Dock work underwent a major shift since the implementation of the container and its consequences like automation and logistics. Since the 1960s, global developments have had a major impact on work structures and organisational patterns of workers and employees. This development engendered generational conflicts through structural transformations, job losses and hierarchical labour disputes. Furthermore, the changing character of dock work altered ideas and concepts of masculinity connected to the profession, challenging a traditional sense of male workers’ pride and evoking existential issues.

Although transformations in ports follow global logics and are subject to similar processes, the history of each workplace and its actors is always linked to a local context. While, in some former port cities, dock work merely plays a marginal role today, others have been able to maintain their status as an important reloading point. Hamburg is particularly suited to an analysis of this technical transformation as the port still plays a major role in the city’s economy and public image (cf. Rodenstein 2008). Moreover, inhabitants and dock workers alike identify with the place up to the present day.

As complex spaces of work and cultural encounters, ports are natural candidates not only for an analysis of spatial transformations, of changes in employment patterns and work cultures. Since the disappearance of former working practices and the historicising of port areas took place as a simultaneous process (cf. Berking/Schwenk 2011), harbours and docks are good examples regarding the challenges of historic representations and the museification of labour. After losing its status as a freeport zone in 2003, various enterprises, such as advertising agencies, entertainment industries and the wider creative sector, began to settle in and around the Speicherstadt, the central part of the former port area. This district today is re-enacted as a cultural event space. Right next to it the so-called HafenCity is emerging, a huge restructuring project. Characteristic features of the old port and its related patterns of work maintain their presence in the form of warehouses and historical cranes and function as the backdrop for this development. Andreas Reckwitz describes this process as “self-culturalisation” (Reckwitz 2009: 2) and explains the transformation of Western urbanity since the 1970s with the creation of culture-orientated creative cities. He points out that this phenomenon is not only a discursive one, but also influences and changes social practices and the materiality of the architecture of a city, of residential or entertainment areas or business districts. The HafenCity is only one expression of this transformed materiality. Besides, various former docks have been filled up in order to store containers there, and container terminals and new working areas have been located outside the centre in the...
western and southern part of the city. Besides an increasing event culture, Reckwitz also observes a trend of museumification, a development that occurred in Hamburg as a parallel process to the rising mechanisation of labour. Since the 1980s, various old ships have been converted to museums and are now part of the maritime heritage ensemble and the city’s public image. One institution that documents and represents this transformation process as well as the historic occupational traditions is the Hafenmuseum (Harbour Museum). As last witnesses of the old port and as protagonists and active part of the transformation, a group of unionised men raised the idea of a museum in the mid-1980s. It eventually opened its doors in 2005 as a branch of the Museum der Arbeit (Museum of Work).

While the global success story of the container and the revolutionary changes it brought about in the logistics sector are well known and researched (e.g. Levinson 2006), my research focuses on the perceptions of those who observed and experienced these transformations and on the socio-cultural and spatial implications the changes entailed (Schemmer 2018). In this article, I will report some of my central findings. When working in the Harbour Museum as a student, I established first contacts with some future interview partners, while I got to know the others in different contexts. Overall, I collected 25 interviews with former Hamburg dock workers, with the term referring to protagonists occupied in the wide range of cargo handling. As narratives always represent a retrospective view on an experience and “stories are told from their end” (Lehmann 2007: 284), the narratives I gathered, along with some interviewees’ present engagement in the museum and other heritage sites, predominantly reflect their current views on the harbour complex and its changes. Considering a narrative a cultural practice means to look closely at the processuality that constitutes meaning in retrospect, and to identify the different functions of retrospective narratives (cf. Bendix 1996: 170). My interest lies in the perceptions and self-positioning of former dockers, discursive patterns of their narrations, and the meaning they attribute to their former workplace in relation to present developments. In the following, I will outline central topics brought up by the interviewees regarding the transformation of the port, in particular with respect to the mechanisation of dock work and the social and spatial changes this process triggered. As the place where these memories are located and publicly negotiated today is the Harbour Museum, I will first turn to this institution.

Moving Display Cases – Negotiating Dock Work

The Harbour Museum is situated in Schuppen 50, one of the last historic, heritage-protected quay sheds built between 1908 and 1912. Notwithstanding its historic setting, the shed is located within the contemporary working port, close to the container terminals. This proximity makes the museum an interesting place for research as it marks an intersection between work related memories of the former dockers and the transformations the port has visibly undergone over the last decades. Although the municipality

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1 It must be noted that most protagonists in my study have internalised the port’s history and firmly identify with it until today. As my analysis focuses specifically on cargo handling, where women were not employed, I rarely interviewed female protagonists. In addition, the voices of those who are not part of this narrative community for various reasons, such as the countless workers who lost their jobs or just worked in the port briefly, must be left out.

2 All cited quotes are translated from German into English by the author.