
THE RHETORIC OF “PROVISION”: PUBLIC AND POLITICAL DISPUTES OVER PORT PLANNING IN HAMBURG IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

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Urban development projects are usually specific. There is a concrete designation of what the land is going to be used for, what buildings will be built and what infrastructure will be required. This enables a meaningful discussion of the proposed concepts and the balancing of public and particularistic interests. But what happens when areas are designated for development and cleared of inhabitants as a measure of economic “provision,” without a precisely defined purpose and with a time schedule stretching decades into the future, and when the underlying ideology of economic growth is called into question? This paper will discuss this question in the form of a historical case-study on port expansion in the North German city state of Hamburg in the 1970s and 1980s. It will shed light on public and political conflicts, some of which were the result of particularities of port planning in general, some were the result of specifics of place and time. It will focus on rhetorical strategies used to bridge the ideological gap between politicians, port planners, environmentalists and private citizens directly affected by the expansion plans.

Keywords

provisionary planning, port expansion, Hamburg

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INTRODUCTION

Many historians currently focus on the 1970s as a watershed in the economic and social history of the second half of the twentieth century. With the first oil crisis of 1973/74 roughly twenty years of uninterrupted economic growth in Western Europe and the United States came to an end. “After the boom” the 1970s and the following decade were not only marked by a new economic scenario of deindustrialization and rising unemployment but by a variety of profound changes on many levels of politics and society.¹ The emergence of new social movements, in particular the rise of the environmental movement, had important consequences for many areas, not the least urban and infrastructure planning. Urban development and the building of infrastructure, from hospitals or schools to power plants and transportation, were no longer a matter of experts and government officials alone. New stakeholders made themselves heard in public and subjected projects to scrutiny.² Today there are administrative instruments and processes in place that ensure public participation and attempt to balance out general interests and individual needs, but in the 1970s and 1980s conflicts played out in less structured ways.³

The following article is presenting a case-study on the conflict over port expansion in the German city state of Hamburg and the framing of the contemporary public discourse about it. It is based on a broad survey of archival sources, parliamentary debates, and contemporary journal and newspaper articles. In the 1970s protests against the expansion of the port of Hamburg, one of Europe’s biggest seaports and an important pillar of the local and regional economy, flared up by residents of the area in the Southwest of the city that was to be evacuated and prepared for use for the port. Critics questioned the ideology of economic growth that lay at the base of the expansion plans. Peculiarities of port planning, especially the long time horizons and the indefiniteness of projections on future cargo development, put additional pressure on Hamburg’s government, the Senate.⁴ The political and economic leadership of the city responded by devising a rhetorical strategy to overcome public resistance that revolved around the term of “land provision” (“Flächenvorsorge” in German). This strategy can be described as an early attempt at solving planning legitimacy issues through communication.⁵ The seizure of private property in the villages of Altenwerder, Moorburg and Francop for the port was justified in countless public statements of the Senate and port-related interest groups like the Chamber of Commerce as a measure of “provision,” indispensable for the economic well-being of the entire city. This calls for a closer look and an explanation, since the term is not often used with regard to planning in economy and infrastructure but is primarily linked to social, public health, or environmental policies. Here the term and its underlying concept of restricting risks of modern life has become increasingly important in the second half of the twentieth century and is usually connoted positively.⁶

Moorburg and Francop are still partly residential areas, not because of the protests but as a result of unforeseen changes in transportation economics, whereas in Altenwerder in the 1990s – more than a decade later than originally anticipated – a huge container terminal was built. Nevertheless, in retrospect the strategy of the Senate to take advantage of the positive image of “provision” for port planning must be considered a failure. Today expansion projects in city ports worldwide are difficult to implement, and “negative externalities” of port expansion especially from an environmental perspective are broadly discussed and even mathematically measured in the literature.⁷

