

# Visual Discourse of HafenCity in Hamburg. Preliminary Results of the Research project

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## ABSTRACT:

The theoretical assumption of researching the image of the port city is that port city is designated by „facts” ( such as the geography of marine professions in a city, economic status of port workers etc.), and “ideas” such as stereotypes about port district, the images of port city etc. An idealization is important feature of these images. Project Visual Discourse of the HafenCity in Hamburg is part of a research task entitled “The Iconography of the Port Cities” and is implemented by the Commission of the Marine Sociology of The Polish Academy of Science (Gdansk branch). Its purpose is to analyze the stereotypes of the port city visual representations, that create collective images of the city and its tourist attractions.

## 1. Port city and maritime sociology

Looking for theoretical identity, a widespread tendency of interdisciplinarity in social studies are the factors that hinder a clear and consistent definition of research and methods typical only for maritime sociology. Studies on the port city are a perfect examples of the dilemmas of maritime sociology that I would like to discuss here.

If we agree that maritime sociology deals with studying of social context, which is produced by geographical proximity of the sea, then surely port city is a specific object of interest of described subdiscipline. The basic assumption is therefore as follows: port city (*port town, Hafenstadt*) is a neighborhood in which the spatial (geographical) and economic facts are related to social issues (Woźniak, 2008; Kozłowska, Michalak 2010; Borsay, Walton 2011); . Simplifying we can say that mutual relations between the port and the city are analyzed in such areas as: professional and economic structure of population, collective and individual behaviour, ideas about the city, the identity of local communities etc. The economic condition of the port (e.g. cargo handling capacity), seems less important, than citizens’ imaginations about the influence of port on the quality of their lives. In other words, what a port city means for an economist, or a geographer, does not necessarily coincide with the ideas that make up social image of the port city. The concept of “port city” is not limited to the main economic functions of the city or employment in marine economy. For sociologist what constitutes the city is mainly the image of city that exists in social consciousness.

Obviously, the areas of research of the port city outlined above, do not interest only those who deal with maritime sociology. It has been already discussed in the literature that at least because of the multiplicity of theories and research traditions in the urban sociology, port city is not a special area of research for marine studies (Kowalewski, 2000). What is more, an interdisciplinary nature of research of the city makes discussions concerning urban studies occurring more often than those about urban sociology. Defining the city as a separate object of research poses many difficulties to sociologists. Sociology has adopted an extremely broad area of meanings of the term “city” in terms of human ecology, anthropological studies, new urban sociology or global cities theory: city has been analyzed in so many different ways that it is actually difficult not to agree with the thesis that a contemporary urban sociology is simply sociology in general.

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Despite these differences and controversies, which are present from the very beginning of maritime sociology, there are some attempts of scientific explanations, which generally can be defined as *the study of the port city*. If we put a restriction only at the social studies, then in this area there are investigations of anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, economists, or geographers. From the different research results we can conclude that sociological perspective is one of many taken in the analysis of the relations between the city and the harbor. In this part of the article I will try to prove that social image of the port city are both main and peripheral object of research of urban studies, and even if only for that reason, it is worth to complement this gap in the maritime sociology perspective, making use of its theory and research results.

It is difficult to enumerate all the scientific papers identified by the keywords: "the port and the city", but if we restrict our search to those which are written with using the theory and methods typical for sociology, the list will appear as too short. It seems that it would be the most reasonable to add to this list some important works, in which sociological perspective is one of many accepted in the analysis of the port city, its institutions, geographies of professions related to working at the sea etc. Overview of key themes in the area called here as *studies of the port city* could begin with the monograph of Plymouth (Chalkley, et. al., 1991), in which typical issues for maritime sociology are presented: relations between economics, politics, tourism, urban planning and the port in the city. This monograph is the result of work made by geographers, architects, economists, political scientists, and finally - sociologists, studying a port city as a whole in an interdisciplinary approach. It shows the interrelationships between different parts of urban system in the period of economy transition.

Research in the port city conducted in Polish marine sociology include, *inter alia*, the place of social categories related to the sea in the social structure (Durka, 2005), territorial migrations of the port city inhabitants (Woźniak, 1991), social and spatial mobility of seafarers (Kobylarek, 2000), social and political divisions occurring in the port city (Woźniak, 1994), inhabitants' imaginations about the city (Załęcki, 2000) etc. In all these cases the objects of research are, generally speaking, the social consequences of the presence of a port in the city.

