Between Europeanization and Marginalization – "Nested Urbanism" in a German-Polish Border Town

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Abstract. Scepticism toward the claim that globalization has been forcing convergence in social and spatial patterns on a "global city" model has triggered a new interest in the variations, contradictions, and complexities of urban and regional development. This has led to a revitalized interest in the "ordinary city" that is on not centre stage of a networked global society. Rather than transcending their hinterland of national political institutions and regional cultural landscapes (as global cities are supposed to do), ordinary cities are "nested cities," deeply entwined in the complexity of global connectivity, the national developmental model, regional cultural landscape, and local tradition. Border cities along the German-Polish border provide a vivid example of "nested urbanism." A closer ethnographic look at the German/Polish twin city of Guben/Gubin shows that terms such as "shrinking" and "marginalized" city do not sufficiently grasp the trajectory of this "ordinary city."

Introduction

As outlined by the editors of this volume in the introduction, recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in the dynamics of the city and city life. This is perhaps unsurprising given the ambivalence of the contemporary era of social development, and the traditional role that the city has played as indicator of trends in societal transformations. Thus, while urban sociology might have lost the privileged position it once held through the dominance of the Chicago School, it has been argued that at the beginning of the new millennium, "the city is once again emerging as a strategic site for understanding major new trends that are reconfiguring the social order" (Sassen 2000, 143).

While the urban world seems to be omnipresent, and while our world indeed has turned into an "urban planet" (Girardet 2004), an agreed definition of its driving force or trajectory has become increasingly illusive. As Amin and Thrift (2004, 1) point out, "the city is everywhere and in everything," yet at the same time "cities have become extraordinarily intricate, and ... difficult to generalize." Until recently, "globalization" was the umbrella term that was enthusiastically embraced in order to capture the reconfiguration of society along socio-spatial patterns beyond the confines of the nation state container. And similarly, the network of "world cities" or "global cities" served to provide an analytical corset that gave at least some shape to an otherwise supposedly quite anarchic "space of flows" within the new global political economy of "disorganized capitalism" (Lash and Urry 1994).

But as is the case with all immediately insightful formulas, the emphasis on a metageography of global cities tends to occlude as much as it reveals. Not only has it led to oversimplifying generalizations about the spatial and social patterns of these globalizing cities, it also disregarded the diverse and distinctive worlds of what Jennifer Robinson (2004) has termed "the world of ordinary cities." Thus Markusen's (2004) connotation of these cities as "forgotten places" quite fits the gist of the discussion of the 1990s. They were not only perceived as disconnected from the networked logic of global capital, but also off the map of mainstream urban sociology (Lee and Yeoh 2004; Hannemann 2004, 11ff.; McCann 2004).

Ironically, the discourse of "postindustrial" shrinking or "deindustrialization" (Cowie and Heathcott 2003), that provides explicit focus on marginalized cities and regions, is just the other side of the same coin. For it stays largely within the same abstract metalogic of labour, capital, crisis, flows, networks, etc. This terminology, however, tends to be less and less helpful in revealing the social and cultural complexity of particular places and their trajectories as it fades out the social and cultural implications of marginalization.

Thus it is no surprise that now there are strong voices that articulate a "recent turn toward variation, contradiction, and complexity" in urban studies (Hill and Fujita 2003, 207; May and Perry 2005) which resonates with a perspective on global transformations that demands strategies of (re)complexification (Robertson and Khondker 1998, 27). To engage again with the "architecture of complexity" (Simon, cited in Hill 2004, 374) of the contemporary city first of all means to relearn to think in contradictions, as indicated in the introduction to this volume: can it be that a city that is *declining* in socio-economic terms is at the same time seen as *revitalizing* in terms of contributing to an emergent Europeanized society? Return to more complex and contradictory thinking on cities moreover tends to rediscover place as more than just a potential intersection of global flows that needs to make itself attractive to global capital. This in turn suggests to us that we should place our attention on concrete configurations of local actors, and the leeway they might have with regard to influencing the trajectory of their city. Hill and Fujita (2003) have suggested the concept of "nested urbanism" in order to rediscover the complexity of a decentred, diverse, and contradictory urban geography.