PROVIDING LAND FOR THE PORT OF HAMBURG

Provision in the port of Hamburg since the late 1950s has meant “land provision:” the purchase or expropriation of property and its preparation for the expansion of the port. It took place not only at a specific location – for geological reasons south of the river Elbe and to the West of the existing port –, but the identification and legal and physical transformation of (parts of) the urban space itself was the act of provision. It was not about port planning in general and concepts for the future, which could have also related to the technical equipment of the quays, the organizational structure of the port, or the development of new markets. Since the land in the port of

Hamburg was (and is) owned by the city and the municipal enterprise of the “Hamburger Hafen- und Lagerhaus-Aktiengesellschaft” (HHLA) was closely linked to the Economics Ministry and in charge of the day-to-day operation at the quays, the state played a central role in all port matters.⁸

A first attempt at expanding the port in the Southwest of the city was made in 1929, when the city state of Hamburg reached an agreement with neighbouring Prussia to expand the port onto 4,500 hectares of Prussian territory, but because of the economic downturn of the Great Depression it had no consequences. The same was true for the expansion plans of the Nazi era: The “Greater Hamburg Act” of 1937 had incorporated the areas in question into Hamburg to allow for self-determined port planning, and the “General Development Schemes” of 1941 and 1944 envisioned extensive port expansions, but in World War II they were not executed. In the interwar years, city officials and their planning experts felt no need for devising a line of argumentation to convince the public and especially the inhabitants of the affected villages of their concept – they simply announced their intentions.⁹

After the massive destruction of port installations in the war, in the post-war period and the reconstruction years port expansion was not an issue. Only in the late 1950s, when the annual cargo throughput of the port surpassed the previous peak of 1928, port expansion became relevant again, not the least because other European ports identified new areas for dealing with the growth of cargo handling and for attracting more port-related industry. In Hamburg the expansion of the port was supposed to strengthen its economic position and make sure that it would not fall behind in the competition with its direct rivals Bremen, Rotterdam, and Antwerp. This seemed particularly urgent after the loss of part of much of its hinterland in the East because of the Iron Curtain.¹⁰

THE “PORT EXPANSION ACT” OF 1961 AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

On October 30, 1961, Hamburg’s state parliament passed the “Port Expansion Act,” which designated 2,500 hectares of land in the village of Altenwerder and in neighbouring Moorburg and Francop as “port expansion area.” The people living there were subjugated to constricting regulations and in perspective to resettlement. In addition, Hamburg traded with the state of Lower Saxony harbour rights it held in Cuxhaven in exchange for the Elbe estuary islands Neuwerk and Scharhörn, which were being considered as a location for a new deepwater port more than 100 kilometres away from the existing upstream port. For a variety of economic, financial, and political reasons, this port was never built though.¹¹

It was in the context of the activities in the early 1960s, that officials introduced the phrase of “provision”. Friedrich Mühlradt, the director of the municipal Port Construction Office, argued in his concept for port development in August 1960, that in view of the growing worldwide flow of cargo and its structural changes, it had “become necessary to take provision for a more distant future,” as had been intended in 1929 already. Hamburg could not do without “far-sighted spatial planning and the valorisation of land for port purposes,” even though Mühlradt acknowledged that it involved speculative moments. Mühlradt demanded a special law and had no objections to expropriate land if necessary, because port expansion was unquestionably in the public interest.¹² In a newspaper article on the occasion of the 775th “anniversary” of the port in May 1964, Hamburg’s Economics Minister Edgar Engelhard emphatically proclaimed “provision for the port” as an act of “provision for Hamburg” as a whole.¹³

Mühlradt and Engelhard both spoke of provision already with a thrust that should become another central feature in addition to “land provision,” namely the concept as an expression of developments which might – or might not – happen in the port in the mid to distant future.¹⁴ Taking provisionary measures was different from concrete planning of new docks, terminals or the establishment of industry. It was basically a statement of political intent to keep the uncertainties and risks of the future under control and to keep options for action. Port construction officials wanted to be able to adapt “elastically” to changes in shipping and transportation and demanded “freedom of choice”.¹⁵



