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The Image and the Region

Making Mega-City Regions Visible!

The Image and the Region – Making Mega-City Regions Visible!

edited by Alain Thierstein, Agnes Förster

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Alain Thierstein
Agnes Förster

Preface

Mega-city regions are an emerging new large-scale urban phenomenon that is currently being discussed from both an analytical-functional and a political-normative perspective. In research the constituent elements and driving forces of mega-city regions are increasingly coming to light. They are feeding the comprehension of the mega-city regions' decisive role in economic, social and cultural development on the national and European level. Hence spatial development faces new challenges and tasks at the novel spatial scale of mega-city regions. The relevant and responsible stakeholders and players are being challenged – large-scale metropolitan governance is called for. On this point a problem of transmission arises. All over Europe there seems to be little awareness still among the relevant players of the prominence of mega-city regions. To politicians, citizens and administrators, mega-city regions remain invisible in many respects: They are rarely mapped, lack a name, image and attendant concept, and hardly offer any direct sensual perception in everyday life.

This work is based on the hypothesis that getting a picture of mega-city regions is crucial for comprehension, identification, motivation and commitment, and is thus a prerequisite to establishing large-scale metropolitan governance. Mega-city regions as an analytical or normative concept have to be transformed into a space of perception in order to finally become a space of collective action. The task of "Making Mega-City Regions Visible!" as presented in this book is an ample and complex one and demands a multifaceted process. The book brings together contributions from scholars and practitioners from different disciplines. The approach is explorative. Starting from the experience of familiar spatial scales, the book approximates the new and still unfamiliar spatial scale of mega-city regions. The selection of the articles and disciplines presented does not claim to be comprehensive in any respect. It has to be regarded as a starting point to further research and practice.

The book draws on contributions to the international conference "The Image and the Region – Making Mega-City Regions Visible!" which took place in Munich in February 2006 at the Chair of Spatial and Territorial Development, the Faculty of Architecture, Munich University of Technology.

Ursula Stein
Henrik Schultz

Experiencing Urban Regions

Visualizing through Experiments

experiencing

"Making Mega-City Regions Visible!" exclaimed the title of the symposium that formed the starting point for this book. The need to comprehend larger spatial contexts in terms of planning and political action is becoming evident in mega-city regions on a world scale just as it is in smaller agglomerations such as the Southern Region of Luxembourg, a prototypical "urban region." But who is supposed to comprehend the urban region in a different way, with a greater degree of awareness and precision? What sorts of approaches are appropriate for the development of images? This paper presents reasons why the technical concept of visualization needs to be supplemented by individual and collective experience and examines this approach with reference to an experimental planning process in the Southern Region of Luxembourg.

What does "making visible" actually imply when applied to regions, whether small or large? Visualization in the sense of a purely technically mediated illustration cannot in itself suffice. It needs to be supplemented and strengthened by perception with other senses. Relevant players in planning processes need to be prompted to experience regional space on a physical level in different ways. This experience can take many forms and may include, for example, guided tours through a region and the "staging" of selected regional locations. Such unmediated experience of the space and the collective reflection it gives arise to allow images to emerge.

The concept of "image" we are employing here is a multifaceted one. It encompasses the perceived appearance and the sensorially experienced (which, a constructivist approach would argue, do not conform to a single reality), the remembered and envisioned, just as it does the concept and the idea. The latter already shapes perception and memory, and as a result these facets or layers of the concept of image cannot be completely separated from one another.

Why do regions need this perceptual and emotional focus? The perception of the metropolitan or urban region is the prerequisite for spatial planning on this scale. The goals are to bundle forces as a means of improving the competitiveness of a region, to use rationalization potentials and to be able to plan on a scale that corresponds to the contexts people actually live in. All this requires new images at the planning level of the urban region. It is not easy to recognize the contextual interrelations of constructed and nonconstructed elements and to form an "image" that transcends these individual parts that does not fall prey to the clichés of "open landscape" and "dense European city." In his 1997 book *Zwischenstadt* (Cities without Cities), Thomas Sieverts argues that images and care are required to deal with a type of area which until then had largely been ignored in Europe on an analytical level and in the development of planning instruments, and for which adequate images or concepts still did not exist (Sieverts 1997).

