The Use of Image in Regenerating Old Industrial Regions

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Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to discuss the relationship between spatial images and the development of Old Industrial Regions, focussing on the ways in which spatial images are used to regenerate such areas.

The term Old Industrial Region (OIR) can be seen as representing a specific spatial image itself which is mainly used in particular contexts, i.e. economic geography or regional development. Although definitions vary, some aspects attributed to areas labelled Old Industrial Regions seem fairly constant, such as the understanding that these areas were at "the forefront of early industrialisation" and have, due to a lacking flexibility to accommodate structural shifts in the economy to Fordist mass production, "become increasingly marginal as growth regions of the capitalist economy" (CUMBERS / BIRCH 2006, 4).

However defined, the term Old Industrial Region embodies a reduction of a complex empirical reality which has undergone various processes of abstraction, interpretation and classification. Yet, it cannot be entirely arbitrary because if it is to have a communicative value, then the empirical phenomena which are drawn on to give meaning to that term have to relate to people´s everyday experiences and use of language (DANIELZYK / WOOD 2004).

Spatial images can be "used" and "useful" in various ways, for instance, by structuring daily life routines or by helping to gain control over the ways in which others regard the world. Both aspects will be looked at in this paper. On the one hand, it will be shown why spatial images are important in our daily lives. On the other, the possibilities and the limitations of calculated uses of spatial images will be discussed, for instance in the context of image campaigns which in most cases quite deliberately depart from well-established images of certain spaces in their attempt to create a specific, reconfigured spatial representation in the minds of the audiences they which to reach. This discussion is focussed by means of an example, the Ruhr district in Germany.

The author's rendition of the relationship between spatial images and the development of Old Industrial Regions rests on three basic assumptions which form the structure of this paper:

(1) Spatial images as verbal or visual representations are embedded in social communication. At the same time, those images shape social communication in various respects.
(2) Spatial images reduce social complexity and create emotional and mental frames of reference for everyday life which facilitate communication and social integration.
(3) Attempts to deliberately make use of spatial images for certain ends are open in their outcome.

(1) The embeddedness of spatial images in social communication
Spatial images can unfold their potential in several ways. As codes which reduce complexities they are instrumental in sustaining our taken-for-granted view of the world, thereby guiding us in our everyday lives. As elements of communicative practices they help us to collectively build up meaning in a complex and sometimes perplex-

ing world, thereby facilitating social interaction in our everyday lives. As IPSEN (2003, 4) puts it, spatial images are important for social communication because they speak a "language" which can be readily understood by many. The life-span of spatial images can differ greatly, and some images can even experience a renewed life after having fallen into oblivion, a case in point being the positive re-imagination of those quarters in central locations of European cities consisting of historic housing stock during the second half of the 20th century (if they survived demolition due to modernization in the 1960s and 70s). Spatial images compress ideas, concepts, interests and capital in certain spatial ensembles (IPSEN 2003, 4). In other words, verbal or visual representations of spatially bounded empiri-cal phenomena are constructed by people with certain interests and aims. Thus, there are potentially various options in which spaces may be represented. Often this takes on the form of ambivalent or even competing representations of spaces, as will be illustrated by the example of an OIR in Germany, the Ruhr district.

The number of historical and current interpretations of the "Ruhr" is impressive and beyond the grasp of any individual (BLOTEVOGEL 2001, 55). In terms of Eric Hobsbawm´s invention of tradition, the Ruhr has been repeatedly invented and continues to be invented at present.

Despite the prolific nature of Ruhr-representations, however, there are recurrent themes, one of which is the amazing continuity of am-bivalent interpretations of the Ruhr. This ambivalence is a reflection of the fact that contemporaries at all times were at odds with the industrial landscape and sociospace which evolved around coal and steel in a few but intense thrusts of development in the 19th and 20th centuries.

For conservative middle-class authors of that time, the massive industrialization, coupled with an enormous amount of in-migration resulted in an image of the area as the "native soil" ("Heimat") and at the same time as an increasingly unfamiliar and alienating place. On the one hand, the Ruhr was seen as an important powerhouse for the national economy and on the other it was perceived as being threatened, if not destructed by heavy industry and massive demographic changes, as for instance Philipp Wittkop points out in 1901 (see BLOTEVOGEL 2001).

