Particularly, the disjoining of big projects from the usual planning context and the establishment of separate bodies of project management are viewed rather critically (Leick et al. 2020). Large projects, which are likely to adopt the principles of project management, tend to prioritise the aims of market implementation (most importantly time and cost/resources) against concurring planning goals such as urban integration. As a result, the momentum and time pressure as well as the interdependencies within project management would also rule out good participation. Simons (2003: 35) emphasises the pressure for accelerated implementation, which presupposes new planning procedures outside the traditional planning structures, increasingly enforced by development companies organised under private law.

Moreover, following colleagues Gernot Grabher and Joachim Thiel from Hamburg (2014), large-scale projects can also be considered the means of 'self-induced shocks'. By concentrating large development volumes and thus invested money, it is expected that the projects provide a significant contribution to economic development, to housing production or to orchestrate urban events. The notion of the shock points at the determination of planning bodies and local governments to dissolve planning lock-ins and inertia at local levels, not least since stakeholder or citizen participation have made development as complex as formal laws and guidelines did before. Hence such incidents are set in place partly accidentally, partly deliberately, in order to speed up the development process. However, this is likely to threaten open planning processes and also limits options for urban integration.

Conclusions: How to deal with further urban expansion?

Our short review of recent dynamics in urbanisation and urban expansion provides a rather mixed picture, particularly when it comes to the question of how to assess the outcomes of these processes. What do they mean: Is urbanisation equivalent to a revival of cities, and what are the associated consequences and challenges? Historian Jürgen Reulecke (1985: 10), when reading urbanisation as a drama, was not clear what to expect as a follow-up to Act 5, whether the comprehensive de-concentration of settlements of the 1980s would eventually lead to a tragedy, the dissolution of the city. 35 years later, we can argue that urban transformation in its entirety is more complex than to simply assume urban renaissance or a triumph of the urban (Glaeser 2011) to be the norm: Urban expansion happens both in urban centres and peripheries, it can include de-concentration in the core and large-scale urbanism at the fringes. All this does not apply to the city as such, but to a range of cities in rather variegated, diversified ways.

Most paradoxical seems to be that urban success stories can turn out immensely painful. This is perfectly visible in the case of Munich, following an exciting story by the Süddeutsche Zeitung of 30th October (SZ – Süddeutsche Zeitung 2019). Over a couple of decades, a series of growth cycles happened to occur in the city. Munich is known for a rather progressive practice in urban planning and social policy, particularly when it comes to land and development. However, the city failed to apply an effective rent control and now witnesses the strongest lack of affordable housing nationwide. In this light, it seems no longer useful to distinguish successful cities from those that are in decline. Today it appears as a real challenge that problems and conflicts arise both from cities that are suffering from decline and from those struggling with the consequences of success.

As a consequence, one could address three critical points or questions, in order to inspire further debates: First, we need to scrutinise 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, by assessing the long 1970s (even 1960s) and looking at ongoing change of large-scale urban projects, to get insights 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 but 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?

If urban areas are going to be planned by and through big projects again, this certainly bears risk and opportunity. In response, a planning approach seems essential that carefully balances the two. Moreover, there are hardly any standard recipes or recommendations available for practice. An important consequence for research could be to invest more in

the observation, monitoring and impact analysis of the new urban quarters. This could provide critical, independent and constructive evidence for evaluating their outcomes. In my impression particularly the latter point – to contextualise, analyse and evaluate the variegated outcomes of new projects, and to reflect upon appropriate methods – seems largely underdeveloped in planning studies (see Oliveira and Pinho 2010).

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