Topics concerning the image of the port city are also discussed within interdisciplinary studies. An interesting example of work that includes, basically sociological analysis of the impact of port on the city on social values is a paper by Erica Van Hooydonk (2006). Negative images of today's major ports of cargo handling are opposed in this paper with "soft" values which are present in the minds of the inhabitants of port cities. These include a variety of values: historic, landscapes, architecture, tourism and myth-related symbols, connected to the idea of the port in the culture of the Western world (e.g. the port as a symbol of openness to the world, exchange of ideas, free trade, etc.). Similar conclusions are made by the author of historical study *Harbor and Town* where history of the port and the city from the Bronze Age to modern times was presented (Rudolph, 1980). According to the author, the most important functions of the port (exchange of goods, people and information) required services of the institutions, which changed the image of the port cities. These were: taverns, cafes, oriental shops, tattoo saloons, public houses - which are the components of the port city myth. Intercultural history of relations between the city and the port allows us to see that local myths have a universal feature. A romantic myth of the port city designates the place which was visited by sailors travelling in the distant parts of the world, telling their stories in the port pubs in the company of easy-going ladies, has an international character.

The purpose of the examples of the port city studies, which were showed above, was to prove the thesis of their interdisciplinary character. The most important topics of these studies (port city as the image and value, the globalization of port cities), are in the same time the most important areas of maritime sociology studies.

## **2. Researching the visual discourse of the port city. Initial results of the project**

As it was described above, the theoretical assumption of researching the image of the port city is that port city is designated by „facts” ( such as the geography of marine professions in a city, economic status of port workers etc.), and “ideas” such as stereotypes about port district, the images of port city etc. An idealization is important feature of these images. The mythical port-city means a gate, opening to the world, a place of exchange of people, ideas and goods. The collective ideas of port is usually a great prosperous commercial center. Idealization refers also to harbor districts - there no suspect meeting places of smugglers, thieves, prostitutes, and the harbor area is usually open to all citizens. Idealization is also affecting other elements of this myth: working seafarers, adventure associated with shipping, etc.

Images of the port city, supported by visual discourse are especially interesting in this matter. G. Quilley (2000) discusses the presence of the iconography associated with the sea in British visual culture. By the same author, marine art is an important part of British cultural identity as maritime British history without visual representation can not survive. A sociological analysis of images relating to the port city's image therefore requires an inclination to the representations of a popular culture, which may seem to those skilled in art of no value. In our analytical paradigm kitschy image showing a ship at sea and the fishermen at work is a sign representing the important processes, pointing out the importance of the sea in culture.

Advertising tourist brochures and postcards play role in creating these stereotypes (Wells, 2007; Christmann, 2008; Kowalewski, 2011; Makaro 2011). Postcards, travel brochures and private photographs made by the visitors belong to the same category of visual space consumption (Urry, 1997) related to tourism. These media of visual consumption can be considered as an indicator of the social phenomena associated with the city. As reflecting the principles of producing the space, (e.g., portraying only the places associated with sovereignty or the capital), tourist images are an important resource for research in urban studies.

Project Visual Discourse of the HafenCity in Hamburg is part of a research task entitled “The Iconography of the Port Cities” and is implemented by the Commission of the Marine Sociology of The Polish Academy of Science (Gdansk branch). Its purpose is to analyze the stereotypes of the port city visual representations, that create collective images of the city and its tourist attractions (Kowalewski, 2011). Hamburg was chosen as an interesting example of the intense transformations of former port areas within the project HafenCity. This gigantic investment in the area of 126 hectares (156 ha including water areas) is implemented between the historic warehouse district and the River Elbe. Starting of the project was announced in 1997, and advanced construction work is in progress since 2003. HafenCity Hamburg GmbH (funded entirely by the City of Hamburg) is responsible for administration of former port areas where investments are made. As we can read in official brochure, “in addition to this financing responsibility, HafenCity Hamburg GmbH also clears and prepares sites, plans and builds infrastructure and public spaces, acquires and contracts real estate developers and larger users, and is responsible for public relations and communication” (Hafencity, 2012: 4).

The project is multifunctional, including residential, office and service business use, cultural facilities (such as Elbphilharmonie Concert Hall, International Maritime Museum Hamburg), education facilities (schools, HafenCity University), special projects (as Hamburg-America Center or Greenpeace German headquarters) and other land uses including public open spaces on the waterfront, promenades etc.

In first step of research available materials from HafenCity project website ([www.hafencity.com](http://www.hafencity.com)) were analysed. It is assumed that in these materials "official" iconography is provided, a coherent vision of the city as a tourist product created by the investors and municipal authorities. The methods of visual sociology and visual discourse analysis were used for this study (Rose, 2001; Banks, 2007; Christmann, 2008). As the project relates to the postcard portraying the port city, the initial categorization of the collected materials include the following forms: 1) people (sailors, tourists, residents, historical figures), 2) location (waterfront, port, docks, public open spaces), 3) vessels (sailboats, motor vessels, other vessels). Research was conducted in February 2012<sup>12</sup>, this article will present only the initial results of the project.