FIGURE 1 The port of Hamburg in the early 1960s. Marked in red is the designated port expansion area of Altenwerder, Moorburg, and Francop / Insert: The city state of Hamburg. The river Elbe divides it into a northern and a southern part. In the latter area in the district “Mitte” most of the port installations and the expansion area are located

Future port planning at this time was less motivated by scientifically based predictions, but the latest trends in maritime and port industry were relatively freely extrapolated. One of Mühlradt’s successors, Hans Laucht, argued more than ten years later still vigorously for a praxis-driven and pragmatic approach to port planning and rejected any “principled” solutions to planning problems.¹⁶ Nevertheless, experiences and activities of the competing ports played an important role: In particular, Rotterdam, where from 1958 to 1964 with the “Europoort” a large new port was built and in the 1960s additional expansion plans were announced, simultaneously served as role model and bugbear.

Public opposition or at least a controversial discourse on the planned activities in the Süderelbe area did not exist in the 1960s. The Senate could rely on broad political, public, and media support. The victims of this policy, primarily the inhabitants of the village Altenwerder who faced relocation, were pitied rather casually.

Shortly after the passage of the Port Expansion Act the city bought the first properties in Altenwerder. About ten years later, in 1973, relocation activities were accelerated to allow for the construction of a new bulk cargo port and a new container terminal. Engelhard’s successor, Economics Minister Helmuth Kern from the ruling Social Democrats (SPD), justified the activation of the first parts of the area set aside for port expansion in 1961 by arguing that it was necessary “to take provisional measures in time for the need to increase the economic strength of our city and the competitiveness of our port.”¹⁷ The emotionally charged debate focused on the remaining 2,000 inhabitants of Altenwerder. They were relocated with financial aid, but also under more or less massive pressure and the threat of expropriation for those reluctant to leave. The neighbouring villages of Moorburg and Francop were targeted by the port expansionists for use in the 1990s.



FIGURE 2 Proponents of “land provision:” Hamburg’s Economics Minister Edgar Engelhard (1957-1966) (left) and his successor Helmuth Kern (1966-1976)

In Altenwerder the relocation came to a halt at the end of 1978, when one of the remaining inhabitants who had sued the city triumphed in court. At this time, the Hamburg Finance Ministry, which managed municipal land and was responsible for the expropriations, had internally already raised doubts about the legality of the procedure and the far-reaching rights the city had granted itself by the Act of 1961.

LEGAL AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PORT EXPANSION IN THE 1970S

One of the key problems of Hamburg’s approach had been described in legal port literature at the beginning of the 1970s already. It is directly linked to the pitfalls of a “provisionary” clearing of land with long time horizons. After all, expropriation of land in the interest of the common good for infrastructure projects was allowed only for concrete projects, which required planning assessment processes and development plans, but it could not be “stockpiled” for some unspecified use for the port in years or even decades into the future.¹⁸ The relevant Federal Building Act also covered only classic infrastructure projects – highways, bridges, railway lines – but not the profitable establishment of private industry, on which the Hamburg Senate insisted for the port expansion area under the slogan of the modern “universal port.” In internal considerations the definition of “port industry” had been even expanded to include not only industry directly dependent on deepwater access but also its suppliers. Expropriation should also be allowed “in order to ensure effective structural policies” – which was vague and not necessarily congruent with the legally required public interest.¹⁹

At the same time it was undeniable that the port expansion area could be prepared for use economically only by using existing dredged material from the Elbe and the port basins and that the land had to settle for some time before port installations could be built and that therefore aspects of time had to come into play in port expansion planning in a different way than in other quickly realizable construction projects.²⁰

