

A View from Port to City: Inland Waterway Sailors and City-Port Transformation in Hamburg

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Every morning, the names of about twelve cargo ships arriving in the port are announced by Hamburg's two daily newspapers.¹ The vessels listed in the papers include container ships, bulk carriers and cruise ships. Not listed are about 40 inland water way vessels, connecting the port of Hamburg to the Hinterland. These cargo units are around 80 meters long, carrying up to 1,000 tons of goods. Most of them are managed by only two persons, normally a captain and a boatman. Sometimes this function is held by the wife of the captain, who is also the owner. Some ship owners and drivers have a multi-generation family tradition as inland waterway sailors; others are former employees that were forced by their ship companies to become owners. Nearly half of the sailors are employees of shipping companies with 2 to 50 units. As in the port of Hamburg and upstream inland waterway vessels normally ship only during the day, they have to berth for the night in the harbour or on the riversides.

Hamburg's port is by far the largest sea port in Germany, of great economic importance for the country which is dependent on external trade. Since 1999, turnover has been increasing at percentage rates in double figures. The port is part of a North-European hub-and-spokes-system. For many destinations like Asia, South- and North-America and West-Africa, Hamburg is the hub and serves a lot of spoke-ports in

1 Hamburger Abendblatt and BILD. Hamburg, published by Axel-Springer-Verlag, Hamburg.

North- and Northeast Europe. For other destinations, e.g. East-Africa, Hamburg is a spoke and large ports like Antwerp are the hub.

The port of Hamburg is situated on the river Elbe, 100 river kilometres south-east of the river mouth on the North Sea. In the port area, two tunnels run under the river, one for cars and one for pedestrians. The first bridges upriver of the estuary are at the southern edge of Hamburg's port area. Three ferries cross the port area of the Elbe and two car-ferries far below Hamburg provide further connections across the waterway.

For most residents of Hamburg, the Elbe and the harbour constitute not only a major attraction which they can look out on from the town centre, but also a barrier to their mobility, although new town planning projects, aiming to reduce this inconvenience, invoke a "leap over the Elbe" (FHH 2005: 4). On the other hand, the residents of Hamburg make use of the Elbe to take their guests on harbour tours, hundreds of thousands take part in the port's annual birthday party and politicians regularly stress the importance of the port for Hamburg.



Fig. 1: Convoy of freighters passing Hamburg's inner city piers (Landungsbrücken) (photo: Hinrich Schultze)

The inland waterway sailors' view of the city, meanwhile, is more ambivalent. They look at the city from the water. Being part of the port system, in their view the Elbe and the port are primarily waterways connecting one place to the next. Their daily lives are affected by the mobile nature of their trade, but there is also a desire to live as others do: "The

others live there, we only drive past"² (Wolfgang, 11/10/2004). Although this situation is common for other travelling professions, too, it has become particularly bad for Hamburg's inland sailors due to the decreasing accessibility of the city.

The following article describes the view of inland sailors in the port of Hamburg, thus complementing current research on port cities which has, overwhelmingly, analysed either the consequences of port development for adjacent neighbourhoods and their inhabitants, or processes of urbanisation. The article presumes that the model of city-port development presented by Hoyle (Hoyle 1992: 1-19), with a few adjustments, applies to the port city of Hamburg. The changes in inland sailors' living and working conditions are a case in point. My argument is based on the assumption that existing clashes of interests between economy, politics and actors connected with the port, will become increasingly visible around the port area because of the processes of change and planning, and will also become apparent in dealing with the inland sailors' interests.

The empirical basis for this article are qualitative data from 14 detailed interviews with inland sailors from an ethnographic study in the port of Hamburg in 2004 and 2005, as well as survey data on the inland sailors' economic backgrounds.

Inland navigation and the port of Hamburg

The fourth phase of Hoyle's model of port-city development (Hoyle 1992: 10; see also Schubert 2001 and in this volume) is on the one hand characterised by the transfer of industrial production overseas and as a consequence, a reduction of jobs and decreasing importance of port cities. On the other hand, the introduction of container ships has caused big changes in this phase. The space required for the handling of this technology is so enormous, that terminals are forced to move further and further away from the city.

