

'Elements of Nature' and Urban Design

Discourse, institutionalisation and implementation: the example of façade greenery

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Abstract

In this study the discourse, institutionalization and practice in regard to the issue of façade greenery are analyzed as an example of an 'element of nature' that is used in urban design. A constructivist point of view is taken, based on the theses of FOUCAULT: Especially with regard to the 'social construction of nature', this perspective is presently getting more and more popular in Anglo-American Human Geography and is here applied to an urban context. As a basic thesis, constructivism states that 'nature' is not only shaped by human *action* but also by societal *discourse*. Established lines of arguments, valuations and connotations produce a specific understanding of 'nature' that is of limited validity on the scales of time and space and strongly influences human acting.

Following this approach the study circumstantiates how in (Western) Germany façade greenery became very popular in the 1980s, propagated as an 'element of nature'. The aim of this study is to first analyze the discourse of the issue façade greenery in its societal context in order to focus on the related institutionalizations (e.g. support programmes) and the material manifestations in urban design.

The empirical proceeding is based on qualitative methodology: An analysis of the comprehensive collection of materials of the Cologne Research Team on Façade Greenery is accompanied by 28 interviews with experts such as early-stage protagonists or experienced practitioners, in which a broad variety of aspects has been addressed.

As a result regarding the discourse it becomes evident that in the early 1980s a solid *framing* has been established, which is based on an extensive *storyline*: This conglomerate of supportive arguments aims at overcoming the 'inhospitality of the modern city' and especially at an ecological upgrade of the urban environment.

This framing is associated with a 'semantic field' concerning the metaphor of the "Gruener Pelz" ("Green Fur") and an assorted set of publications with significant graphical illustrations.

The understanding of façade greenery as an element of *nature* is based on the postulated psychological-emotional function for the large city dweller as well as on its ecological contribution to the urban structure.

The institutionalization of the 'new' discourse is carried by the public sector largely on the municipal level, which however has been prompted by external private actors to initiate a broad variety of supportive programmes.

Though the clout of the framing weakens, it appears valid in that it is still universally familiar and an important motivation e.g. in municipal planning regulation. However, in retrospect on about 25 years "Green Fur" framing, it is evident that monitoring of façade greenery issues, for instance by empirical studies of ecological impacts or evaluation of municipal subsidies, is rare. The public sector, the

scientific community and the media adopt the framing; the call for 'more green in our city' is discussed as an axiomatic thesis.

However, more and more failed attempts of greening facades get evident. Aesthetically or technically inadequate greenings put the risks of constructional damage on the agenda and motivate a team of experts to formulate guidelines and recommendations in order to support improvement of greening practice.

As the frequently inadequate greening efforts show discursive and institutional consequences, it becomes obvious that the interrelation between discourse, institutionalization and practice is not unidirectional, but includes various feedbacks.

This study affirms the central thesis of the constructivist perspective, that societal life and human environment are at least to a significant extent *socially constructed*, as discursive definitions and framings define 'reality'.

The idea of a self-acting and untouched nature – as it has been discussed in the context of planning national parks, political programmes etc. – is at least latently present in the discourse concerning façade greenery. But this cannot conceal that urban design, too, is a process of social negotiation, in which the reference to 'nature' is not inevitable, but proves to be a powerful argument within specific superior discourses.