But in the second half of the 1970s, the port came under criticism not only because of the legal problems of the expansion plans. Firstly, in light of an ever growing demand of the port for financial subsidies – to be able to meet the challenges of containerisation and other technical upgrades – and declining tax revenues after the crisis of 1973/74, even in the Senate and the state parliament sceptical voices could be heard. The conflict of goals between support of the port and other politically relevant issues such as education, healthcare, or urban development was evident. Secondly, the Senate encountered increasingly fierce headwind from the environmental movement. In its formative years in Hamburg, next to the fight against nuclear power plants and the pollution of the Elbe, resistance against port expansion in Altenwerder, Moorburg and Francop was an important and emotionally charged field of mobilisation for the movement. Its representatives challenged the economic assumptions provided by the government and the port that lay at the base of the paradigm of “provision”: “The so-called progressive planners think that you need these residential areas for port expansion and industrial development. At a time in which one can read daily about the limits of growth, for the port expansion planners progress cheerfully proceeds, progress that the affected citizens don’t believe in at all.”²¹ The leftist newspaper “taz” commented that the destruction of Altenwerder was premeditated “in the heads of people who have the power to impose on us their visions of the future. These are terrible visions, nightmares. Some of these dreams have become a reality already. Much of it is only paper however. And here our resistance must begin. We must fight these dreams, when they are dreamed, tug the plans to light when planning is done. And if that is not enough, we must prevent that these dreams become reality.”²²

During negotiations between Social Democrats and the Green Alternative List (GAL) to form a coalition government in the summer of 1982, a GAL representative reiterated: “Senate and SPD have to do without the port expansion. The plans are based on unrealistic hopes of growth, the expansion does not bring new jobs and destroys beautiful villages and an ecologically valuable landscape.”²³ Instead of a port policy focused entirely on the preservation of competitiveness, the GAL demanded “political general planning” in the port, restriction of the size of the port and increased collaboration with other ports.²⁴ Compared to the harmonious debates of the early 1960s in economic and port policy, there was now – as in other fields, too – a fundamental conflict visible, in which official planning and economic activities and (claimed) interests of the society as a whole were newly scrutinized and weighed against the interests and needs of individuals. The alternative social movement fundamentally criticised the ideology of progress and distrusted technocratic promises of salvation which had been important characteristics of planning in general.

“LAND PROVISION” AS A STRATEGICAL ARGUMENT

The Senate responded to the legal problems of the Port Expansion Act of 1961 and the questioning of its port policy of growth and competition on two levels: with the drafting of the “Port Development Act” which was adopted in January 1982, and a rhetorical strategy of justifying its activities in Altenwerder, Francop and Moorburg by emphasizing in public the argument of “provision”. In this discourse general ideas of the government being responsible for economic growth and prosperity – and with the aid of modern planning and management instruments being able to achieve it – mixed with the attempt to activate generally positive connotations of provision from social and public health policies such as a sense of responsibility, foresighted action, and the establishment of security.

After the defeat of the Senate in court in 1978, the Port Development Act was tailored to the specific needs of the port and defined a “gliding” planning process with several separate steps. It was supposed to cast the provisional principle – expropriation and eviction a long time ahead and without concrete intentions of usage – in a legally acceptable form.²⁵ In the text of the Act itself the term “land provision” was not used, but those in charge in the Senate, First Mayor Klaus von Dohnanyi (1981-1988) and the Economic Ministers Jürgen Steinert (1978-1982) and Volker Lange (1982-1987), all Social Democrats, argued in countless public statements with the need for “provision”. They were supported by the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce and interest groups representing the port industry.²⁶

