

Misperceptions of bridges

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Abstract

"I couldn't imagine that Hamburg has more bridges than Venice." The above statement – attributed to the actor Robert Redford – could be provided by any visitor or even inhabitant of Hamburg. It contrasts with the official statistics, quoted in tourist guides as well as in the specialised literature, according to which Hamburg, with its *"more than 2500 bridges"*, surpasses the united records of Venice, Amsterdam and London.

Even if the comparison itself appears questionable, the modern misperception of the "objective" number of bridges in a city surrounded by rivers deserves more attention. The present study approaches the deviating perceptions from a perspective combining history of technology and cultural anthropology. The study argues that the creation of the limited-access area of the Free Port of Hamburg (since 1883), the diversification of the uses of space in the urban and the industrial areas, the shifting of the port and trade activities beyond the borders of the city, as well as the traffic focus upon three or four major bridges render the bridge multitude diffuse and invisible – except for the specialist who is interested in counting them all. This counting, however, presupposes recognition patterns and categories of the counted bridges – and these criteria turn up to be ambiguous and lacking a consensual basis.

A further aspect is related to the perception of space in the Hamburg area from the point of view of the person travelling by car, train, or the subway (which in Hamburg partially runs above and not below the ground). Several areas (such as Wilhelmsburg, Wandrahm or Brook) were (or are still) islands on the river Elbe – but very few travellers would recognise this fact during travelling. The feeling of connection is so perfect that the bridge as medium of this connectivity becomes unrecognisable. Thus the technologically high-tech bridge constructions become perceivable rather in case of malfunction, repair or demolition.