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BUILDING CULTURE – KEY TO BETTER URBAN AND RURAL QUALITY OF LIFE

AT A GLANCE

Building culture is the key to a decent life in our cities, towns and villages. But politics has tended to neglect this area of activity. That must change under a future Social Democrat-led government.

Whether or not we are aware of it, how we build and how we look after what we have built has an enormous influence on our everyday lives. Although awareness and appreciation of urban quality of life have grown enormously in recent years, our building culture is still a long way from being a natural aspect of politics at the municipal, state and national levels. Given that quality of life in our urban areas and rural regions is absolutely central to the vision of a – social, sustainable and democratic – decent life, we will have to pay greater attention to questions concerning building culture. The following aspects are central.

BUILDING CULTURE IS THE FOUNDATION OF QUALITY OF LIFE

Building culture creates and preserves what we love about our towns and cities, villages and landscapes – their uniqueness, the way they convey a sense of history, their beauty and energy. To begin with cities: many cities have experienced impressive population growth in recent years, driven by the popularity of the urban lifestyle, but also as a side-effect of the singular success of German urban renewal. At the same time, we find urban areas suffering from particulate pollution and nitrogen oxides, excessive rents, elements of overcrowding and a lack of green space. These neighbourhoods are largely occupied by poorer population groups, often immigrant communities, to whom alternative housing options are unavailable. It is these quarters that most require our attention. Affordable housing is not the only problem; building culture raises a whole series of fundamental questions:

- How can we create high-quality educational institutions that serve as the heart of their communities?
- How can environmental pollution be reduced, especially along major arteries and close to industrial and commercial zones, in order to create a liveable environment, even in disadvantaged areas?
- What kind of facilities do we need to build for culture and leisure, and also for senior citizens in order to address the social and demographic challenges in disadvantaged areas?
- How can we improve the neglected urban landscape and inadequately maintained green spaces in these areas?
- How can we increase residents' participation in ways that make it truly socially inclusive?

Turning our attention to the countryside, to the villages and small and medium-sized towns, rural areas continue to lose population to the conurbations, in the course of a gradual loss of jobs, vital social infrastructure, education and health care. Restoring a just and social balance between big cities and rural regions represents one of the greatest political challenges of coming years. This means understanding building culture as a challenge for rural regions, not just for the cities. More specifically, it means:

- boosting towns and villages by means of viable centres, especially by preserving and expanding local retail and services;
- preserving historical heritage in towns, villages and countryside, making it more visible;
- promoting sustainable agricultural production structures, especially small and medium-sized operations;
- accelerating expansion of high-speed data networks in rural areas;

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- improving and speeding up rail connections between town and country;
- strengthening sustainable rural tourist infrastructure.

STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING URBAN AND RURAL BUILDING CULTURE

First of all, public and political awareness of the importance of building culture needs to be enhanced. Building culture is not an incidental detail, but decisive for our quality of life. As such, its needs must be addressed in all the central areas of construction and planning law, and in national government support programmes. Concretely, this means:

- national government, states and municipalities must set a good example in their own construction, modernisation and maintenance projects;
- in particular, public infrastructure – buildings, bridges, roads, energy plant and so on – must be assessed in terms of building culture;
- the aesthetic aspects of building culture must be taken into account when developing and improving energy standards (the energy saving ordinance, among other things);
- the existing planning, construction and emissions laws and safety requirements need to be reviewed with regard to their effects on building culture;
- democratisation and participation in construction and planning processes must be given greater weight, specifically in public works planning procedures;
- preservation of historic buildings and maintenance of urban landscapes must be stepped up;
- national government must institutionally strengthen and continuously support the International Architecture Exhibitions (IBAs), as Germany's research and development laboratory for building culture;
- building culture must become part of cultural education, especially in schools;
- international dialogue concerning a European building culture must be strengthened. Here, too, IBAs can play a key role.

TOOLS AND MEASURES TO STRENGTHEN BUILDING CULTURE

Under paragraph 1 (6) (5) of the German Building Code, drafting of urban land-use plans must pay particular attention to the requirements of building culture, to protection and preservation of historic buildings, to districts, streets and squares of historical and aesthetic or architectural significance, and to the appearance of built and natural landscapes.