What shapes the appearance of urban regions? As a consequence of the extension of residentially popular peripheral locations, the "maximization of the periphery" has become just as characteristic as the coalescence of settlement areas and the pressure of certain uses to locate along arterial roads and thoroughfares. The result is an increasing reversal of figure and background in the sense that open space is framed by built structures – in contrast to traditional images of the city embedded in a landscape. Open space in the region is a resource both in terms of land use and in an aesthetic sense (see Hauser, "Vermutungen über die Wunscherfüllung," in Hauser and Kamleithner 2006: 84ff). Since land usage is dominated by the perspective of the individual element and is devoid of an overarching concept, the result is a rudimentarily public space with barely adequate spatial organization (e.g., a lack of footpath links) and featuring random encounters between interest groups in unexpected places (e.g., practitioners of popular sports find themselves in hunting areas or walkers wander into commercial zones).

As long as the perception of this overall picture of the urban region by professionals (planners, environmentalists, policy-makers, etc.) and laypeople (residents, users, voters, etc.) remains obstructed by an ideal construct (namely, the antithesis between "European city" and "European agrarian landscape"), the planning and development of urban landscapes and regions cannot be linked with the experiences and needs of their citizens. According to the "interpretive paradigm" of the social sciences, social reality is not an objective given but rather the product of social constructions based on the interpretations of social actors (Helbrecht et al. 1991: 230). This assertion is based on three premises: "(1) People act vis-à-vis objects on the basis of the meanings these objects have for them. The term object here applies to everything to which people are able to relate their actions... (2) These meanings are generated in the course of social interaction and they are (3) deployed in interaction in the sense that they are constructed in the moment of the respective action situation. Due to this process of situa-

tional interpretation, meanings are subject to constant modification" (Meuser 1985: 134; cited in Helbrecht et al. 1991: 230). The development of images for regions by scholars, planners, citizens and policy-makers thus requires attention and perception. Interpretations of phenomena, uses and facts as the basis of individual and institutional action are generated in communicative and learning contexts.

"Experience-based planning" is the term we use for the integrative approach we propose for the development of open space and communicative spatial planning. In what follows we delineate the distinctive spatial type of urban region that we refer to as urban landscapes. We also discuss the SAUL project (Sustainable and Accessible Urban Landscapes) in the Southern Region of Luxembourg as an example of the experience-based planning of urban landscapes and explore a number of relevant methodological approaches. Finally we place the experiments involved in the SAUL project in the context of the future regional planning framework that Luxembourg's Ministry for the Interior and Spatial Planning has been developing in collaboration with the office of Stein+Schultz.

I Urban Landscapes – a Spatial Type Characteristic of Many Urban Regions

City and countryside can no longer be clearly delimited from one another. They now tend to form a new patchwork pattern characterized by interfaces that are both exciting and problematic, weaknesses, but also fascinating places. Rural spaces are increasingly being shaped by urban lifestyles. Intermediate spaces and overarching infrastructures are shaping the phenomenon of the region.

The factual significance of these new elements is supported by statistics. Over 60% of retail turnover in Germany is recorded by businesses on the edge of cities, in commercial areas and at autobahn exits. Many people questioned about their recreational preferences refer to intensively stage-managed experiences with a controlled level of tension but devoid of unpleasant surprises: cinemas, water and wellness parks,

indoor tropical environments and indoor skiing. Moreover, 60% of all Germans live in areas that researchers classify as "suburban space."

Urban-landscape residents often describe their living space as practical in the sense that one can quickly get from "here" to "there," for example to the "countryside" or to the nearest big town. However, it is also common for words such as "weird" and "chaotic" to be used in characterizations of these spaces.

