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Amazon the rural shopping center—from a temporary business model to a spatial impact: a backstage landscape

ABSTRACT

The distribution of goods in the world of Amazon is well known through their “1 click-order”. The reason, why more and more shops in this areas shut down. The today's market square is virtual and only one click away. Delivered the next day by DHL or UPS.

This project will focus on a side effect of this system. In november and december 2012 during Christmas shopping the distribution centers have to be enormously enlarged with labor. For the hub in Graben¹ around 3500 extra workers are needed for a period of 6 weeks. All of them are temporary workers, mostly students from all over the world, which come to Germany during this time.

With this research the side effect of the organization system of a logistic hub will be shown. The transfer of people will be mapped and the impact on the rural places will be shown. They create a new type of landscape, called backstage landscape.

Keywords: backstage landscape; logisitc landscape; amazon's time based workers; exchange of cultures; decrease of shops in rural places

¹ comment of the author: Graben is a small village with 3600 residents, in the greater region of Munich, where amazon settled in 2010

This observation was made in fall 2012, without having any background information about amazon and their business politics.² It should be seen as a first observation, a little story of an “absurd” reality. The process is running, the results are diffuse.

Working on this subject many critical reports occurred about amazon and their company policy. The “Süddeutsche Zeitung” and the “ARD” reported on the low payment of workers and illegal contracts. Some examples showed the bad situation of the workers’ accommodation and the brutality of security services. I absolutely agree the approach of the media to pick up this topic and denounce the current standards at amazon.

However, I have decided, to “only” focus this study on the “spatial interactions” of amazons in Lechbruck am See.

According to the “Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung (GfK) amazon is the leading online-seller with 16,7 Millions customers in Germany since 2009. Founded in 1994 by Jeff Bezos and online since 1995³ amazon became famous for its “1click order” strategy.

This idea of e-commerce drastically changed our space today, the practice of everyday life was transformed. The option of getting goods the day after ordering, is a service responding to customer behavior—the success for amazon. It was a transformation of our spatial practices of “shopping⁴” and “working⁵” and later of its physical space.

Through globalization, the worldwide distribution of goods changed dramatically—creating the new term of “logistic landscapes”. Based on a global distribution network, these landscapes have recently changed our environment. The reason for that lies on the one hand in their location which is from an “urban point of view” in the middle of nowhere and on the other hand in their huge dimensions.

² note of the author: this report is based on personal observation with the view of an outsider, concerning the internal politics of amazon, only focussing on the effects on Lechbruck am See. In early 2013 critical reports occurred, how amazon is dealing with their time-based employees in the Sueddeutsche Zeitung or the German television (ARD).

³ note of the author: the world wide web was opened in 1991 for public and private use with its goal to connect the world. Since the mid 90s more and more private households use this hypertext- service for various issues.

⁴ note of the author: for the example of rural situations it means, customers buy online and have a large variety of offers instead of the local reseller with a limited selection of goods

⁵ note of the author: in the last month especially in Germany amazon’s behavior get into critique, because they ignore the rules of the labor union.

Facing already the third stage of industrialization, in which space is organized on a global layer, centric (zentrierte) cities as we used to know them do not exist anymore. In previous decades goods used to be produced, stored and sold within the city borders. In the period of fordism production had been shifted to suburbia as a decentralized structure and network of roads and train tracks. In the post-fordist landscape, with its “just-in-time” production and distribution everything had to be flexible—not only individualized products, but also a the schedule for workers according to customer demand.⁶ The last one will be highlighted in this study later.

