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'European Port Cities' Ambiance as Heritage of the Future

An analysis of Dublin and Gothenburg

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Abstract. *I analyse how the specific spatial-material structure in combination with a certain local culture accounts for European port cities' characteristic ambiances. I show how port cities' historic material structure helps to preserve their maritime ambiance as cultural heritage for the future. Using two case studies from urban planning projects in Dublin (Ireland) and Gothenburg (Sweden), I show how European port cities' ambiances do not only stem from the cities' characteristic historic design, but are also used as heritage for the cities' future.*

Keywords: *port cities, urban planning, cultural heritage, staged ambiance*

In my paper, I focus on European port cities and the ways their specific spatial-material structure in combination with a certain local culture (Warsewa, 2014), accounts for port cities' characteristic ambiances. In so doing, I take the concept of 'ambiance'¹ as starting point for my analysis, understanding it as an intermediary between a city's material culture and its social dimension. Using data from empirical research in European port cities, I show how port cities' characteristic historic material structure is used to preserve the cities' maritime ambiance as cultural heritage² for the future. My argument goes as follows: First, cities in general and port cities in particular have a material and a social dimension. The material dimension refers to the cities' architecture and their material culture in general, thus comprising not only of buildings, but also of man-made objects in urban space such as sculptures or benches, infrastructures such as streets and canals and so forth. The social dimension refers to the cities' users, their practices of using the cities as well as norms, values, symbols etc. Taken together, a city then is a social-material assemblage. For port cities, this assemblage is characterised by the city's characteristic history as port cities, that is as site of specific port-related buildings and objects (material dimension) and port-related economies, values, practices (social dimension). The port city-specific ambiance emerges from the relation between the material and the social dimension: it is a characteristic port city ambiance rooting in the cities' history as port cities (ambiance¹). The interesting result from my empirical

1. I use the term 'ambiance' to stress the role of the built environment for evoking certain emotions and feelings of attachment (Thibaud 2015).

2. I use the notion of heritage to refer to the strategies of urban planners to select, reconstruct and promote a certain past of cities.

research is that this ambiance is not only characteristic for single port cities, but that it can be identified across European port cities and shows similar traits across these cities. Second, urban planners select certain elements of the cities' materiality and sociality as worth protecting, thus marking these selected elements as parts of the cities' cultural heritage, either tangible (material dimension) or intangible (social dimension). This set of elements of the cities' cultural heritage is then used to design the cities for future usage and accounts for the creation of a modified ambiance of the port cities: a staged ambiance (ambiance²). Thus, new 'heritage narrative [s]' (Delle and Levine, 2011, p. 64) (can) emerge when a specific urban history is constructed in retrospect (Urban, 2011), implying both tangible and intangible elements.

Port Cities' Ambiances

Port cities in general and European port cities in particular are characterised by a certain industrial history. This history stems from the cities' being sites of port-related industries like the shipbuilding industry and substantially affects the cities' material and social structure: The architectural design and the spatial structure, very much alike in European port cities, account for port cities' tangible cultural heritage; meanings, norms, values and practices account for the cities' intangible local culture (Warsewa, 2014). The cities' tangible structure is not only a representation of the cities' past, it also influences how people act in cities and, in general, inhabit cities. Thus, it also influences the intangible structure of the cities and the cities' societies. Such practices can then, on the other hand, be identified across port cities as characteristic of their intangible cultural heritage. In addition, it is the interplay of tangible and intangible structures that accounts for the cities' ambiances and their 'intrinsic logics'. Furthermore, what is identified as cultural heritage, stemming from the cities' pasts, serves as basis for urban developments that are directed towards the future, such as urban planning projects.

Constructing a Past as Port City

The Dublin Docklands are an excellent example of the industrial transformation that took place in Dublin and of the way a history as port city is constructed by local urban planning institutions. As a lot of industrial work in Dublin had been related to the port, the Docklands had been the center of laborers and carters on the docks and railways. Today, the Docklands are the place of e.g. the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) and Google's European headquarter. But it is also a central place of the city's tangible heritage and the place where the construction of the city's history as port city becomes clearly visible as the 'maritime [...] history of the Docklands has left a legacy of architectural and cultural heritage in the Area' (Dublin Docklands Development Authority, 2008, p. 177). The intangible maritime heritage of Dublin is constructed in planning documents in relation to the Dockland's community. Not only do you find *a strong seafaring tradition in the Docklands, as one would expect in a maritime setting. [...] In addition, the demise of large industries has contributed to unemployment in the Docklands. However, it has also encouraged the growth of a strong community spirit in the Area (Dublin Docklands Development Authority, 2008, p. 20)*. Here, the city's historical experience of structural changes due to the downfall of port-related industries is reinterpreted as the birth 'of a