To my mind, this view of the Ruhr is – inter alia - an expression of the difficulty to reconcile economic, social and spatial transformations with established images of the area which related to its rural character before the onset of industrialisation. On a social psychological level, WEICHHART (2000) reminds us that the psychological and social processes involved in identity formation very much hinge on security and reliability when making judgements about the environment and on the experience of stability and continuity of that environment. This is why regional images, for instance, tend to conventionalize regional traditions which are then quite inaccessible to change. Additionally, established spatial images are formed over longer periods of time and sediment to become intrinsically tied to social practices. They become part of people´s collective memory which serves as a backdrop for everyday life, reassuring us of our (relative) position in the world.

Thus, the stability of certain spatial images over time is due to this twin functionality. The question remains, however, as to how we can reconcile the persistent nature of certain spatial images with the changing social contexts these images are embedded in. How do spatial images change and can that process be influenced?

The Ruhr was chosen as an example quite deliberately because due to its changing economic fortunes and the manifold associated implications it can be regarded as a "typical" Old Industrial Region, conforming to the definition at the beginning of this paper. As was also noted above, there is a certain amount of divergence in the usage of the term, depending on whose views are articulated. For an economic geographer, for instance, this term may allude to an area which has not (yet) successfully made the transition from one long wave of regional development to another or switch from products at the end of their life-cycle to those which are in their infancy and have a promising future. From a political scientist´s point of view old industrial regions may in the main signify areas characterized by ossified governance structures in need for renewal if these regions are not to lose touch with overall social and institutional developments. For a sociologist this term may be shorthand for the juxtaposition of "old" (i.e. working-class) values and a maelstrom of comprehensive social change. For an "image broker", finally, that term is very likely to be dismissed as being a "misrepresentation" because it does not adequately draw attention to the – significant – renewal some of these regions have undergone. All of these different readings (and various others) have been applied to the Ruhr which makes it an interesting case to study.

With regard to the overall focus of this paper, the last argument about misrepresentations, or rather, the "proper" representations is particularly interesting because it is very often at the heart of the debate on how to best represent a certain region to the (outside) world, for instance in order to enhance its market value. This point will be looked at more closely further down in part three of this contribution.

From a constructionist´s point of view it is untenable to assert that there are misconceptions of (social) reality. Rather, there are competing representations of the same empirical phenomena. If we consider spatial images as representing certain interests and the people articulating them then it is obvious that the search for **the** proper spatial representation or even the "truth" is indeed a fruitless venture. The power certain representations may assume very much rests upon their communicative strength that is their acceptance within smaller or larger sections of society. Thus, various representations may co-exist, even conflicting ones, as was noted above. Social reality is messy. This is why spatial images (the "Ruhr") on the one hand offer order and in their often multitudinous meanings create disorder on the other (at least for those who try to systematize the meanings of various representations). These reflections lead to the second point of this contribution.

(2)   The relevance of spatial images for everyday life

Images of spaces are arbitrary delineations, at the same time including as well as excluding certain characteristics (TZSCHASCHEL / MICHEEL 2008). The associations which are conjured up by spatial images can be conveyed either through primary that is first-hand experience or through mediated forms of knowledge (printed media, TV, internet etc.). Because of their arbitrary nature spatial images cannot be equated with the empirical phenomena they are grounded in. In other words the "Ruhr" or the "North-East" of England do not exist per se, even though the images associated with these terms may be put down to tangible empirical evidence. It is important to make this point because very often social reality (the richness of economic, social, political, cultural and the many other characteristics of the Ruhr, for instance, and the multitudinous ways in which they are interconnected) is equated with and thus reduced to a limited set of features (in our case: specific spatial images) which are taken for the whole.

Spatial images are always constructions as they are reductions of a complex social and socio-spatial contingent reality (TZSCHASCHEL / MICHEEL 2008). The term contingent is used here to emphasize that all social processes are in principal open in their outcomes, hence underscoring the arbitrary nature of spatial images which reflect and shape social practices. Reducing social complexity by means of spatial representations helps us to structure the world we live in and to simplify social communication.

