Chapter 36
T. Sieverts on Zwischenstadt

Thomas Sieverts

T. Sieverts
University of Darmstadt, Darmstadt, Germany
e-mail: tom.sieverts@googlemail.com

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022
M. Barcelloni Corte and P. Viganò (eds.), The Horizontal Metropolis,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56398-1_36
36.1 Zwischenstadt: an appraisal

This all started thanks to an invitation from the “Wissenschaftskolleg”, the WIKO, in Berlin. They offered me a fellowship of one academic year from October 1994 until July 1995, to work on a topic of my own choice. At that times I had just finished my directorship at the “International Building Exhibition Emscher Park” in the “Ruhrgebiet”, where I worked the five years before. I was—thus—fresh and open for new ideas.

I wanted to do something in relation to my experiences with the “Ruhrgebiet”, the largest and one of the oldest industrial regions in Europe, transformed by the Industrial Revolution. It presented a type of seemingly anarchic settlement pattern, quite the opposite of the ideal, well–ordered, old European town.

My curiosity about these kind of anarchic settlement patterns began in Berlin, where I lived from 1957 till 1970, with the analysis, together with my students, of some of the old allotment garden areas there and their spontaneous self—made “people’s—architecture”, produced without any planning control. Being a child of the 1968 movement I loved these gardens and their self -produced, richly decorated huts, the direct expression of people’s life.

When I came back to Berlin in 1994, the spirit of 1968 had disappeared completely. Instead a mood of restauration had become predominant, both in the city’s planning administration and in public opinion, also expressed in the postmodernism of new architecture. I disliked this mood and wanted to do something in an opposite spirit.

In the following I shall talk about three topics: Analysing the language we speak about suburbia and the urbanized landscape, the contrasting scales of urban design in the local and regional scale and last but not least about aesthetics and unaesthetics.

I began, intellectually, to dismantle the myths of the “European city” by examining in depth the key terms of these myths, dominating the urban discussion of the 1990s: Urbanity, density, centrality, mixture and ecology.

I tried to disclose the somewhat ideological character of these terms, as they had become rather flat, more or less meaningless conventions:

Urbanity had been degenerated to a kind of superficial “cappuccino–urbanity”; conventional centrality had been submerged into the “network–city”; “density” had been watered down by the still growing specific space we all use and which had tripled in the last decades. “Mixture” had become difficult to achieve with a specific growth of institutions but also with a growing intolerance. Urban ecology was deeply changing: the old contrast between the compact stony city and the open green landscape began to be blurred, instead a new kind of urban landscape emerged.

Once I had deconstructed the old myths of the European city, I had gained a free field to reconceptualise the contemporary metropolis: To start with, I accepted the reality, that the majority of the people of Europe already lived in some kind of urbanized landscape and no longer in concentrated cities and I accepted their reasons for this decision.
I began to avoid the degrading term “Zersiedelung”, a term, indicating that low density urbanization destroys a landscape, and spoke instead of a “mutual penetration of town and nature”!

Instead of lamenting the loss of urbanity I spoke of its new meaning in a networked city, concentrating my reflections more on the people and their behaviours, than on the form of the city. Instead of criticising a loss of urban density I spoke of a new virtual density supported by digital means.

In my reflections I contrasted the loss of diversity with combinations opened up by the new digital networks.

In contrast to the thesis of the destruction of nature by low-density suburbanization I emphasised the findings of the urban ecologists, that the urban landscaped-city is much richer in species than the surrounding industrialised agriculture and forestry.

As a result of my reflections, I was questioning fundamentally the old categorical separation of city and landscape. I tried to develop a new understanding of the urbanized landscape/landscaped-city. This new position opened the perspective for a type of city in the form of an extended urban region, with an enlarged catchment area, supported by the “space-jumping” electronic media, (which at the time I wrote the book had just begun to really impact space).

I soon realised, that this enormous extension of the city into the urban region leads to several conflicts: one of these conflicts is related to what the Swedish geographer Gunnar Turnquist called “the conflict between system and agora” : The uncontrolled extension of the realm of work and production into the urban region, now organised into an extensive division of labour, will do harm to the “agora” of daily life and spontaneous contacts: There is a danger, that the “system” will take over and the “agora” will suffer.

I tried—thus—to reflect on the type of daily life in an urban region: On the one hand, a neighbourhood, that risks to be isolated in space–time islands, floating in the urban region and, on the other hand, risks to divided by the division of labour, where people are always on the move to take advantage of the region, but do not have any personal localised life any more.

This means: The new regional city must be developed in two directions: On the one hand, into the dimension of the “system” of a network—city, which has no “natural” borders anymore, and, on the one hand, into the direction of the “agora” of the locality, as the realm of daily life, of the family and the extended neighbourhood.

And there is another problem: The extended realm of daily life and work in a networked urban region does not have an equivalent inner representation in the mind of its inhabitants. To develop a sense of belonging, people must have a notion of the area they use in their daily life. Otherwise, the ability of orientation, of finding your way, is completely dependent on printed or electronically presented documents. To realise “instinctively” the use of the extended opportunities of the regional city, people need more than a technical, economic and functional city, they need a “city with a soul”.

In this type of city, situated between town and landscape, between an economy serving the locality and international corporations serving world—markets, between intimate relations in the personal neighbourhood and the more abstract, unpersonal relations in the region, there exist tensions, which the old town did not experience.