Pictures posted on the [hafencity.com](http://hafencity.com), were in most cases pre-categorised as much of the presented gallery is being prepared for press publication. Pictures have also

addressed topics (categories: sustainable development, public open spaces, cultural projects & events, etc.). A preliminary classification of photographs was complemented by descriptions of images that are meant to prepare the interpretation of images (the images presented in this article have their original prepared titles). For example, a photo of promenade Dalmankai has the description: "The Dalmankai promenade is perfect for strolling and resting". Similar symbolical function have the names of newly created sites (*Magellan, Marco Polo, Vasco da Gama Terraces*), referring to a well-known sailors, travelers, iconic persons of the era of great discoveries. They symbolize communication with the Great World, the desire to travel, discovery, adventure.

Unlike traditional postcards (Kowalewski, 2007), these materials usually present a lot of people on the streets; public spaces are never empty, and districts have the impression of being vibrant. This is caused by will to create the impression of a lively area, which could attract new residents and investors. Some of the pictures even resemble the visuals attached to architectural projects. In this sense, part of the photographs presented here can be regarded as a tool of idealization of the managed space.

Fig. 1. *HafenCity is already used at this time as a venue for numerous cultural and artistic activities. When designing parks, promenades and squares, cultural and artistic requirements are consistently taken into account (original title, on photo: Magellan Terraces). 09.04.2009*



Photo: ELBE&FLUT; Source: HafenCity Hamburg GmbH

<sup>12</sup> I could realize this research during his stay in the University of Hamburg in the DAAD postdoc scholarship and scientific cooperation with prof. Rolf von Luede, whom I would like to thank for the given help.

Portrayed places can be described as "nice" - this effect is made by high quality of the pictures (sharpness, correct composition), most often using classical approaches in order to show the whole building, panoramic, view, genre scenes etc. The images presented in the category entitled *Ethnography* do not make this impression. They are much more like "natural" scenes from the urban life and even if they have been selected, they do not look artificial (see Fig. 4.). Small streets and narrow passages are absent here. The project of the area and spaces presented in the pictures rather create the impression of power of the city, than feeling of intimacy. Representation of the harbor area, full of narrow, vibrant streets and bustling trade is not part of the researched visual discourse. Its essence is the representation of the scale of the project of huge, multifunctional district.

Fig. 2. *Queen Mary II and MS Deutschland in the HafenCity, 29.08.2007*



Photo: ELBE&FLUT; Source: HafenCity Hamburg GmbH

Fig. 3. *The floating pontoon system of the Traditional Ship Harbour that raises and lowers with the tide offers moorings for more than 20 historic ships (original title). 13.11.2008*



Photo: ELBE&FLUT; Source: HafenCity Hamburg GmbH

Created image of the port city on analyzed images has an explicit reference to the relationship (although physically non-existent) to the sea. Persistent stereotypes of sea-port city will be retained in the visual representations, that create images of HafenCity. Elements of romantic myth become particularly apparent in photographs portraying

Traditional Ship Harbour, a place of historical presentation of vessels (see Fig. 3.), or photographs documenting the residence Queen Mary II and MS Deutschland in Hafencity (see Fig. 2.). What is interesting in the pictures almost never appear in other implicit references to the maritime culture, such as an anchor in the square in front of the International Maritime Museum (Fig. 5.). References of this kind generally occur in the information materials, such as the description of the 25hours Hotel Company in Überseequartier "with a design that reflects maritime and port themes in guest and public rooms" (Hafencity, 2012: 24) or in this description: "in the process Hamburg's identity as a maritime city is being reinforced, while simultaneously Hafencity Becomes a model for the development of the 21st century European city center" (Hafencity, 2012: 12).

Fig. 4. Photo: Daniel Barthmann



Source: <http://www.hafencity.com/de/informationenmaterialien-zur-hafencity.html>

Fig. 5. Anchors in Uebersee District



Photo: Maciej Kowalewski, February 2012

Fig. 6. *The Dalmannkai promenade is perfect for strolling and resting* (original title). 03.04.2009



Photo: Daniel Barthmann; Source: Hafencity Hamburg GmbH

### 3. Conclusions

Full sociological research of visual materials promoting Hamburg should consider not only the objective properties of the city, but to the related ideas, stereotypes and myths. Certainly the study of visual discourse should be placed in the wider context of creating the space of (post)capitalist city, discussing political and economic determinants of such projects. Such studies are already carried out: Thomas Doerfler in paper presented on ESA Conference in 2011 in Geneva (*The Antinomies Of (New) Urbanism. Henri Lefebvre, Hafencity Hamburg And The Production Of Posturban Space*) draws attention to the social problems associated with such enormous economic and urban projects for the whole and the city and neighboring districts.

The first results presented above are only a recognition of the studied problem. They show, however, that the visual discourse of the new district is created in a planned manner. Images are intended to strengthen the representation of the principal objectives of the Hafencity project. Idealization of discourse is done by creating the impression of authenticity in the spaces of urban life, while its size hinder to create such a life can hinder. Presented text is rather a sociological sketch and will be supplemented by further analysis.

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