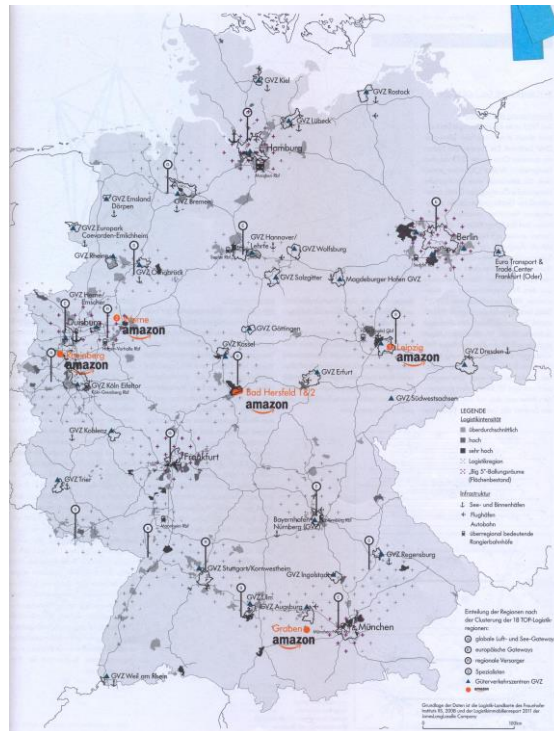


FIG. 1 - Overview about the logistic landscape of Germany, see ARCH+, Nr. 205, p. 93

Logistics is a highly relevant industry for Germany's export based economy. It is the second largest industrial sector behind the automobile production. In this industry, Amazon is only one of many players. Its 6 logistic hubs are located between European and regional logistic distribution centers. Both are embedded in logistic-clusters, a

⁶ see: Berger; Waldheim Charles (2008), p. 219ff

conglomeration of logistic services with close connection to traffic infrastructure. Five of the six hubs are in the middle of Germany in the same corridor between Rheinberg in the West and Leipzig in the East. The only exception is Graben which is in the south of Germany, close to Munich. Amazon had decided to set up this hub in the South to also serve the small Austrian⁷ market from there.

The outer system of the cluster is an interface between the global and local system. Goods are stored in extremely large buildings in a chaotic way (“chaotic system”). This saves times, because the next free space can be used. The computer system calculates the closest distance between the ordered goods. The workers are the most flexible component in this hierarchy. They collect the order.⁸



FIG 2 - Amazon's logistic centre in Graben. A google maps eye birds view is not existing (20.05.2013), see http://www.ievg.de/pix/referenzen/Amazon2_muc3.jpg (20.05.2013), Photocredit: Ulrich Wagner

Graben is a village of 3600 residents in the south of Germany, near Augsburg. Due to infrastructural, economical and political decisions, the amazon complex was realized there in 2012. It is a absolutely flat land, where the neutral distribution hall is close to one of the Aldi logistic centers.

In almost 20 years this impact of “1 click order” has changed the physical space—our environment. “Societies—through whatever organs they see fit, such as state patronage or the operation of the market—prescribe the creation of fit environments for human activities; the architectural profession responds, reflexively, by proposing

⁷ note of the author: Austria has a population of 8.5 mio. See: http://www.statistik.at/web_de/statistiken/bevoelkerung/ (20.05.2013)

⁸ see Kampmann, Wertgen (2012), p. 96

enclosed spaces framed by massive structures, because that is what architects been taught to do, and what society has been taught to expect of architects.”⁹



FIG 3 - Size of amazon's hall in relation to the Aldi distribution center, in http://www.augsburger-allgemeine.de/img/14628836-1302525581000/topTeaser_crop_Amazon-1.eps.jpg (20.05.2013)

But here not architects decided the change, the customer behaviors have slowly changed.

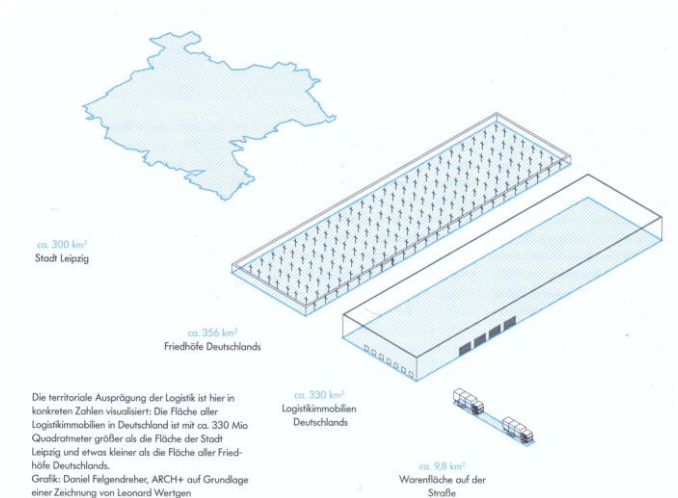


FIG 4 - The territory of logisitcs, see Arch+, Nr. 205, p. 92

⁹ Banham (1984), p. 21

It has also slowly changed our consumer habits. Shopping becomes a more and more important part of our leisure time activities¹⁰. While larger cities working as commercial hubs with an increase of supply, in small local shopping places a decrease of shops and goods can be observed. It is based on walking. "The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered."¹¹