Nested Urbanism and Forgotten Places

The concept of nested urbanism was initially introduced within urban studies in order to reclaim the specifics of Southeast Asian urban developments, against the claim that globalization was forcing convergence in social and spatial patterns among the world's metropolises (Hill and Fujita 2003). Instead, emphasis was given to the embeddedness of the city in multilevel spatial and institutional configurations that prevented the urban trajectories of cities like Tokyo or Singapore from converging on the global city model, as presented

by its transatlantic paradigmatic cases of London and New York. Rather than following the "presentism" of the earlier global city debates (Abu-Lughod 1999), the nested city approach highlights the lasting impact of regional history and the complex local configurations of rupture and continuity within the global urban landscape. Following earlier discussions on "rescaling" (Brenner 1998), the national and regional cultural and institutional context here was given added weight in relation to the global. Thus, instead of assuming a fixed hierarchy of institutional reach and cultural embeddedness, nested urbanism highlights the case-specific and complex interplay between "global niche, regional formation, national development model and local historical context" (Hill and Fujita 2003, 212).

It should not come as surprise that the nested urbanism approach has found some resonance in the discourse on marginalization and shrinking cities. If it is now claimed that even global cities did not transcend their hinterland of national institutions, regional cultural landscape, and local tradition, then this should even more so apply to the marginalized ordinary city (Robinson 2004; cf. McCann 2004). Here the emphasis is on recovering "conceptual space in counterpoint to the overwhelming attention given to global cites and major learning or innovative regions" as defining norms of contemporary urban development (Lee and Yeoh 2004, 2295). It is argued that the uneven nature of global urban development cannot be attributed to an anonymous market logic, but that "instead, cities are materially and ideologically nested in a diverse national and regional configuration" in which an active "politics of forgetting" is being played out (ibid., 2297ff.). In other words, the increasing invisibility of some places and regions is (also) the outcome of an active social construction of urban development in social discourse and urban policy. Here we clearly sense an approach that seriously considers the nestedness of marginalization and shrinking in changeable configurations of human action.

This is most clearly argued in Markusen's concept of "forgotten places" (2004, 2304-2305), defined as "communities and ecologies that are deprived of leadership and stewardship by the actions and attitudes of people both present in and absent from these environments." She argues that four sets of actors are involved in generating such forgotten places: "the deployers of money and physical capital, external allocators of public sector moneys and infrastructure, external symbolic analysts

who process understandings and create ideologies about places, and local resource-wielders, decision makers and knowledge workers." On the other hand, there are the local residents who oppose the forgetting of their locality. Next to the return to an approach that highlights active decision making by groups and individuals as crucial for "trajectories of forgetfulness," there are a couple of further aspects noteworthy in Markusen's argument. Firstly, she highlights the role of "ideologies of forgetting" for the cultural reproduction of marginalization. For instance, "individualism" as ideology here refers to the normative modelling of successful biographies, with regard to their successful pursuit of self-interest outside the needs of community and family. Complementary to individualism, we find "out-migration as strategy," especially in times of crisis as a legitimate ideology that favours the destiny of the in-dividual over commitment to community. However, it is due to the unpredictability of actor-centred local configurations that – according to Markusen – there is always hope that trajectories of forgetting are countered by "routes for remembering" (ibid., 2310). Hope here rests with local people that forge coalitions within and beyond community boundaries, in order to revitalize their place.