As far as the port of Hamburg is concerned, these phenomena can be found to a certain extent. As elsewhere, there was a relocation of secondary industry between the 1960s and the 1980s and shipyards were particularly affected. However, a time lag materialised in the relocation of jobs because of governmental armament orders and guarantees of warship exports, especially at the big shipyards Blohm and Voss (Walden

2 All interview quotations are named by the date of the interview and the name of the interview partner.

1997: 115ff). Furthermore, regarding the space required by “containerisation” of all maritime transport, in Hamburg the relocation of the port to areas south-west of the city did in fact start in the 1960s, but continued beyond the end of the millennium. In this process, the dominant dynamic was the container ship sector, making the port city of Hamburg, according to turnover figures, Germany’s number one port in terms of technical development of the ship industry (Berenberg Bank – HWWI 2006).³



Fig. 2: Map of inland water ways served from the Hamburg port (reproduced by kind permission of Drucksachenstelle der WSV bei der WSD Mitte, Hanover)

A timeframe diverging from the standard can also be found in the area of inland navigation. During the division of Germany, the structure of handling in Hamburg port was strongly influenced by its responsibility for the supply of West Berlin. In the 1980s, more or less one third of the

3 Only in Hamburg did the volume of goods handled between 1997 and 2004 increase by more (43%) than in the ports of Rotterdam (9%) and Antwerp (29.5%). For the year 2030, the HWWI predicts joint second place for Hamburg and Antwerp, just behind Rotterdam in the European ranking of port cities.

inland tonnage load was destined for the exclave of the FRG inside the territory of the GDR.⁴ Of particular importance was the supply of the thermal power stations in West Berlin with fuel, by the inland sailors of West Germany, although they also report about restrictions: “Today there is no more Steglitz or Lichterfelde. And back then it wasn’t possible to pass by the channel since the East didn’t allow access to Klein-Machnow. It was only opened a short time before the Wall came down, five years earlier” (Olaf, Jürgen and his wife, 11/10/2004).

Since the size of the inland vessels depends on the dimensions of the navigable waterways and since only few structural alterations of the waterways have been carried out, technical developments in inland navigation largely passed by West-German vessels. There was also little change in business as the cargo rates were fixed and transport was regulated to guarantee continuity. In the course of German reunification, this was fast and radically changed. The transit regulations were abolished and the state-negotiated distribution of the market shares between the FRG and the GDR was no longer valid.

The disbanding of the economic structures of the GDR on the one hand caused ships and employees of the formerly state-owned East German shipping companies to flood the unified German market. On the other hand, the old workload was partly replaced by selling off much of the former GDR industry. For many sailors, the scrap metal brought by inland vessels to the port of Hamburg from all over the former GDR to be exported by seagoing vessels, became an important transport commodity. “What took place was the scrapping of the GDR. Here in Hamburg almost every day we received and supplied scrap metal. That was crazy. That was the common practice” (Shipping company manager Meincke, 29/10/2004).

In addition to the disappearance of regular orders relating to the supply of West Berlin, the strict cargo rates, which up to then inland sailors had received for trips within Germany, were lifted in 1994. For many decades, this regulation had ensured that all suppliers received fixed prices for different kinds of transport.

On the basis of an investigation by the research group GüterTransportSystem/Logistik (goods transport system/logistics) at the University of Duisburg-Essen, the specialised shipping committee at the trade union “ver.di” determined that the abolition led to a huge increase of workload (Danckwartz/Schürmann 2004: 12). In my investigation in the port of Hamburg, this was confirmed by various statements from my interviewees, e.g.:

4 Estimate according to Gewiese 1996.

“The pressure on the people has risen many times over. During my time, for instance, there were three or four people on board the inland waterway vessels. Usually there were two qualified skippers on board. Today even larger ships are operated with only two people. That fact alone produces tremendous social pressure.” (Wolfgang, 11/10/2004)

These statements correspond to predictions by Hoyle’s model (Hoyle 1992: 10) about mechanisation of port work. However, apprenticeship for career inland sailors was only created on 01/08/2005, in order to combat recruitment problems. Clearly, changes in transport methods have drastically reduced the time the inland waterway vessels need to stay in the harbour, with the result that fewer and fewer sailors actually enter the city.