Thesis 1:

The former local shopping places have changed from places with many small units with all kind of goods in the city cores to just a view supermarkets in the commercial zones.

Thesis 2:

The influence of amazon time-based workers hosted in small municipalities temporary transformed them back into a vivid place. This produces the new backstage landscape.

Backstage architecture is used in architecture since at least baroque. Planed as a physical space for servants it changes over time. The most remarkable shift is into the digital era. It is not only digital, it is more a combination of both. In the case of distributing goods, all data is administrated by computers and executed, as already briefly described by men. This describes the distribution of goods. the focus here is more on the workers.

In this case due to the lack of accommodation in Graben, the temporary workers have to travel everyday by bus at least one hour between "work and life".

They create a new backstage landscape¹² nobody is thinking about, when ordering from amazon. This terrain includes the area between the bus-stop in Graben, next to the amazon hall on the one, and on the other the "temporary home" in Lechbruck with the facilities of everyday life. Literally it is the contemporary translation of the "servants corridor", to substitute our personal daily rhythm with more comfort.¹³

¹⁰ note of the author: this is a personal observation in examples of Innsbruck, London, Munich and Stuttgart mostly cycling/ running through these cities. People do have more and more leisure time. In Germany working hours are between 35 and 40 per week.

¹¹ Certeau (1984), p. 97

¹² note of the author: landscape according to J.B. Jackson is opened to the contemporary discussion about it. Today landscape is everything, because we are already in a post-landscape. Therefore backstage landscape is the field of this study. It is a combination of natural and artificial pieces forming this environment.

¹³ see Kopper, Ngo, Opel, Schneider, Muhr (2012), p. 18

Case-study Fall 2012, Lechbruck am See¹⁴. This report is based on personal observation in short visits, interviews with the mayor and the person in charge of the municipality.

Over a period of three months between october and december around 850 from more than 25 countries all over the world invaded a small municipality of 2.500 inhabitants. Nothing special, because during the 70s and 80s large touristic infrastructure of camp-site, hotels, vacation village and bed&breakfast units were built to host mostly tourists from northern Germany and the Netherlands. The residents were used to the increase of population during summer time, and over time they became “friends”¹⁵. Parties were organized and the tradition was present to show “our”¹⁶ originality. Since the 90s less and less tourists came, the infrastructure of hotels, restaurants, swimming facilities, tennis court, and other has to be closed, because of financial problems.

The peak is over, through the location in a close distance to touristic hotspots as the castles of King Ludwig II., like Neuschwanstein, Linderhof, Lechbruck is part of the region called Allgäu, which is still popular for vacations for people from the north both in winter and summer time.



FIG 5 - Map of Lechbruck am See, see google.maps.de (20.05.2013)

“Second spring” in fall.

This time the color of the tourists change. Most of them are colored, their communication language is English, because of their different origins. Actually they

¹⁴ note of the author: for further information about this municipality see: www.lechbruck.de

¹⁵ note of the author: what the locals understand in friendship with tourists can be summarized as, we also have fun with the tourist until they leave their money here.

¹⁶ note of the author: fortunately my family was outside the system

arrived from 25 countries, mostly from eastern Europe, or Africa. They work only temporary, most of them are students, taking this 12 week period to gain money to finance their live, to enlarge their personal network with other workers or the residents in Lechbruck.