In sum, what the nested urbanism approach provides us with is a dynamic understanding of place, in the production of which a variety of nested scales are involved, from the global to the regional and local (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2003, 9). Nestedness implies that the various scales are not neatly separated, but intersect and inter-penetrate, often in complex ways that in their outcome are not under the control of local actors. Nevertheless, the dynamics of nestedness cannot be understood without reference to the active networking and deci-sion-making (across various scales) of people involved in influencing the trajectory of a locality. In the following section I will indicate these dynamics in more ethnographic detail by drawing on the case of a city in the German-Polish border region.

Guben/Gubin: From "European Model Town" to "Dying City"

The events of 1989 and after have lastingly reshaped the so-cio-spatial make up of central Europe. Post-Fordist globalization and European enlargement have by no means led to a "Europe without

borders," but rather sharpened our awareness of old and new forms of cultural difference and economic inequality. At the same time they have led to a more fluid intersection of social and cultural spaces that were formerly kept apart by nation state borders.

The immediate encounter of Polish and German society and culture within the border corridor that stretches along the rivers Oder and Neisse should make border cities in this region the ideal seedbed of a European cosmopolitan border culture. The twin city Guben/Gubin would seem to provide the paradigmatic case for this setting: divided by a tiny river, the town is split into two equal halves. You can both see and virtually hear and smell the other side. The locals here have the chance to actively enact "rescaling." While for most Europeans, "Europe" is still a very abstract term of transnational identification, the inhabitants of the borderlands here encounter "Europe as lived place" (Paasi 2001, 10; Meinhof 2002). Accordingly, with Poland's EU accession pending in 2004, during the 1990s there was heightened political attention to the (European) identity-generating power of places like Guben/Gubin. "Fear of failure" of the European project led to the political elite providing an institutional framework especially geared toward cross-border cooperation along the seam (at that time) between "Europe" and "not-yet-Europe." Notably the "Euroregions" that were founded in the 1990s were meant to play a central role in this process. It seems plausible that local and regional councils would jump at this chance of financial support and symbolic enhancement provided by the various EU integration projects. At the height of these developments Guben and Gubin successfully applied in 1998 to be part of the World Expo 2000 as the pioneering "Model Experiment Euro Town Guben/Gubin." However, the identity-generating power of these top-down administered projects has been greatly overestimated. They have rather turned into self-referential projects of symbolic politics, without ever gaining the necessary grass-root support from the everyday cultures on both sides of the border. Thus a huge gap has opened up between programmatic objectives (fostering a transnational civil society) and results (a drift into cultural closure between the neighbouring societies, and further alienation from the political discourse on "Europe") (Bürkner and Matthiesen 2001).

This disjuncture becomes plausible when we look at the wider economic and cultural landscape in which the "Euro Town" is nested.

The German-Polish border region is now right in the middle of a multi-layered process of restructuring European space(s) within a globalized socio-economic landscape. With Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, the EU border has moved further east, leaving the German-Polish border region with less political and symbolic significance. At the same time, the border zone increasingly becomes part and parcel of what Lash and Urry (1994) have described as a new mix of "wild" and "tame zones" within the global political economy of disorganized capitalism. In fact it looks as if here – right in the middle of Europe – one of the "black holes of marginality" (Castells 1996, 379) within the new global division of labour is developing, bypassed by global flows of capital and information, as well as by the transregional corridors of transport (Heidenreich 2003).

The image of a "Model Euro Town" that is supposed to play a pioneering role in the process of European integration thus stands in stark contrast to the lived experience of its people. They see themselves as living in a "dying city" and a "forgotten region," visibly struck by industrial decline, unemployment, demographic loss, and resulting breakdown in civic culture. People therefore tend to develop little enthusiasm for a political rhetoric of glossy Europeanization.