Urban landscapes offer space for uses that do not fit in anywhere else, for parking lots that are needed for today's retail and recreational centers, for large infrastructure facilities and commercial sport and recreational facilities. The new urban landscapes are fulfilling the needs of society in the way the "European agrarian landscape" and the "European city" once did. However, they often do not accord with classic organizational and aesthetic criteria and are therefore unpopular with many planners. Compared with the ideally conceived combination of dense city and open landscape, they are perceived as "unplanned" even though their individual elements have been formed by conventional planning processes. The tools of classic town and country planning and landscaping do not function in urban landscapes predominantly determined by self-interest. There is a strong need for local authorities to coordinate their activities, a requirement that makes things even more complicated.

Figure 1:
Experiencing urban
landscapes: new partners
on new paths through the
Southern Region.

Figure 2:
Experiencing urban
landscapes: picnic with
a special view.

II Example: SAUL in the Southern Region of Luxembourg

The SAUL project in the Southern Region of Luxembourg, which is sponsored by the EU within the framework of the Interreg IIIB program, represents a response to the problems outlined above. As in the case of partner projects in the UK, the Netherlands and Germany, the SAUL project sponsored by the Luxembourg Ministry for the Interior and Spatial Planning from 2004 to 2006 focused on how impulses for a modern form of regional planning could be generated through research into urban landscapes and collaboration with municipalities, associations and citizens. SAUL looked for answers to the question of how regional identity could be created by means of a new planning culture based on "partnership building." Through a process of networking, discussion initiation, information provision, experimentation and coordination, SAUL explored the potential for experienced-based planning in relation to the urban landscape as a particular type of area (The SAUL Partnership 2006).

Luxembourg's south is a prototypical urban landscape, a multilayered mosaic of settlement areas and open spaces. The region has some 144,000 inhabitants, or 30% of Luxembourg's population, who live on 8% of the country's territory. The structural transformation of the former industrial region into a location for modern services can be clearly recognized in a series of large-scale conversion projects. At the same time, Luxembourg in general is seeing a creeping urbanization of rural areas, and this means that new infrastructure needs are also arising in the peripheral regions.

In the year 2003, the government's "Integrative Transport and Development Concept for Luxembourg" identified the need for further urbanization and aggregation in the Southern Region in order to help the country to cope with the significant increase in Luxembourg's population. This process requires targeted engagement with the development of open spaces and the way in which they are dovetailed with cities and built-up areas.

The Project Group
"Paths and Places in Urban Landscapes"

The idea for the "Paths and Places in Urban Landscapes" project arose from a series of interviews with people knowledgeable of the Southern Region. The resulting project group comprised the Luxembourg Velos Initiativ bicycle advocacy group, the Natur- und Vogelschutzliga (Nature and bird protection league), the Mouvement Ecologique environmental group, the Fond de Gras cultural initiative, the Frenn vun der Haard (Friends of the Haard nature reserve, which is involved in nature conservation as well as cultural issues), Objectif Plein Emploi, a national network that conducts a wide range of community-service and employment-creation projects, and six of the twelve municipalities in the Southern Region.

This group of SAUL-partners was an important element for the understanding of the urban landscape as a particular type of area which needs to be analyzed and planned with a specific approach. These learning points were transmitted into some of the groups which were represented. The integration of different points of view proved to be as helpful as the shared experience of space.

Experiencing:
Journeys through Urban Landscapes

The idea of a "journey in the Southern Region" was developed collectively. The aim was to identify places in the Southern Region that were characterized by a merging of settlement areas and open space, places that exhibited signs of the upheavals and changes of the last years and thus provided clues as to the direction of future development. A selection of stages for the journey was made that ranged from wild to urban. This allowed the urban landscape of the Southern Region to appear in a new light and altered participants' perception of it.

A collective bicycle tour led by the Lëtzebuerger Vëlos-Initiativ provided all participants with greater insight into Luxembourg's Southern Region and enabled them to explore and discuss new perspectives on site. Even aficionados among the cyclists discovered "new" things. This collectively established foundation subsequently contributed decisively to concretely shaping the SAUL process.