The logistic of accommodation is organized by amazon. They rent all available rooms, apartments. Most of them are originally 70s style with the need to be refurbished if tourism should increase again. The payment is more they usually get per day for such a kind of facility. Eventually the money is used to activate parts of the sleeping infrastructure



FIG 6 - Example for the anonymity of Lechbruck represented through Jonas Dahlberg's project "invisible cities", http://images.arcadja.com/dahlberg_jonas-study_7___18~OMa76300~10623_20081029_G810_1200.jpg (20.05.2013)

The restaurants serve as canteens. They have time-based eating times. Their eating traditions as vegetarian, vegan, no pork, allergies are taken serious and have to be implemented in the production of meals. Imagine a bavarian cook¹⁷, used in cooking meat with potatoes on demand, dish per dish, has to create meals for around 80 people at one time. Can you imagine the taste. So the workers started to cook in their accommodations¹⁸. Nevertheless the restaurants made double of their usual profit¹⁹ per year.

¹⁷ note of the author; here we are not talking about a gourmet chief, well educated as a cook. Some/ most of the families running a restaurants not of being a cook, more because they failed in all other disciplines.

¹⁸ see scene 4

Hopefully the people in Lechbruck use this event as a stimulation to continue running their businesses and bring their level of accommodation and restaurants to a contemporary standard.

The logisitc centre of amazon is around one hour drive away. They are organized in shift-working to serve our demands. Buses/ coaches are used, because there is no railway connection running anymore between north and south since years. Instead of a crowded parking lot at the holiday location, the situation was spooky, one or two of them were placed there. The companies and drivers of the buses are not locals, they came from somewhere in Germany to work for this specific task.

The change of a small, sleepy town to an active spot is better explained with 4 little stories highlighting the spatial interaction of amazon as a shopping concept and its workers.

Scene 1- spatial interaction

In small villages everybody is using a car for transportation. If a distance is longer than 100m or in the next street, walking is no option. "In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of these real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city. They are not localized; it is rather they that spatialize."²⁰ Obvious regarding the parking lots in front of the houses and shops. This increased over time, due to the fact the small shops in the center²¹ shut down and the supermarkets are located at the borders. Usually nobody is walking.

Certainly you could see groups of people walking with plastic bags with brands of one of the three supermarkets along the streets. This interaction brought the character in the sense of de Certeau of an active space back. The different places as public areas around the middle of the village or the sports facilities, or other very small public spaces became meeting points between the locals and the foreigners. They started chatting about their cultures, visions, latest fashion, or playing sports. This influence both.

¹⁹ note of the author: unfortunately not because of the quality they are producing, only because their facilities changed from a no-go place to a canteen.

²⁰ Certeau (1984), p.97

²¹ note of the author: the village of Lechbruck am See is a linear type due to its topography along the river Lech and the unification of Lech and Brugg around 250 years ago. In the 60s and 70s the municipality missed to generate a clear situation instead they build a 15m wide road through this small structure.

The young generation becomes global in the sense of getting into touch with unknown cultures, a benefit in the upcoming future.

Scene 2 - clash of cultures

In an old farm house a bit outside the town. This place belongs to one family since hundreds of years. It is one of the biggest farmers. They have around 40 cows for milk production and in winter time they cultivate their forest. Their life is working, they never go on vacation, Munich is a world-tour for them²². They do not speak one word English²³. They rent beds for tourists since years in their old, traditional farmhouse. Of course they rent their space to Amazon.

A young couple and two women from the African continent moved to this place. Imagine four colored, students, well educated meet these thin, white, strange looking farmers. A doubtful situation for the farmers. Colored people in their house. No communication is possible. Are they dangerous, as TV reported several times about bad things from this continent.

After three days the four colored guests coming back from working, get in contact with the referent of the municipality to translate for them. They were a bit scared and especially the two women could not sleep well at night, because they feel unsafe!

The reason for this is, the main door of the farm-house has not been locked during the. It is never locked, since hundreds of years.

Both sides understand each position and trusted each other. The colored slept well without locking the door and the farmers opinion is, people you are scared because of this can not be dangerous at all.