Moreover, its socio-cultural nestedness does not bode well for a revitalizing development of Guben/Gubin. The German-Polish border region very much testifies to the observation that just when a clear-cut state border becomes more porous, complex geographies of difference begin to reveal themselves. It is often forgotten that for most of the time between 1945 and 1989, the border between East Germany and Poland had almost the characteristics of an "iron curtain," despite being a border between two aligned countries. After 1989, the hidden transcript of historical cultural landscapes came to the fore again. There is subtle awareness that the region's socio-cultural make-up still displays a "culture of displacement" that goes back to the resettlement policies during and after the Second World War (Krätke 1999, 638; Janeśniak-Quast and Stokłosa 2000). These ethno-spatial cleavages, kept under closure by nation state politics and socialist ideology, nevertheless lingered on in the collective consciousness on both sides of the border. In consequence, the prevailing "low trust environment" appears to be a serious developmental blockage with regard to sustainable cross border cooperation (Bürkner and Matthiesen 2001; Krätke 1998, 250ff.).

These cultural cleavages are not helped by the fact that bilingual language competence is heavily imbalanced in favour of the Polish side, and that considerable differences in cost of living and income in favour of the German side do not make for a level playing field in terms of enjoying urban everyday culture. The imbalances are further underpinned by the fact that the respective everyday cultures are embedded in rather different "pathways of postsocialist transformation" (Stark and Bruszt 1999). For East Germany this means a "gradualist" transformation with emphasis on softening the restructuring by extensive welfare regulations, while the Polish "big bang" strategy favoured private initiative and restructuring via the market. While otherwise these differences might make for interesting abstract debates in academia, for people in Guben/Gubin they mean head-on confrontation with rather different worlds of postsocialism, within one and the same city.

Thus until recently, the scenery of nested shrinking for a place like Guben/Gubin could well be summarized as follows

> In this way, a vicious circle developed, hanging over the borderland territory as a whole, combining economic, political and cultural processes into a downward spiral, and diminishing local potential and factual learning processes (individual/collective) (Matthiesen 2005, 56).

The Gubin Church Ruin: The Crystalline Structure of Place-Making

Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez (2003, 10-11) claim that even the most complex processes of socio-spatial transformation and rescaling "become worked out and are mediated through the built environment." To the extent that this is true, then the city centre of Guben/Gubin provides the paradigmatic case for the embodiment of "nested shrinking" as described above. Located on the Polish side of town, it is left virtually as an empty space, continuously reminding its inhabitants of the heavy destruction that the inner city suffered at the end of the Second World War. Moreover, the catastrophic picture is completed with the ruin of a church that in its origin dates back to the thirteenth century (Peter 2007). This is not a ruin in the sense of a commodified quotation from past times that has been renovated and

preserved to feed postmodern nostalgia (Cowie and Heathcott 2003). Even more so than the empty space on which it stands, it impacts the onlooker like a crystalline structure that holds the city's complex nestedness in past and present. Deprived of its roofing and church tower, and overgrown with the prevailing life of nature, its walls and columns still carry the scars of heavy inner city fighting, just as if the Second World War had ended yesterday.

If, as Sharon Zukin (1995, 259) maintains, public place is the window to a city's soul, then Gubeners and Gubiners "view the catastrophe of their own town" when looking at the city's central place (Hoffmann-Axthelm in Graff 2002, 25). It reflects the embeddedness of the city in lingering cultures of displacement and low trust. Thus, it could be argued, the fact that Guben and Gubin for quite a while after 1989 did not attempt to make efforts toward a joined city centre had as much to do with straight forward communication barriers as with mutual hesitation to impinge on the other side's memoryscapes. Not attempting to deal with the revitalization of the city's core had as much to do with the pressing problems of deindustrialization, as with the different everyday realities of postsocialism and their respective ways of coming to terms with it.