Tours with the artist Boris Sieverts in April, May and June 2005 led participants from the southern and neighboring regions along unusual routes to a range of special places in southern Luxembourg. In the program of the planned tour, Boris Sieverts described a section of the urban landscape through which the tour led in the following terms, "On the flat land at the foot of the Doggerstufe, the dense neighborhoods of the Minette dissolve and the elements seem to float arbitrarily in space. The dump, free-standing houses, cement works and shopping center are some of the performative elements of this new urban type, which has the autobahn as its center." The tours, which led through dense and intensively used areas as well as unused ones, produced new perceptual contexts linking old and new elements. Boris Sieverts' way of running his tours had the effect of slowing down the visual experience and dissecting it into its elements. In a very real sense, the tours provided new forms of access to the urban landscapes and enabled participants to discover the hidden beauties of these changing living spaces. New perspectives enabled many of those who took part to form new images – new perceptions, new concepts and new ideas – of their region.

Reflecting: Focusing on Places

The shared memory of the bicycle tour proved very valuable when it came to selecting "typical places within urban landscapes." Project group members were able to recall certain situations and thus share a reference to individual "urban landscape" sites. Initially 83 such places were compiled in a list. Based on a range of criteria, eighteen were then identified as particularly characteristic and thus as suitable fixed points for a "journey through the Southern Region." These places are characterized by dynamism and chaos, particular encounters and sudden breaks, strangeness and beauty. This selection and characterization of the elements of the urban landscape facilitated a more precise image of the region.

For example, one of the selected sites features a steelworks cooling pond adjacent to a road, on the other side of which is a wetland nature reserve. The silhouette of the old steelworks contrasts surprisingly with a vista of pondweed and wooded paths, both forming a place of encounters and breaks. The large, disused site of the former Belval steelworks was selected as a typical site because it represents chaos and dynamism. Huge blast furnaces have been demol-

ished while others are being restored as monuments to industrial culture. The new national rock music center and the headquarters of an international bank have been opened in the immediate vicinity, and they will soon be followed by residential areas and Luxembourg University.

Applied to the context of the Southern Region, the concept of urban landscapes becomes more concrete. Moreover, an engagement with the urban landscape also entails engaging with the concept of beauty. Under what conditions can "strangeness" and "rupture" also be perceived as beautiful?

Documenting: a Map for the Journey

The links between the individual sites were also discussed in detail. Topography, usability for the public and different types of transport and other criteria had to be taken into account when determining the best links. This process of selecting routes and places produced a map entitled "Journeys Through Urban Landscapes." The map represents an interim product and documents ten months of work by the project group. It is hoped that it will convince municipalities, associations and other decision-makers to develop the project further and engage with the diverse phenomena of the urban landscape.

Figure 3:
Reflecting and documenting: map featuring urban landscape locations in the Southern Region.

Networking: the "New Paths in New Landscapes" Symposium

Specialist contributions, consultation with project sponsors and external experts and numerous discussions within the project group have increased the fund of knowledge concerning the emergence and development of urban landscapes. As a result, the spatial effects of social and economic trends have become more transparent, and it is now clearer why dealing with urban landscapes is important for the regional development. In June 2005, within the framework of the SAUL project, the "New Paths in New Landscapes" symposium was held on the site of the former Belval steelworks in Esch-sur-Alzette. The Ministry of the Interior and Spatial Planning, Agora and Fonds Belval, two national institutions involved in the development of large brownfield areas, and the PRO-SUD municipal alliance had invited specialists and interested parties from politics and civil society to attend. Representatives of regional associations and planning offices discussed the challenges of planning in urban landscapes with experts and project developers. How can the development of open spaces contribute to a region's profile and its inhabitants' quality of life? Are new forms of collaboration required for this process? What significance should be attributed to opening up the landscape and creating pathways through it? The discussion of these and other central questions underscored the preparatory function of the SAUL project for regional planning.