strong community spirit'. Although Dublin's time as port city is bygone, it is present in the city planners' narrative of Dublin as port city with a strong community. Both Dublin and Gothenburg have undergone structural changes due to deindustrialisation, containerisation and the economic downfall of the shipyards industry. This experience is constantly re-negotiated and re-interpreted in order to construct an urban past that is a 'possibility' rather than a 'burden'. In Gothenburg, these processes of negotiation and interpretation are localised in the port area, the Norra Älvstranden. This area and therewith the city's history as port city is a burden to the city and its political and planning authorities: *G: There was no single big industrial enterprise wanting to take over, but it was the municipality that took care of it, of the dockyards, that is the state. W: Yes, the state inherited the [...] and suddenly they were lumbered with the dockyards that they didn't want to have. (GSB2, pgr. 128–129, own transl.)* Here, 'the dockyards' – a synonym for the whole area, the buildings as well as the contaminated wasteland – is perceived of as a burden. But the same planners describe how this burden and thus the historic incident of the economic crisis is reframed and reinterpreted as possibility: *W: [...] the background is that Gothenburg had been a really big city of shipyards, with shipbuilding industries [...] a backbone of the economy. And this vanished for different reasons. And was this a crisis or a possibility? And it turned out to be a possibility. (GSB2, pgr. 79, own transl.)* Reinterpreting the cities' pasts as possibilities for future developments has a lot to do with the conversion of buildings, the cities' tangible heritage, to new usages.

Planning Port Cities for the Future

One of the central planning strategies in European port cities is to convert port-related buildings and areas to new uses. This includes selecting objects for conversion, assigning them the status of being worth-to-be-protected, and selecting new usages and addressees for the objects. In the course of this process, traditional interpretations of the cities' material structure are overwritten and new interpretations for the tangible cultural heritage are created. In Dublin, the challenge of urban planning is to find a balance between the remains of Dublin's industrial and architectural history – which are considered valuable for tourism – and the needs of the knowledge-intensive industries. Both are regarded as important elements to keep the city dynamic. A representative of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce sees balancing between past and future as main task of local urban development, ultimately leading to a 'vibrant city': *we need to keep that Georgian Dublin alive [...] it can't be an ugly sky scraper just in the middle of a Georgian city [...] it's got to be well-balanced, preening districts where the Docklands will be [...] and then you can go into the old city, and then [...] we remain vibrant (DCh1, pgr. 433–434).* Certain buildings with a specific architectural style forming 'that Georgian Dublin' represent the city's tangible cultural heritage, stemming from the city's past. In order to succeed in bridging between past and future, 'preening districts' such as the Docklands with glass-and-steel-skyscrapers have to exist next to the 'Georgian city'. A similar development is described for the inner-city area The Liberties, one of Dublin's oldest districts and home of the newly-erected technology park The Digital Hub: *the physical manifestation here will be very obvious [...] it will be one that befits a creative city more, it will have refurbished heritage buildings of a high architectural quality and new modern architectural outputs side by side with that [...] and the whole thing being an example of how a modern twenty first century city can actually*

take the value of its past and its heritage, and hold on to it, and make it a significant part of its future identity as well, that's very important to us, aesthetically and creatively (DDH2, pgr. 786–788). The representatives of *The Digital Hub Development Board* stress the importance of existing architecture for creating new social and physical spaces for this future society: *we're certainly taking advantage of the infrastructure that's here already [...] there are some activities that suit older buildings [...] those creatives tend to prefer heritage type buildings [...] whereas the technologists tend to like the modern steel and glass buildings* (DDH2, pgr. 671–675). In the representatives' perception, specific types of buildings correspond to specific types of work: Old buildings are especially suited for those working in occupations closer to arts and culture, new buildings for those working in technological occupations. In addition, by converting existing buildings to new usages, a grown identity and heritage is build upon. For the Dublin Docklands, the planning documents assign conservation and re-use the role of 'maintain [ing] a sense of place and history' (Dublin Docklands Development Authority, 2008, p. 182). European port cities like Dublin and Gothenburg are characterised by their former port areas' location in or close by the city centre. In former times, this location had been an obstacle for a coherent and integrative urban development as the industrial areas were hardly accessible, often contaminated and designed for industrial, that is very specific, usages. The fact that the areas are today accessible and, most often, owned by the municipalities, allows for a re-use and make-over of the areas (Stadsbyggnadskontoret, 2009, p. 114). In numerous cases, this re-use comprises of a transformation from industrial to mixed-use, a renovation of heritage buildings and the development of new buildings. As a result, waterfront developments are observable all over (European) port cities (see e.g. Haarich and Plaza, 2010 for the development of Bilbao; see e.g. Müller, 2013 for Dublin and Gothenburg; see e.g. Zehner, 2008 for London). In what sense do such transformations of the tangible cultural heritage play a role for the cities' ambiances and the potential use of ambiances as heritage of the future? This will be the topic of my last empirical section.