The consequences of this state of affairs cannot be underestimated. Identification with the built environment of one's town is a catalyst for engaging in urban public life and the amenities of urban culture. Civic pride in large part feeds on residents' identification with significant public edifices. Conversely, the city's inner city may function as an architectural expression of a collective commitment to a certain urban trajectory. While a shared city centre is certainly no substitute for lived urban togetherness and everyday solidarity, the latter can certainly not be achieved without some symbolic commitment in the semiotic landscape of the twin city. Thus it is no exaggeration to claim that the downward spiral for Guben/Gubin will have to be tackled from within its core – not just in real, but in symbolic terms. For the visual in this case has a lot to do with vision: the city centre as a model (*Leitbild*) that literally puts an alternative urban trajectory – against the familiar one of "dying city" – into the frame. In summary, Hoffmann-Axthelm (ibid., 24) has aptly captured the situation of Guben/Gubin at the beginning of the new millennium, by saying that both sides of town can certainly

survive to a certain extent within the current state of affairs, but in order to *live* they need a shared vision that focuses on the city centre.

Recent years have seen developments toward revitalization. The twin cities of Guben/Gubin were part of the "Stadt 2030" programme that encouraged cities to develop innovative models of urban revitalization. A redevelopment scheme has been set up that emphasizes an urban corridor connecting the two cities across the river (mainly via the **high street**), rather than focusing on one particular location as the centre. Supported by external governmental funding, (architectural) change is already visible (see www.guben.de and www.guben-gubin-2030.de).

However, alongside these externally induced changes in the architectural landscape, there is now another encouraging development that needs attention with regard to signs of endogenous revitalization. It refers to a cross-border civil initiative that takes the city's soul as its point of departure (to stay with Zukin's metaphor), namely the church ruin located in Gubin. In doing so it faces up to the difficult memory-scape in which the city is embedded, and which needs addressing, if the twin city is to have a chance of true revitalization – one that is sustained by a cross-border civic culture. Dating back to the initial enthusiasm of a Catholic priest on the Polish side of town, the idea to redevelop the church ruin as a Polish-German centre of communication quickly found supporters on the German side too. Since May 2005, there has been a foundation around which the civic initiative has galvanized. At its centre are the two mayors, a few local politicians, and some other exponents of the local citizenry. The foundation in its statutes clearly sets the aim of redeveloping the church ruin as a symbol for the awakening of the city, by facing up to its past and by generating a spirit of tolerance and cultural dialogue. The foundation is supported by donations and actively lobbies for its project in the local and translocal public(s), with some considerable success. Several public forums have managed to turn the project into a hot topic in the town. Meanwhile, there is civic discourse about the concrete shape – both in architecture and intention – of the communication centre, and a considerable amount of money has been raised. The most visible success so far is the reinstalling of the restored church tower in June 2007. Thus this civic initiative has managed to bridge the gap between the two everyday

cultures within the twin city, but also to set a visible marker into the symbolic landscape of the city that announces, "the civic spirit of this – supposedly dying – city is alive" (see www.stadtkirchegubin.de).

The Difference a Few Years can Make

As a long time participating observer to the development of Guben/Gubin, one is naturally sceptical to any new project that announces cooperation between the halves of the city, and that attempts to change the trajectory of the "dying city." Too fresh is the memory of other projects that attempted to foster European society within a revitalizing city, but were met with grumbling discontent by the local public on both sides of the border. So why should it be different this time? Why has this pro-European project of local revitalization met with considerable enthusiasm, when only a couple of years ago the mayor of Guben was voted out of office due to his attempt to give life to the idea of a "European Model Town"?

Taking up again the idea of nested urbanism, we can get some clues to the prospects of this local civic initiative by looking at its embeddedness in more general social processes and their intersection.

The first point of reference concerns the general phenomenological framing of everyday life. One could argue that when people start taking issue with the centre of their locality or community, this does indeed reflect a sense of "centeredness," or a calmness as borne in the meaning of the Greek *sophrosyne* (Schroer 2005, 335). Perhaps for the first time since 1989, people are experiencing what could be called a "sedimentation of relevances" in their life world. After years of upheaval, accompanied by reorientation in all spheres of life, and characterized by hypermobility as far as relocation and learning are concerned, people in the transformation societies of eastern central Europe might now enter a period where things are calmer. Efforts now seem more concentrated, and options are perceived as less complex and unpredictable. In more substantive terms, we could say that people have just come out of what Vobruba (2005, 39) has called a "double ditch." By this he refers to the sequence of two periods of radical change that have affected people in eastern

central Europe: the postsocialist transformation and the integration into Europe, both coming with demanding consequences in terms of institutional restructuring and cultural adaptation.