In addition, as KÜSTER points out (2008), spatial images can be instrumental in creating emotional and mental frames of reference which endow spaces with an "inner logic" and offer people options for identification, including the feeling of belonging to certain places. Spatial images can have a stabilizing effect, most notably in times of (comprehensive) change because they suggest stability and continuity of the environment people live in (cf. WEICHHART 2000). The obvious paradox is that these spaces (for instance OIRs) may undergo considerable change, yet the adherence to established images suggests a continuity of affairs. This mechanism, functional as it may be for everyday life, can backfire as it may prevent people from adapting to changed circumstances. In literature and public debates on regional development this issue has been paid growing attention to because it is seen as an important bottleneck for any substantial (economic) revitalisation. The longevity of certain spatial images for which empirical evidence is increasingly difficult to find (i.e. polluted air, barren industrial landscapes, a topography dominated by slag heaps etc.) is seen as having a detrimental effect on regional development because they allegedly impede the spatial allocation of capital (Sucháček 2009) and (qualified) labour to OIRs. The growing realization that spatial images may be important and potentially hazardous for regional development has resulted in numerous attempts at image management. This can be seen as an exer-

cise in taking control over the ways in which others see the world, and it can go hand in hand with people´s need to rely upon mediated forms of more comprehensive spatial knowledge due to their own fragmented daily experience.

Thus, a regional newspaper can be successful in economic terms if it pursues such an image management of its area of circulation (Example: WAZ which is located in Essen, cf. WOOD 1989). By binding together spaces which individuals can only loosely connect in their daily lives (regional) spatial representations circulated by the media can have a homogenizing effect. Additionally, they may underpin social reproduction and pay off for those who have employed them as a focussing and integrating device. Whether such an image management can also be successfully applied in the context of regenerating OIRs is an issue I will now turn to.

(3) Image management and regional regeneration

The focus of this chapter is, firstly, on the examination of one example of image management geared to the "improvement" of the perception of OIRs (and, ultimately, to economic regeneration), both within and outside such regions and, secondly, on the discussion of the "usefulness" of such attempts in terms of meeting the expectations of the people behind such schemes.

The first example deals with the Ruhr. In 1985 the association of local authorities in the Ruhr, then called the Kommunalverband Ruhrgebiet (KVR) launched its first major campaign which aimed at changing people´s perception of the Ruhr, both inside and outside the region. There had been previous analyses of the internal and external images of the region, and the results were always sobering: as early as in 1973 a study commissioned by the predecessor of the KVR came to the conclusion that the image of the region was unambigu-

ously negative and that in order to turn that around it was deemed necessary to launch a massive PR-campaign (LANDWEHRMANN et al.1973). Another study, again commissioned by the KVR, endorsed the main findings of the first. For the chief executive of the KVR PR-department it was plainly clear that "the most powerful opponent of the Ruhr is its reputation" (RÜHL 1986, 450).

The KVR therefore found it "imperative that in view of the many misjudgments concerning the Ruhr the [underlying, GW] lack of information needed to be counterbalanced by means of targeted PR." Professional image management was to project a positive image of the Ruhr, thereby altering outsiders´ views and enhancing the sense of community and common purpose amongst the people living in the Ruhr. The KVR declared the (costly) intervention in public perceptions as a necessary step in economic revitalization of the area (KVR 1986, 25).

"This campaign is essential in order to bring about an up-to-date appreciation of the Ruhr which is true to life, thereby dissolving prejudices and stereotypes. […] If the Ruhr is to be seen as a place for work and a base for business which offers a promising future, then it is crucial to improve its reputation. If we want people to move into the region we need to enhance the ways in which people perceive its quality of life."

The chief executive of the KVR at the time, Jürgen Gramke declared, "Coming to terms with structural change, which is enormously testing, crucially depends on the ways in which all the positive changes that have taken place and the chances the Ruhr now offers are appreciated both from within and from outside the region. The image of a region can be a first-rate locational advantage" (GRAMKE 1988, 7).