From Past to Future, from Ambiance¹ to Ambiance²

When urban planners and city politicians decide upon a city's cultural heritage, select buildings and areas for conversion or demolition and create an urban narrative of the city's heritage, they contribute to creating a new ambiance. As this ambiance entails elements of the historically grown ambiance of the city (ambiance₁), but is subsequent to ambiance₁ and result of the performance of planning institutions, I call it ambiance₂ or 'staged ambiance'. For Dublin, the interviewees assign the city a certain, historically grown, ambiance as 'vibrant city': *if Dublin [...] didn't have a vibrant atmosphere, then I probably would have thought twice if I'm coming home* (CCD2, pgr. 72–74). This topos of vibrancy is also present in the city's planning documents (Dublin Docklands Development Authority, 2008, p. 195). In Gothenburg, the ambiance is more closely connected to the city's identity as port city. A creative worker says: *we are an old port city, and we have a tradition of having a very good will to cooperate [...] that shapes a form of climate, or environment, that makes it like everything goes, everything can happen, so that's how I think that it feels.* (CCG2, pgr. 20, own transl.) The cities' former port areas play a fundamental role in the creation of this modified ambiance. The fact that

these areas are now accessible to the public, something that they have not been before, allows for the interactions between the cities' users and the urban materiality: *[The dockyards area] was a working environment that was not ..., for generations, there was a wall there. You had no admission to enter there. So it's actually the new generation who sees it as part of Gothenburg. (GSB2, pgr. 107, own transl.)* The wall mentioned in this quote is metaphoric, but it had empirical consequences: the architectural-spatial structure of the area together with the designated use as industrial area, prevented generations of people in Gothenburg from going there and from interacting with the port environment. Thus, it also accounted for a certain ambiance – ambiance¹. The newly-made possible interaction between users and city's materiality in the port areas, a result of the economic downfall of the shipyards industries and of the regeneration projects carried out by the planning departments, now accounts for the altered ambiance of the city – ambiance². As it is fundamentally fostered by the planning institutions, it is a staged ambiance. In Dublin, similar developments can be observed. Here, too, the planners are very much aware of the fact that ambiances cannot easily be created: 'as to whether you can, (3.5) create that atmosphere [...] I think you can do things to facilitate it' (DCC1, pgr. 646). These 'things to facilitate it' include, on the planners' side, providing adequate infrastructure that people need. What both planners and users agree upon is that a city needs 'a mixture of atmosphere and infrastructure and making it possible for people to live up to their ideas, and to inspire them in a way as well material infrastructure is quite important' (DCC1, pgr. 775-777) – it needs tangible (infrastructure) and intangible elements (people) and ambiances (the in-between) to be a liveable city.

Conclusion

Ambiances of port cities significantly stem from the cities' industrial history as port cities. This particular urban history plays out on two levels: On the material level, the cities are characterised by a characteristic tangible heritage, visible in the architectural and spatial structure of e.g. the former inner-city port areas. On the social level, practices, norms and values as well as ways of knowing and designing the city, in short: intangible heritage, correspond to this. Both tangible and intangible elements of the cities account for a specific ambiance that people sensually perceive when they interact with the city. On the local level, the cities' cultural heritage is explicitly used as element of local urban development strategies. Within these strategies, certain elements of the cities' historically grown, material and social heritage is selected and assigned the status as cultural heritage. This goes together with a selection process including *an active choice as to which elements of this broader 'culture' are deemed worthy of preservation as an 'inheritance' for the future. (Blake, 2000, p. 68, original emphasis)* It is important to note that here, cultural heritage is not a synonym for culture but 'a more limited category [...] acting as a qualifier which allows us to narrow it down to a more manageable set of elements.' (Blake 2000, p. 68) Thus, speaking of a city's cultural heritage fundamentally implies a political dimension. In addition, by selecting elements from the past to design the city of the future, a bridge is built between the cities' industrial past as port cities and their future as sites of a postindustrial knowledge society. Creating such a connection between past and future helps maintaining the city's grown

identity and to ensure the inhabitants' identification with the city. Selecting elements of the cities' materiality as tangible cultural heritage does not leave the people untouched. The communities living in the cities, interacting with them and feeling their ambiances, change as well. For the ambiances, this means that a grown ambiance is only temporarily stable; over time, it changes as well as do the materiality and the sociality of the cities. It is this character of being only temporarily stable that urban planners can make use of for their purposes: By selecting certain elements of the cities' past and assigning them the status of cultural heritage, they intervene in the process of creating ambiances. Preserving and rhetorically framing the cities' materiality and its history as port cities in a specific way affects how people interact with these material elements and, consequently, what kind of ambiances they create: a modified form of ambiance comes into being, a staged ambiance. In this way, urban planners contribute to altering the ambiance of a port city by conserving parts of a city's materiality and defining those elements of the city's past that are worth-to-be-remembered. In this way, European port cities' ambiances are a heritage of the future.

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