Europe and European integration under these circumstances were perceived as an additional large scale supranational institutional process that is imposed from above. This helps to explain the discontent toward externally imposed institutional structures such as "Euroregions" and the "Euro Model Town." Only now that the official enlargement procedure has moved further east, can a sort of "inner cosmopolitanization" (Beck 2002) of the European project take hold of the German-Polish borderlands. This inner cosmopolitanization here implies that the nation state is opened up at its fringes, and that Europeanization is perceived as an inner quality of everyday life, rather than an institutional frame that imposes itself from outside. Moreover, one could argue that within a rather small town like Guben/Gubin this process is supported by the "inescapability of small places." This, in contrast to the lofty cosmopolitan variety of the metropolis, pushes people toward accepting "banal cosmopolitanism" (ibid., 28) as a normal feature of everyday life. The "banality" of inner cosmopolitanization is, in such a local setting, more strongly felt than elsewhere. Take, for example, the accession of Poland to the Schengen treaty in December 2007. For people in Guben/Gubin this implies the final abolishment of border control within the city. This will immensely enhance the "walkability" (du Toit et al. 2007) of their city. If there is indeed a link between flâneuring the city and developing a sense of community based on a sense of place, then this link should further enhance for Gubeners and Gubiners the feeling of indeed living in "Gubien," as the city is now already affectionately called among some of its more cosmopolitanly inclined citizens. To call Guben/Gubin by the name of "Gubien," thereby symbolically summarizing the name into a country, suggests indeed a horizontal perspective on Europeanization that sees being part of the society of a city as just as important as belonging to a nation state.

In addition – and this might sound ironic – the very process of shrinking might also contribute to further enhancing a cosmopolitan sense of place in Guben/Gubin. Namely, still following Beck's argument (2000, 80), in so far as people start realizing that shrinking is a process that is largely "indifferent to national boundaries." The crucial

insight here would be that the decisive frame of reference for countering marginalization is not the nation state but the translocal society of "Gubien," that has to transcend nation state boundaries in the attempt to mobilize its full potential.

These tendencies toward postnational society within a city should finally also be reflected in its memoryscape. It is well known that collective memory is essential for stabilizing national communities. This is especially the case in times of crisis when its narrative maintains a reference point of solidarity within the group, and affirms a sense of difference to other communities. However, what if people's everyday milieus no longer coincide with the national space, as is the case in "Gubien" and other border cities? They might become paradigmatic cases for what Levy and Sznaider (2002, 89) have described as the "decoupling of collective memory and national history." This does not imply the straightforward replacement of "national memory" by "cosmopolitan memory"; however, it does mean the relativization of the privileged position of national history as discursive frame of collective memory and identity (ibid., 89ff.). It moreover implies mutual recognition of the history of the other and future-oriented dialogue over a shared past (ibid., 102-103). Inner cosmopolitanization thus has its time dimension in the uncoupling of the quasi-natural link place – identity – national memory. It is increasingly replaced by "staged landscapes of memory that can only be deciphered transnationally" (Beck 2000, 99). The envisaged communication centre within the redeveloped church ruin in Gubin could provide such a stage for transnational dialogue, within a difficult landscape of memories of war and displacement.