Designing: Experiments with a Sense of Place

Finally, experiments in landscape design were used to interpret individual sites within the urban landscapes in a regional context. As a result many observers and users found their perception altered, and thus their reality in the sense of the interpretive paradigm used in the social sciences. Four temporary installations, "Pit Stop," "Network," "Umbrella Meadow" and "Fire Towers," were mounted at sites in the Southern Region to promote reflection among residents, policy-makers and representatives of regional associations regarding their images of urban landscapes. For a

Figure 4:
Designing urban landscapes: experiment on the Schifflingen landfill site by Lia Deister and Jana Sido, September 2005.

short time a former landfill site, a disused inner-city industrial site, a meadow on the outskirts of a town and a site next to an old immigrant neighborhood became focuses of interest. The installations were the result of a competition organized by the Urban Landscapes Studio in the Faculty of Architecture and Landscape at the University of Hanover and supervised by Professor Hille von Seggern and Henrik Schultz. The winning teams worked together with the municipalities of Differdingen, Düdelingen, Esch and Schifflingen to realize their proposals within only one week. These selective interventions represented thematic explorations of boundaries and connections between settlement areas and open spaces as well as the history and future of former industrial locations. They provided a clear, easily comprehensible medium that incited discussion about the individual locations, which had previously been largely ignored and yet are typical of the overall framework of urban landscapes in the Southern Region of Luxembourg. With comparatively few financial and planning resources, the students created new images of these places and of the region as a whole.

Figure 5:
Designing urban landscapes:
experiment on the Esch-sur-
Alzette city edge by Marco
Motzek and Dennis Ziegert,
September 2005.

Summary:
Experience-Based Planning in Luxembourg
Only those who intensively experience the land-scapes of their region can change or recreate their images of those landscapes. This form of visualization requires the cultivation of an unpre-judiced gaze, and this is why discussions with the residents of these urban landscapes are im-portant. "Striking up" conversations about these new urban landscapes is best done on site. This process can be helped by events such as group "journeys" using different types of transporta-tion, as it can by designs forming anchoring points or connections. The new meanings and interpre-tations generated by the social interaction and social learning processes that can be sparked by such "perceptual initiatives" can lead to a new image of the region growing out of the existing interpretation of reality, an image that does more justice to the spatial structures of agglomerations than old ideas of "city" and "countryside."

Such perceptual initiatives can themselves also bring about spatial changes. In Luxembourg's Southern Region, the kind of teamwork between municipalities and the relevant ministries en-visaged as the basis of future regional planning in Luxembourg is evolving well on the professional level, but remains contradictory on the political one. Nevertheless, discussions between local politicians and the Ministry of the Interior and Spatial Planning have focused more on spatial qualities than ever before. The SAUL project has drawn attention to the fact that open spaces and urban landscapes represent important potentials and challenges for the design of our spatial future and that a spatial vision needs to be developed in parallel to the classic, official regional plan.

III   Experience-Based Planning: Situations, Senses, Proximity, Exchange

When it comes to visually representing regions, regional plans that are technically oriented and coded with symbols are really only helpful to plan-ning specialists. Communication about the differ-ent ideas of the different groups can result in individual images becoming collective images. Specialist input into this process of exchange between regional actors and spatial experience are major elements of experience-based plan-ning. Such an approach creates situations, works with a range of senses, establishes proximity and distance to places, and maps out phases in the process of collective exchange. In this way, region-al actors are able to develop new approaches, criteria and images for their region.

Situations

Experience-based planning attempts to "pro-voke" regional actors to conceptually appropriate space. To this end, such an approach involves the organization of intensive interaction with spatial situations, as seen in the case of SAUL's approach to urban landscapes. Experience-based planning involves the construction of information and dis-cussion platforms and the design and supervision of projects geared to opening up and networking typical regional locations. "Outsider views" such as found in interpretations by artists allow for new ways of seeing. Experiments can turn a spotlight on particular locations. They can reveal ways of dealing with places and provide impulses for regional development.

Senses

The different journeys undertaken in the context of the SAUL project show that experience-based planning animates people to place themselves physically in the prevailing situation, to focus their attention on the space. Precisely mapped out stages in a journey, an appropriate amount of background information and aspects that appeal to the senses can all be helpful in this respect. The appearance, music, smell and taste of spaces influence the conception of the journeys. In this way access to spaces that would otherwise re-main concealed is facilitated. The physical expe-rience of a situation allows people to perceive scales and relationships and understand the way a space is shaped. Reflection on these corporally comprehended situations provides the back-ground against which images of spaces – percep-tions, concepts and ideas – are generated (Stein 2005).