Sea port development and the situation of inland sailors

As described for the fourth phase of the model, the port of Hamburg has increasingly withdrawn from the city. This has had a much larger influence on the situation of the inland sailors than mechanisation itself. Since many peripheral areas of the port are abandoned and not well used, transport connections to the city from areas where the inland waterway vessels can dock have been getting worse. Most of my interviewees confirm this emphatically:

“When doing shift or crew changes, we look out for bus or ferry boat connections. So that we can say: There we can rest, and there we can have our shift changes, where it is convenient, where there is at least a ferry boat going to Baumwall or Landungsbrücken, from where you can go on by public transport. We don’t have that at all. In the summer it’s okay. But stand somewhere with two bags in the winter in the freezing cold: Where will the ship dock? We’d have to say: here and there.” (Dietmar, 01/04/2005)

The following map shows the port of Hamburg with important places for the inland waterway sailors and their basic needs, like shifting crews, buying food, bunkering drinking water and visiting places for social contacts.

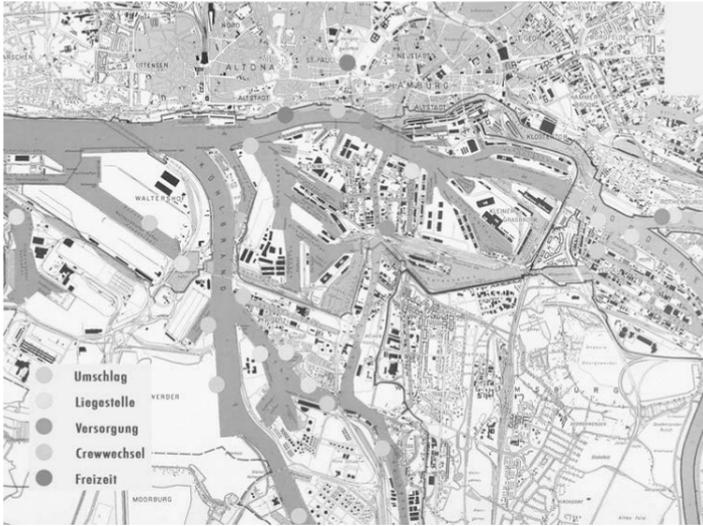


Fig. 3: Map of Hamburg Port (Initiative “Rettet die Elbe”, Hamburg, graphic additions by Hinrich Schulze)

However, inland sailors do not only report difficulties at the change of shift. They also report that the increasing distance between the docks and the city makes accessing basic supplies and attending cultural events or social meetings more and more difficult. More than once it was explained to me that the costs of transport from the ship to the city would be many times the entrance fee for the cinema or a soccer game. All in all, the inland sailors complain about a decrease in quality of life caused by the lack of city-centre docks.

The changes to the port of Hamburg have also had indirect effects on the inland sailors. In the development of the port, a particular focus was set on increasing the container traffic on sea-going vessels. As a consequence, the water depth of the Elbe has been continuously adjusted to suit the ever larger container ships. The deepening of the Elbe-waterway was followed by an increased tidal range, meaning that the high tide became higher and the low tide lower. This way, access to the docks near the city was drastically reduced. When the tide is high, the bridges are no longer passable. When the tide is low, the port basins cannot be used by the inland vessels since they are not dredged on a regular basis, and as a result, the water level is too low.

In inland navigation, there is a difference between unloading and loading places on the one hand, and overnight berths on the other. As far as the berths are concerned, until the 1970s many Hamburg boat opera-

tors benefited from a situation similar to that of navigation in the 19th century: Overnight and in winter, in Hamburg vessels docked in neighbourhoods near the port (e.g. Veddel). Apartments of the inland sailors and their families were often located directly on the bank. This has changed and is described by the sailors as a major problem:

“I would finally bring this misery to an end – that a fully-packed inland vessel can’t dock anywhere close to here but only at the end of the world. Look at it like this: after a few days with an easterly wind it is not possible to enter the Billwerder Bucht to get to the docks, even with a draught of just 2.5 meters, since you have to be careful not to get stuck on the flood barrier. To me the situation is unbelievable.” (Wolfgang, 11/10/2004)

All in all, my findings show that possibilities for inland sailors to spend their ever-dwindling free time in Hamburg and to find and maintain contacts on land have decreased significantly.