Two processes could further contribute to this being a realistic scenario for "Gubien." Levy and Sznaider (2002, 91, 96) highlight a generational shift with regard to the traumatic events of the Second World War. They argue that there is a transition taking place from "social memory" (carried by those generations that have personal experience of the war and its atrocities) toward "historical memory" (carried by those who only have mediated experiences of these events, and who are more open to reflexive engagement about the complexities of the past). Postsocialist developments might further stabilize a move toward cosmopolitan memory. Misztal (2004) draws the rather interesting distinction between "closed and frozen memories," on one hand,

and "open ended and often shared along group lines memories," on the other. While the first mode of memory is typical for unsettled times when people tend to freeze their identity to the world and toward others, the latter is typical for open societies and democratic community. While the immediate time after 1989 might have favoured the revitalization of a nationalist past and closed memory, the postsocialist differentiation of lifestyles and milieus meanwhile seems to favour a fragmentation of collective memory along the line of reflexive "memory groups" (ibid., 68, 74). Thus the argument here is by no means one of neglecting a traumatic and nationalist past, but one of engaging in dialogue beyond nationalistic myth and propaganda (Misztal 2005, 1331).

Finally, all this ties in with the complex and sometimes unpredictable "socioscapes" (Albrow 1997; Appadurai 1990) in which a locality such as Guben/Gubin is embedded. The shrinking city is by no means a place clearly divided by stayers or leavers. The landscapes of mobility and attachment that have evolved after 1989, here turn out to be more sophisticated than that. There are of course those who commute in various cycles of presence and absence. But more surprisingly perhaps, it is returnees of different age groups who are pushing the civic initiative around the church ruin. What is surprising here is that people with the human capital they have acquired elsewhere in the world – and who are therefore enabled to be anywhere in the world – should return to the shrinking city. Perhaps what we see here is linked to the first point made earlier: these returnees might indicate a beginning of a sedimentation of socioscapes, following a period of hypermobility after the sudden eruption of socioscapes in postsocialist society, in the wake of 1989. It might just be that the reflective migrant realizes that in his or her continuous relationship to the world, "place matters" (Markusen 2004, 2310). But whatever the concrete reasons for their return, it is obvious that these returnees are likely to embody what Beck (2002, 36) has called "rooted cosmopolitanism." Such rooted cosmopolitans, unlike local parochialists, are not inclined to give in to short sighted localism, but instead tend to "defend their place as one open to the world" – in this case also implying openness to the other side of the town and its lived experience. A great asset that these returnees bring to the shrinking city is a relativization of the destiny of their city. They have seen much better and much worse places, and thus reflect the town's faith in a larger perspective.

Moreover, they do not feel overburdened by the task at hand. As one of them summed up their attitude, "We are building Europe here, but so what? This is Europe in a big wide world." What they bring back to the locality is thus an active rescaling in life world terms, that is the reevaluation of local embeddedness in the light of global and European experience. In practice, this means they can rather eloquently mediate between the local community and the translocal networks. In other words, due to their familiarity with both the local and the transnational world, these returnees are capable of (local) "politics of scale" (McCann 2004). This, for instance, showed very effectively in the role they played in the difficult process of obtaining from the Polish state the leasehold for the land on which the church ruin stands. In effect this clearly indicates nested urbanism as being not just a constellation of intersecting and overlapping macrosocial processes, but just as much as a "kairos" situation: the right people meeting at the right place at the right time, and accessing the relevant scales of power (Matthiesen 2005, 59). The "nestedness" of projects of urban renewal from this perspective, then appears as largely resulting from active networking across various levels of interaction, power, and influence – rather than suggesting passive local embeddedness in various large-scale socio-spatial dynamics.

Summary: Guben/Gubin or "Gubien"?

What we are left with is a feeling of ambivalence. Is the Guben/Gubin church project indeed the beginning of a development toward a transnational "Gubien," deeply embedded in real existing cosmopolitanism? Or is it just another playing field for cosmopolitan elites who always have the option to leave the place to which they are supposedly committed? In all likelihood, the project to turn the church ruin into the Polish-German communication centre of a new "Gubien" is not going to generate many, if any, new jobs for Guben/Gubin. So can it be more than yet another act of – however laudable – symbolic politics, this time not imposed from outside, but generated from within the locality by a group of rooted cosmopolitans with enough local "street cred"? We do not know yet, as this project of civic reempowerment is still very young indeed.