Minister Steinert declared in April 1980 in front of 450 enraged citizens in Moorburg that the competitiveness of Hamburg had to be preserved. He claimed that not following a policy of provision meant stepping backwards.²⁷ A year later Steinert defended his port policy in a parliamentary debate on the planned eviction of Moorburg and parts of Francop: This had “nothing to do with growth euphoria but something with provision for future generations and securing jobs even in 15 to 20 years.” Helmuth Kern, since 1976 chairman of the board of the municipal HHLA, seconded that the Senate acted correctly if it took “timely provisional measures” since the reserve of available land in the port was down to just 200 hectares. Steinert and Kern both acknowledged that a short-term decline of cargo handling at the port was possible and that forecasts of cargo turnover reaching more than ten years into the future were difficult, but Steinert nevertheless persisted that there was a clear trend “and this trend obliges us today to take provision and not only in the year 1990. Because then it would be too late.” As always, a reference to the much larger land reserves of competing Rotterdam and Antwerp on the Rhine estuary and some words of appreciation for the “victims” of his policy of “securing the future of the port” were included.²⁸ Environmentalists countered: “Who says that land provision is done to secure long-term prosperity of the population, obfuscates that here the short-term quality of life is already impaired.”²⁹

In October 1982 in a radio broadcast on Moorburg, Steinert’s successor Volker Lange referred to tradition: “It has always been said: provision. And if you read the protocol of the debate in parliament, then all chief whips [...] said very clearly, we have taken this decision out of a need for provision for Hamburg.” Even without an increase in the volume of cargo more space was needed for containerisation, and one had to be prepared for “potential enterprises.” Lange concluded: “You have to grant a state, a city the right to take provisional measures.”³⁰

First Mayor Dohnanyi emphasized in February 1983 that he wanted to combat unemployment and maintain the economic competitiveness of the city. Strengthening the port which he claimed was good for more than 100,000 jobs was crucial for this goal. Therefore, he would “consistently continue a provisional policy in the port.”³¹ In the same parliamentary debate, Social Democratic chief whip and later First Mayor Henning Voscherau went one step beyond the city’s “right to provision” by stating: “Since no one can predict with certainty to what extent the need will increase, Hamburg is lawfully obliged to take provision. [...] Careful, differentiated legislative provision is important and useful.”³²



FIGURE 3 Hamburg's First Mayor Klaus von Dohnanyi (1981-1988) (left) in 1986

Despite the efforts of Dohnanyi and the others, the Senate was politically on the defence with its plans for port expansion, as became clear in a survey of the Institute for Applied Social Science in late fall of 1982: Although a majority of the population of Hamburg attributed to the port great importance for the economy and its job share was even overestimated, about a third of the people opposed port expansion, in particular young people (72 percent) and people with high school degrees (52 percent). Not surprisingly 91 percent of the supporters of the GAL rejected port expansion, but also about a third of Dohnanyi's Social Democrats and a third of the economy-friendly conservative Christian Democrats opposed it.³³

The Senate tried to combat this mood with the argument of provision: In the context of port policy it was to be an expression of responsibility, logic, rationality – against the emotionality of the opponents –, foresight, and anticipatory action for the public good. In addition, it was supposed to close the legally and, given the forced relocations, morally problematic time gap between the early evacuation and lengthy filling of the land and the subsequent steps of concrete planning and utilization. However, given the decline of cargo volumes in the port of Hamburg in the early 1980s and a by no means strong demand for industrial land close to the water, in June 1985 even representatives of the port economy, including HHLA chairman Helmuth Kern, granted that Moorburg initially would not have to be used for port expansion.³⁴ Social Democrats of the District Assembly in the southern district of Harburg reproached Lange that the needs of the port were “increasingly in tension to the needs of the people living in these areas.”³⁵ The Senate decided on some relief for the residents, but did not advance from its principles. Lange stressed in another emotional parliamentary debate in April 1986, that the Port

Development Act was a compromise between the interests of the city and the interests of the affected citizens. Although the conservative opposition criticized that the forecasts of the Senate from the 1970s had proved to be faulty and denounced that parts of Moorburg and Francop “for years had been let to rot” instead of improving the living conditions of the people there, but “the overall long-term provisional policy for the port” was not called into question. The GAL reiterated that the Port Development Act was “megalomaniac,” stipulated “completely exaggerated standards for the space requirement of the port” and had “already completed widely the destruction of the southern Elbe villages.”³⁶