Fig. 4: Inland ships docked in the bay of Billwerder (photo: Marily Stroux)

Consequences of urban development

Although in Hamburg, relocation of the port away from the city of Hamburg will continue for years or decades (thus confirming phase four

of Hoyle's model), the next development phase can also serve to describe current changes in the Hanseatic city. Abandoned areas between the city and the port have attracted the interests of city planners and investors, with the goal of revitalising the port and the waterfront. According to Schubert, this group constitutes a "conglomerate of very different and partially contradictory goals" (Schubert 2001: 23). In Hamburg, the most famous and largest example is the so-called "HafenCity" which is currently under construction on the north bank of the river at the eastern end of the harbour. On the outskirts of the port area, which had been for the most part inactive since the construction of the new harbour (and in some cases for a lot longer), a new district of residential, commercial and leisure buildings has been taking shape since the turn of the millennium. Following the prestigious new development of an inner-city district, with international connections via the cruise ship terminal in the so-called "overseas quarter", the city seeks to gain the highest possible revenues from selling the surrounding areas, in order to finance the infrastructure of a new container terminal in Altenwerder.⁵

In January 2003, the customs border of the free port was moved to allow access to the HafenCity. Now the duty-free area is on the north bank of the Elbe, and all docks or berths have been removed from there. This means that inland vessels with taxable cargos have to declare them to customs before leaving the free port, in order to continue onto the inland waterways in the interior of the country. This can be difficult, however:

"We can not leave using the North Elbe bridge, because the customs office is only open until 5 pm. We can no longer sail out to Peute [berthing place outside the free port in the eastern port area, R.D.] and come back again the next day. It is now an offence to travel out of the duty free area and then back in again. No one gave any thought to the inland vessels which don't reach the border on time, receive their load of containers after 5 pm and as a result have to dock and wait somewhere." (Dietmar, 01/04/2005)

5 In an official statement to the citizens of Hamburg on the 21/05/1997, Mayor Voscherau linked the financing of the Altenwerder container terminal to the income from selling off the city's land, on which the HafenCity was to be built.

The inland sailors' view: suggestions for improvement

My fieldwork in the Hamburg port was part of a comparative research project on urban transformation in different European port cities (Kokot 2006). Research was conducted in cooperation with local NGOs addressing local effects of urban change in port-related areas. In my case, this was the Hamburg Riverboat Church, which traditionally had offered its services to inland waterway sailors. One result of this co-operation was a series of events, in which the inland sailors' concerns and their suggestion for improvement were presented to the public.



Fig. 5: Public event on the Riverboat Church (photo: Marily Stroux)

As Schubert points out, urban renewal is a “complex network of actors, owners and interests” (Schubert 2001: 27). In the past, suitable docks had been available for the inland vessels in the duty free zone on the north bank of the North Elbe, whose port usage had to give way to the HafenCity. Considering this background, it is not surprising that many inland sailors argued for a central docking bay in the eastern part of the HafenCity, when they were asked for suggestions to improve their everyday work in the Hamburg port, while a representative of the planning company (HafenCity GmbH) was not even willing to comment on the suggestion, because its implementation could lead to problems with the contracts. So far, in addition to the degradation already described, only minimal efforts can be discerned on the part of the

Hamburg Port Authority to address the berthing and supply problems of inland sailors within the current context.

However, future developments may point to a different direction. A doubling of all container transport has been predicted within the coming twelve years (Berenberg Bank – HWWI 2006), which will place a considerable strain on the inland transport networks. Road capacities and rail networks are overloaded already. The forecasted increase in cargo volume can only be reconciled to the political goal of reducing CO₂ emissions, by using means of transportation with a low consumption of energy per ton/kilometre. In this context, boats (partly in conjunction with other means of cargo transportation) will have to be reconsidered as a rational option.

Conclusion

Hamburg harbour has been developing largely in accordance with the Hoyle model – with some adjustments to account for contemporary circumstances. This also applies to the situation of the inland sailors, whose quality of life has been affected significantly by the increased distance between the docks and the town centre. The conflicts of interest which have become evident during the development of the harbour and the planning for surrounding areas are also apparent in relation to the interests of the inland sailors. As a group of harbour users, they feel underrepresented, and largely unheard by politicians.

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