However, even if it was another attempt in symbolic politics, Gu-ben/Gubin would be in good company, as it is observed that urban regeneration via pushing "emblematic projects" (Swyngedouw, Mou-laert, and Rodriguez 2003a, 248) is a common strategy within postmet-ropolitan regions. Still, the point here is not so much to reveal the parallels to common governance strategies and tactics of "actually occurring regeneration" (Henderson, Bowlby, and Raco 2007, 1445), but to stress the symbolic revitalization of the "dying city." It is against the assumption that the open city – one that is "not ridden by debilitating spatial and social barriers" (Amin and Graham 1997, 422) – is a precon-dition for any economic revitalization, that the church ruin project has to be cast. To rediscover the city's soul in Zukin's sense would here mean more than just revitalizing public space as an arena of civility, tact and trust. It would imply generating a symbolic centre that has the capacity to hold the twin city together amid the turbulences of postsocialist and postindustrial redevelopment.

Consequently, that a cross-border civic initiative should identify the church ruin as such an anchor of cosmopolitan community, seems to stand for more than just naive and self-absorbed soul searching. This rather suggests awareness in certain segments of translocal civil society with regard to the fact that openness of place intrinsically involves the overcoming of temporal closure via overdue dialogue about conjunctive collective memories. In other words, Guben/Gubin could be a trendset-ter in realizing that the real existing cosmopolitanisms of "Gubien" can only be turned into a revitalizing element if it is deepened by real existing "chronopolitanism" (Cwerner 2000). In this way "Gubien" might eventually manage to break out of dominant feelings of apathy and distrust. In turn this civic recovery of place could then even contribute to economic recovery. For as Amin and Graham (1997, 427; Markusen 2004, 2308) maintain, "a sense of place and belonging taps into hidden potential and the sources of social confidence that lie at the core of risk-taking entrepreneurial activity."

While the civic initiative evolving around the "Gubien" church ruin could well be seen as an exercise in "recovering place," Markusen (2004) reminds us that to oppose processes of marginalization does not just require people who actively preserve and champion their locality, but also needs a change of discourse by (us) symbolic analysts. In the

first instance that could mean breaking away from the currently almost normative discourse of "shrinking" in terms of crisis and collapse. Instead it would require us to be "more open to positive interpretations of change" (Amin and Graham 1997, 413) as they might indicate themselves; for instance, with the church ruin project in "Gubien." This in turn implies that we should be attentive to the simultaneity of shrinking and revitalizing tendencies not just *between* various localities and regions but *within* them (Matthiesen 2005, 53). As the "Gubien" case study suggests, it would seem that "a scale perspective on the nonglobal city" (McCann 2004, 2317) can help us in recovering some conceptual space beyond the dominating paradigm of shrinkage. By investigating the concrete civic networks involved in "nesting" a project like the "Gubien" church ruin, we abstain from abstract logics of global capital, spatial restructuring, or urban crisis. This is not to deny the power of the large-scale dynamics of shrinkage, but to reemphasize the dynamics of civic action and local policy making which are also involved in it.

In that sense then we might conclude with Entrikin's (1999, 270) observation concerning the intrinsic link between civic (re)empowerment and "good place": if, as he maintains, "good places are constructed through civil society," then the twin city Guben/Gubin has not suddenly turned from a "bad" ("declining") into a "good" ("developing") place, but the "Gubien" church project might announce that, unexpectedly for many observers, it is perhaps on the way to becoming a "better" place. And for a "dying city," that says a lot.

Internet links:

www.guben.de
www.guben-gubien-2030.de
www.stadtkirchegubin.de

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