Proximity

Experience-based planning compels us to form a direct relationship with space. Whereas in other contexts codification in the form of maps can create a significant distance to the object, the experiential approach is consciously based on a corporeal confrontation with the space. This al-lows for a productive engagement with the prej-udices of participants, which for a short time can be undermined by new perspectives and ways of seeing. Attitudes and potential solutions can sub-sequently be examined on the basis of the ex-perienced realities.

Exchange

Shared memories and associations serve as ref-erences for discussions about the spaces that have been experienced. The process of exchange makes it possible to develop new standards of assessment and generates curiosity concerning other solutions.

Experience-based planning attempts to enter into dialogue with an interested and organized public sphere and links experts, representatives of particular interests and policy-makers. It is not limited to urban contexts and is above all suited to implementation at the level of the urban region, which has until now been abstract and hardly open to experience at all while at the same time constituting the living space of most people.

Figure 6:
Experimental interventions by Jana Sido, Lia Deister, Kirsten Olheide, Johanna Reisch, Christian Kamer, Marco Motzek and Dennis Ziegert, September 2005.

IV The Regional Planning Context: Spatial Vision as the Form of Visualization

Building on the different forms of experience explored in the context of the SAUL project, the next step is to condense the new concepts of Luxembourg's Southern Region into a spatial vision. A communicative process involving regional actors and external experts will aim to combine individual images into a collective image. This image will be developed in association with official regional planning processes and delineate the direction with which the Southern Region is to be developed. Such an image will express less about the organization of settlement and open-space development than about the characteristics of the space.

The office of Stein+Schultz has been working extensively with the Luxembourg Ministry of the Interior and Spatial Planning to develop the instrument of spatial vision as an element of regional planning. The spatial vision helps regional planning to adapt to a specific spatial type and its developmental needs, to elaborate particular characteristics within the overall view and to use images as a means of emphasizing particular elements.

Spatial Vision as Graphic Reference Level

Difficulties with regional planning are usually encountered when conflicts over distribution and jurisdiction prevent the region from being perceived as a whole. Classic regional planning has the character of legally binding systemic planning. Supplementing this process with the graphic element of the spatial vision creates a shared reference level for decisions concerning land use and projects that allows conflicts over distribution to be solved within a framework of shared concepts of development. The instrument of spatial vision enables regional and local actors to experience and discuss the typologies and qualities of the space, and exchange visual concepts of their region and make these visible. In this way an image is generated in the form of a map that emphasizes the particularities of the region and presents integral and atmospheric perspectives relating to the development of different spaces and the re-

gion as a whole. The images generated through this process (perceptions, concepts and ideas) are condensed in this map in such a way that previously invisible "talents" of the region are made visible. Every municipality can then answer the questions "What are our particular spatial features?" and "What role do we play in the network of municipalities?" However, rather than forestalling decisions, this image encourages consensus building while making sure that there is still room for interpretation.

The Luxembourg Tri-Level Model

In the future, regional planning for Luxembourg will be organized in three parts: First, the spatial vision; second, the legally binding plan with a graphic and a written element; and third, ideas and concepts for regional development projects. As far as possible, the spatial vision as graphic development concept will be elaborated in parallel and conjunction with the legally binding plan. The spatial vision will profit from the basic groundwork carried out at the level of legally binding planning. Conversely, it will be able to thematically inspire the analysis so that the result does not merely deliver standard information based on interregional comparisons but also information regarding regionally specific themes. Legally binding planning requires a communicable, innovative and convincing graphic tool such as the spatial vision in order to express regional interests independently from municipal concerns.

Anyone aiming to make regions visible should engage key regional actors in a process of exploration and learning (Stein 2006). Experiments with spatial experience, the condensation of experiences and the formation of a spatial vision within the framework of regional planning are key elements of experience-based planning.

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