So, as urban designers, we have to work on both scales: on the one hand we have to work on the regional scale to create a coherent inner regional image, representing a solid network, able to bring into play all the different opportunities and qualities of a region, and on the other hand we have to work on the individual and intimate scale of the locality, on the means of emotional feelings, of being at home, of feeling the soul of a place.

Working as an urban designer on the contrasting scales of the urban landscape/landscaped—city needs an extended notion of aesthetics, as the conditions of perceiving and realizing the regional scale in the mind versus the local scale are so different. Thinking more about different ways of perceiving the landscaped—city, I came to make a fundamental distinction between aesthetics and unaesthetics: unaesthetics does not mean ugliness, it means, that people “do not perceive at all”, or if they see, they perceive with indifference only the functional and economic side of the environment, they do not develop any emotional relations in form of positive, warm memories. I am afraid, the majority of urban environments are of this character.

Therefore, one of the aims in urban designing of the urban landscape should be to help people to develop positive emotions, to feel at home. Our experiences analysing the old allotments in Berlin told us, that as soon as people built their huts and plant their gardens by themselves, they take care of it and love it. We need more of some kind of “hands-on aesthetics” to root people in their locality.

Working as an urban designer on the scale of the urban region should help as orientation. Most important here is to make use of the geographical/morphologic structure of the landscape. Beautiful alleys and architectural dominants with a regional meaning can support this structure of orientation. The urban designer in the scale of the urban region must be a combination of landscaper, urban designer, traffic engineer and architect. At least they must know enough about these professions to serve as a creative curator!

I would like to conclude with saying something about the impact of the book “Zwischenstadt”. I have written this book during my time in the Wissenschaftskolleg in nine months, from the first word to the final touch. Then, when I went to the publisher, I was doubtful it would sell. Once published, a review came out quickly from a colleague, who tried to ridicule the book and dismantle it from the very beginning. This was painful for me, because the author of this review was a close colleague, also a fellow at the WIKO with whom I discussed the book several times before publication, as it is usual in the WIKO.

The book was—thus—controversially debated: I was called a “traitor of the idea of the ‘European City’”, supported by a kind of moral judgement: “A matter as uninteresting as ordinary suburbia is not worth writing about!”.
Nonetheless, despite this heavy critique, the book began to sell well and to be translated, first into French (in France it became a kind of textbook in schools of architecture) and then into English. A little bit later came the Japanese translation (with a second edition a few years later) and a translation of the first part of the book into American English. In 2015, the Spanish translation was published, mainly for the South American market. The book still sells, more than twenty years after its first publication.

And here I want to pay due tribute to two very dear colleagues, who were pioneers in this field, but sadly are not with us anymore: Bruno Secchi and Francois Ascher. I speak neither Italian nor French, I could not read their publications, when working on my book. That was a great pity. But both colleagues read my book and we became friends, both invited me to talks and discussions. I feel very grateful to them.

Since a few years, younger colleagues took up the topics of the “Zwischenstadt”: Vera Vicenzotti wrote her doctoral theses “Der Zwischenstadt – Diskurs, eine Analyse zwischen Wildnis, Kulturlandschaft und Stadt” (Bielefeld 2011).

A group of young planners, urban designers and social scientists were funded by the ‘Gottlieb Daimler and Carl Benz Stiftung’ and worked for three years to apply and test the theses of the Zwischenstadt at the greater area of Frankfurt am Main under the guidance of some old colleagues and myself. Being already retired, I had a good time discussing my favourite topics with twenty young ambitious researchers and their teachers. In the end, we have produced twenty volumes of research together.

Meanwhile the term “Zwischenstadt” is used in German speaking countries as an equivalent to the term “citta diffusa”, used in Romanesque countries. And this term has found its way also into the universities: several students have written their master-thesis on that topic. In short: The book might be useful for readers interested in continuing their reflection on the Horizontal Metropolis.
Fig. 36.1 Satellite image (20 × 20 km) of a portion of the Ruhr, on the east of Gelsenkirchen-Bismarck (Sieverts’s case study); the area includes Castrop-Rauxel, Bochum Nord, and Dortmund (on the right).
Source: Google Earth, 2018
Fig. 36.2 Built fabric of a portion of the Ruhr (20 × 20 km) area in the Ruhr, on the east of Gelsenkirchen-Bismarck.
Credits: GEObasis NRW, dl-de/by-2–0, map elaborated by C. Küpfer
Fig. 36.3 Satellite image of an area (5 × 5 km) located in the Ruhr, including Castrop-Rauxel and Dortmund-Bodelschwingh.
Source: Google Earth, 2018
Fig. 36.4 Evolution of the built fabric of an area (5 x 5 km) located in the Ruhr, including Castrop-Rauxel and Dortmund-Bodelschwingh. In black the ancient structure of the built environment, in grey the evolution described by T. Sieverts and in red its subsequent development. Credits: Hansa Luftbild GmbH, Aerowest GmbH, Regionalverband Ruhr; EUROSENSE GmbH, Hansa Luftbild GmbH, Kampsax, Regionalverband Ruhr; GEObasis NRW, dl-de/by-2–0; map elaborated by C. Küpfner. <1953: black 1953–1998; grey 1999–2019: red
Fig. 36.5  Aerial sequence (drone) of an area between Herne and Castrop-Rauxel, west of Dortmund. Credits: E. Barcelloni Corte, 2020
Fig. 36.6 Diffused and mix-use urbanisation on the south west of Castrop Rauxel, west of Dortmund. Credits: E. Barcelloni Corte, 2020