This debate focused again on the fundamental differences between the specific interests of local residents and the interests of a vague “general public” and between a concrete present age and an undetermined – and presently indeterminable – future. The fact that future spatial requirements of the port could not be proven by scientific means and that predictions about the time horizons from the 1960s and 1970s had turned out to be wrong, increasingly undermined the postulate of rationality of the Senate and the port economy and therefore upset a key element of any policy of provision. Altenwerder, which at this time was almost completely cleared but lay fallow and was partly used as a landfill, appeared in the mid-1980s as a warning sign that the economic provision the Senate promoted, unlike social policies of safeguarding against illness or poverty, not necessarily paid off and may have been superfluous. Critics were not convinced that the benefits would exceed the costs – just as in other areas where environmentalists balanced economy with ecology and the well-being of society in a different way – which meant that another central justification of provisional action was undermined.

Ironically, both sides were under the impression of increasingly accelerated changes in world economy and cargo transportation since the 1960s but arrived at different conclusions. The shock of the containerisation, when in a short time all major seaports had to change their spatial layout and technical equipment at huge costs new in order to remain economically successful, continued to have an effect. The consequences of deindustrialization became noticeable in the ports for example in the crisis in European shipbuilding. Gloomy forecasts had already in the late 1970s predicted economic decline for the Northern German coastal states and saw the future of the Federal Republic in the south. Precisely because the economy appeared to be subject to further changes, reliable forecasts for the future were difficult and concrete investment plans with longer time horizons in the port appeared to be no longer useful, officials in Hamburg concluded that it was all the more important to provide for future uncertainties and be prepared for all kinds of scenarios with large undetermined land reserves. By contrast, the critics were committed to accept the limits of growth, in the port literally, and to respond to new economic challenges by structural reforms.

In Altenwerder the construction of the ultramodern CTA (Container Terminal Altenwerder) began only in 1997. In 2002 it was completed, nearly thirty years after the start of the evacuation. However, at that time those in charge could feel vindicated by the economic success of the CTA and the spectacular growth in cargo handling in the 2000s: Had Altenwerder not been available and ready, Hamburg would not have been able to respond as quickly to the new economic opportunities after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the opening of China.³⁷

The framework that had established in Hamburg in the late 1950s the economic need for “land provision,” that is: growth as a key indicator of the success of a port, the desire to have substantial freedom and flexibility for planning, and the fear of falling back in the competition between the seaports of the European North range, has not changed much to this day. The political disputes over port policy, however, have moved to other fields such as the deepening of the Elbe because there have not been activated any new controversial areas for a while now.



FIGURE 4 Protest against port expansion in 1982: "Moorburg mustn't be buried. No money and no sand! We stay on our land!"



FIGURE 5 Container terminal Altenwerder in 2004

CONCLUSION

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Hamburg Senate used the argument of “land provision” to overcome the resistance of local residents and environmentalists against the eviction of land for the expansion of the port and to convince them of the necessity of the measures. The desire of the port planners for maximum long-term flexibility – beyond concrete construction projects – and thus long-lasting uncertainty of planning in a time of accelerated economic and technological change made this difficult. Abstract benefits in the future: to be a citizen of an economically successful city, came at the cost of concrete disadvantages in the present, namely the destruction of ecologically and socially valuable living space in an albeit small and not central part of town. This dilemma could not be covered by the rhetoric of “provision” and is still a contentious issue in urban and regional planning. The conflict in Hamburg took place at a time, when the sole legitimacy of the state and its technocratic experts in issues of economic and infrastructure planning and the underlying ideology of growth was publicly called into question by the new social movements, but democratic mechanisms of civic participation and new forms of balancing public interest and the interests of individuals had yet to be developed.

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