Federal and state programmes concentrate on funding measures to preserve historic buildings and protected architectural ensembles. In Germany's federal system, culture – including building culture – is fundamentally a matter for the states, but instruments and initiatives designed to strengthen building culture need to be expanded at the national level. This includes the following ten principles:

(1) Strengthen quality control in building culture

Building culture does not simply arise spontaneously, and it is certainly not a purely private matter. Instead, public entities must ensure that quality control is implemented in practice. National government must support this through formal procedures and fee codes. This includes:

- enhancing project preparation by introducing a »Phase 0« (target and requirement planning, project development);
- strengthening dialogue-based planning and competition processes through public participation (see also item 7);
- evaluation of construction and use phases (»Phase 10«).

(2) Improve urban development intervention

Urban development intervention is one of the most successful instruments of urban renewal and an internationally credited example of targeted government intervention that promotes structure and ensures quality. Nevertheless, this instrument needs to move with the times. This includes, in particular, making urban development interventions conditional on building culture criteria, such as:

- tying the granting of funds to the use of urban development or architectural competitions and/or training processes;
- strengthening dialogue-based public participation.

(3) Improve circumstances for civil society engagement

Government is not solely responsible for building culture. The history of building culture is also the history of private engagement and the passion of individuals for good architecture, attractive urban landscapes and a liveable environment. One of the priorities of government policy related to building culture must therefore be to improve the circumstances – and especially the funding environment – for civil society engagement. This includes:

- recognition of the public benefits of the building culture activities of associations, institutions, and so on (charitable status);
- better support for historical preservation measures through social and/or cultural use of protected buildings;
- focussing funding on public space, specifically activities improving the appearance of small-town and village centres.

(4) Avoid conflicts between building culture and energy-saving targets

Many architects, as well as many engaged citizens complain about the »disfigurement« of the traditional appearance of towns and cities by cheap (and often ecologically questionable) façade insulation. In fact, there is no need for a conflict between maintaining aesthetic or historical features, on one hand, and strict energy-saving standards, on the other – as demonstrated by instances of successful redevelopment, such

as the International Architecture Exhibition in Hamburg. If we are to avoid concerns about our historic buildings and townscapes being exploited to block energy modernisation we need not only new, holistic thinking among architects, developers and politicians, but also targeted government action. The following policy areas need to be intensified:

- more support for research in alternative insulation techniques – for example, more practicable methods of internal insulation;
- exclusion of public subsidies for ecologically questionable and environmentally harmful insulation materials;
- consistent amendment of the Energy Saving Ordinance from per-component to overall primary energy consumption in order to ensure a holistic perspective;
- support for holistic neighbourhood energy-saving concepts;
- introduction of funding eligibility for aesthetic enhancement of energy-saving measures using higher-quality materials and intelligent systems technology, in particular with regard to façades and windows.

(5) Ensure that land use is not governed exclusively by business considerations

Building culture as a conscious field of political action is viable only if the use of its most important resource – land – is not governed exclusively by the principle of economic gain. It is therefore necessary to expand land ownership instruments to add aspects of building culture. The following steps are needed:

- development law (Building Code paragraph 165 ff.) should be used and improved as an instrument of building culture, for example by introducing a »development zone light« to facilitate utilisation of small areas of building land, reduce costs to municipalities and, at the same time, ease the introduction of relevant quality control (competitions, peer review processes);
- consistent use of »best concept« criteria in sale or leasing of publicly owned land, where the social and development/architectural quality of the bidder's concept is the yardstick. The price is either fixed in advance or assessed as a secondary criterion (for example, weighted as 25 or 33 per cent of the assessment).

(6) Include building culture in the school curriculum

Building culture is largely a process and cannot be imposed from above. It has to be wanted and practised by citizens, during actual construction but also in maintenance, conversion and modernisation. Only if building culture becomes part of everyday culture can it be a lasting success. Introducing building culture education in schools is a fundamental precondition for a broader understanding of quality in urban development and architecture. National government should support initiatives that promote building culture as an element of cultural education in schools, as is already customary in certain Scandinavian countries. This could also be a field of activity for the Federal Foundation of Baukultur (see item 9).