Scene 3 - cultural exchange

The meal the restaurants provided did not taste too good as explained earlier. So if they have the facilities in their accommodations the foreigners started cooking. The variety of dishes from 25 different countries and various cultures is extremely rich. The ingredients, flavors, herbs and spices vary totally, the smell is delicious. Not for

²² note of the author: the distance between Lechbruck am See and Munich is around 100 km by car. Some people commute every working day between the to cities

²³ note of the author: because of their immobility they never have to speak English. They learned it in school for 4 years, never practiced. They even do not speak proper German, they communicate in dialect. Not bad - keeps tradition alive.

people used to the taste of meet and potatoes, with a little influence of “germanized, Mediterranean cooking”²⁴.

The occupants were bothered with the strange taste. The first days they accepted it, after the smell took over the original one, they asked to stop cooking strange things.

The amazons invited them to join their meal. Based on pure tolerance they accepted the invitation. With respect what will be served they started eating and were amazed how extremely delicious the meal tastes.

So the exchange of meals started, they were changing recipes, herbs, spices and knowledge how to cook diverse products.

Scene 4 - future options

A young man from Nigeria, showed up at the secretary of the major and asked her about Lechbruck, the region. Her answers were insufficient and therefore he asked for a meeting with major.

In the meeting with the major he precisely asked him about job opportunities in and around Lechbruck and the region. He is studying electric engineering. After finishing his studies he plans to return back to Lechbruck and start working as an engineer. His interest also covers the fields about learning German, local cultural facilities, sport clubs (soccer, volleyball,...), and other activities. The major precisely explained all relevant information to understand WHY he wants to know all this. What is behind his interest?

Suddenly the colored's breezily manner changed to a shy, quiet voice. He offered him a secret, he is falling in love with a young girl from Lechbruck. They are dating since two weeks...

This case-study of Lechbruck am See is based on observation and interviews with local stakeholders in fall/ winter 2012. Their original idea was to increase tourism in Lechbruck during off-season. This was an offer from amazon, because they could not host time-based worker closer to their distribution center. The major as representing Lechbruck applied for hosting them. Out of this pure economic issue, an exchange on many layers started, where this will lead is an open answer. In an forward looking manner it will work in both ways, what means some of them after graduating will come back and bring “fresh” knowledge, culture in and become residents. There could

²⁴ note of the author: the region of the Allgäu, where Lechbruck is located has a very limited variety of meals, because originally it was a poor area due to its altitude of more than 700 m and a very rough and cold climate. The milk production, where may the region is famous for, is only about 120 years old. The knowledge is taken from Switzerland. Before this time farmers grow flax. For more information key words are: Carl Hirnbein, das blaue Allgäu.

be also an exchange in the other direction, and if only as tourists for a two week trip to visit the former guests country and become guest there.²⁵

A new “backstage landscape” is created. This emerges in the overlay of logistic and touristic landscape and builds up a corridor between them. It is more the interaction of systems, who generates this, than architecture will do. It means everything is still built, through creative users and their spatial practices an new system starts, as an environment²⁶. Furthermore backstage landscape, specially the word landscape is a topological²⁷ meaning of different parameters. The parameter are based on hard and soft facts as mentioned above.

Amazon changes drastically our way of shopping, specially in the rural areas, where shopping never becomes an event. Supply was very limited and through globalization (the www case), the demands changes from buying only the available product, instead “shoppers” usually get an event free. On the one hand this is still present.

On the other the second part, who creates backstage landscape leaves many questions open, because the process has just started and it is still a first observation²⁸. Quoting J.B. Jackson:

“In time, we will find our way and rediscover the role of architecture and man-made forms in creating a new civilized landscape. It is essentially a question of rediscovering symbols and believing in them once again.”²⁹

To be continued in Fall 2013.

²⁵ see: Zinganel, Albers, Hieslmair, Sagadin (2006)

²⁶ note of the author: environment here means the use of this topic in art installation starting in the 1960s by Herrmann Szeemann

²⁷ Girot, Freytag, Kirchengast, Krizenecky, Richter (2012), p. 7

²⁸ note of the author: this first observation is called “Landing” according to Chritophe Girot’s Four trace concepts in Landscape Architecture. It is just the first of four layers to understand system.

²⁹ Jackson (1984), p. 37

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