



Metaphors We Built By. Analyzing Different Readings in the Discourse about Urban Landscapes in Germany against the Backdrop of the US-American Debate

Vera VICENZOTTI, PhD. Student
Technische Universität München, Germany
vicenzotti@wzw.tum.de

My contribution analyzes metaphorical readings used by urban designers and landscape architects to characterize urban sprawl. Against the backdrop of the US-American debate, it focuses on the German language discourse on urban landscapes, on the so-called Zwischenstadt (Thomas Sieverts) since the mid 1990s. As it places emphasis on the wilderness metaphor, it has to take into account the different cultural histories of both countries that have coined totally different ideas of wild nature.

Within the broad discourse field, the positions taken can be typologized in the following way: (1) positions that reject urban landscapes, (2) attitudes that come to terms with and at least accept sprawl, arguing that it is a reality-whether you like it or not. (3) A third position is unreserved advocacy of urban landscapes. Although each position has a specific way of conceptualizing and evaluating these landscapes, the same metaphors are used to illustrate the respective point of view. This is due to the fact that one metaphor can have multiple, even contradictory meanings. I will reconstruct different significations of one exemplary reading of urban landscapes: wilderness. I have systematically distinguished different meanings of this metaphor by analyzing its semantic content from the perspective of different worldviews; i.e. I use the history of ideas as a means to expand possible significations of the idea of wild nature.

In addition to the analysis based on the history of ideas, a second way of deepening the understanding of the German language discourse on urban landscapes is a comparison with the US-American debate: At first sight it seems that the idea of wilderness is not used in the American context to characterize urban sprawl. This is primarily due to the divergent histories of the two cultural areas that have shaped totally different ideas of wild nature: In the American context, the idea of the frontier and the pioneer history are crucial, whereas in Europe the idea of Wildnis is shaped by the notion of the emergence of the German people from the woods. However, several common features of urban landscapes (such as the lack of identity, the ideas of freedom, and the concept of "the other") are expressed using other metaphors, such as outer space, the frontier and the weather.

A historically informed analysis of metaphorical readings reveals the attitudes that have shaped decisions about the way we build our environment. Metaphors are subtle yet powerful vehicles for conveying certain ideas and values. Thus, analyzing them-and especially the ideological context in which they are embedded-helps to disclose the meaning environments impart and the way professionals deal with them in plans, programs, and design proposals. This type of analysis has the potential to open up new perspectives on how to perceive urban landscapes, which in turn may also inspire new design strategies. Comparing the use of metaphors in different cultural contexts turns our attention to the fact that analyzing cultural differences has to become an important part of research in the field of planning history and landscape research.

KEY WORDS: Zwischenstadt, urban landscape, urban sprawl, wilderness, metaphors, discourse, Germany, USA, 20th century, 21st century.