(7) Strengthen public participation

Another important element of such education is responsible exercise of the democratic right of participation. But participation presupposes the creation of institutional and procedural preconditions – from the outset and extending beyond the process of actual building through to questions of building stock management. This is an important task not only for federal government, states and municipalities, but also the entire construction sector and in particular public housing organisations. A social democratic building culture policy must therefore initiate the following measures:

- strengthen process culture by stepping up the inclusion of users and civil society in urban land-use planning procedures, with a fundamental revision of paragraph 3 of the Building Code to orientate the concept of participation towards building culture and the public good;
- include community-building (support for creating functioning neighbourhoods) in larger building projects, and in urban development interventions and budgeting systems for formal development measures;
- initiate model innovative public participation projects focused on promoting building culture through allocation of state-owned land by the Institute for Federal Real Estate (Bundesanstalt für Immobilienaufgaben, BIMA);
- tie federal funding for social housing construction to model processes of public participation;
- launch federal government initiatives jointly with the housing sector to strengthen public participation as a core element of the process culture of building culture;
- establish a revolving federal trust fund to promote and secure building culture activities and qualities in underfunded municipalities. Such a land fund could support underfunded municipalities by buying and renovating culturally important buildings before selling them on affordable terms (for example, vacant inner-city tenements, unused half-timbered village houses). Specific use and ownership concepts could be applied to attract young and education-orientated sectors of the population into threatened areas. Here, too, a number of exemplary pioneering projects already exist in Germany.

(8) Facilitate and promote social and functional diversity

When we enthuse about attractive and liveable cities we are always also speaking about mixed-use urban areas. But social and functional mixing is still hindered by the existing planning and emissions legislation. Thus these areas of the law require a building-cultural revision aimed at facilitating and promoting land-use mix and strengthening small decentralised centres. This involves:

- tightening the location restrictions on large-scale greenfield retail developments, especially in unintegrated locations; in "integrated inner-city locations" development should be conditional on demonstrating compatibility with local small-scale retail structure (complementarity);

- increasing structural promotion of urbanity and use-diversity in rural small-town and village centres;
- increased research activities and pilot projects for »twenty-first-century garden cities« that break the monocentricity of conurbations (following the original garden city idea) in favour of fully functional polycentric urban networks;
- accelerating the expansion of digital infrastructure in rural areas also belongs in this context (strengthening of commercial activities).

(9) Expand the activities of the Federal Foundation of Baukultur

When the German government created the Federal Foundation of Baukultur (Bundesstiftung Baukultur) in 2007 it established an important driver for building culture in Germany. Now its scope – and chances of success – need to be expanded and improved. The following measures might be productive:

- in view of the expanded importance of building culture and the enormous publicity and education tasks the funding of the Federal Foundation of Baukultur needs to be improved;
- the building culture reports published every two years have become one of the most important sources of inspiration driving the discussion; the government must ensure that the recommendations are thoroughly discussed in parliament and, wherever possible, adopted and implemented;
- the introduction of a national building culture prize.

(10) Expand the International Architecture Exhibitions

The International Architecture Exhibitions (IBAs) are traditionally the most important and successful format – so to speak, the flagship – for building culture in Germany. IBAs are not only the »research and development department« of building culture in Germany, but have generated a growing and truly international format that explicitly references the German model. The current Europeanisation represents both an opportunity and a responsibility for the German government to promote the idea of a European building culture. At a juncture at which Euroscepticism is fashionable, intensified cooperation in the sphere of building culture can contribute to strengthening awareness of the shared roots of European identity – and not just in the area of architecture. Central aspects – for a truly International Architecture Exhibition – include:

- expanding the IBA format as a laboratory for research, development and experimental implementation of building culture innovation;
- intensified promotion of quality management within the International Architecture Exhibition format, and of dialogue (»IBA meets IBA«);
- strengthening international exchange about building culture and promotion of the European IBA network;

- establishing a research and documentation centre for International Architecture Exhibitions (IBA-Akademie) located at the Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik (Difu);
- developing the national urban development projects programme towards IBA-style innovation and experiment.

Authors

Michael Groß, member of the German Bundestag.
Uli Hellweg, Hellweg Urban Concept.

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Responsible for this publication at FES:
René Bormann, Division for Economic and Social Policy
Orders/contact: wiso-news@fes.de

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