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Baukultur's future challenges: encouraging fragile connections

Conference : Getting the measure *Baukultur* – pour un espace de vie de qualité
4th and 5th November 2019 at the Pavillon Sicli in Geneva

Main challenges

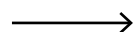
“Nations talk, cities act” – as national governments in Europe have become mired in polarised and not-ending debates about nation-spanning questions such as migration, climate change and the commons, often leading to gridlock, it is the cities that have been able to convert the intense debate among citizens into pragmatic action that is based on a progressive outlook. Certainly, cities do not have the power to actually leverage national legislation and regulations, but their small-scale, concrete solutions create pressure to act at the higher levels of government and they work as laboratories for broader societal change (Hillmann 2019). It is exactly those slow, uncomfortable and difficult pathways from concrete local action towards enacting declarations such as the Davos Declaration that count – certainly so when heritage is concerned. Transformative power can emerge from a situation of crisis and exclusion as many cases of urban regeneration show.

Not only have cities become more relevant players by organising themselves through national and transeuropean city networks or through a more pronounced presence of the mayors (Barber 2014). Internally they are confronted with persistent social polarisation and spatial fragmentation, due to macroeconomic shifts such as deindustrialisation and deregulation of markets, not least of financial markets. We witnessed public funds drying up and a restructuring of planning that placed private interests above public goods. Processes of disintegration within the social fabric occurred in many cities, seemingly especially in those that saw regeneration schemes. As a study on public health recently reported about the forerunner of the 1980s, Glasgow, urban regeneration did not automatically generate more well-being for all, i.e. it did not produce cohesion. Today, one out of three children in Glasgow lives in poverty. The physical as well as mental health of Glasgow's population resulted to be more vulnerable compared to other cities in the UK – despite or exactly because of large regeneration schemes (Walsh et al. 2016).

It is about time to analyse the changed balance between *Flesh and Stone*, as Sennett (1994) once delineated the relationship between inhabitants and the built environment. The aspiration of high-quality Baukultur and the Davos Declaration might be of help here: it envisions an understanding of urban development rooted in culture and actively builds social cohesion, ensuring environmental sustainability as well as contributing to the health and well-being of all. It is about maintaining human cities. But how to obtain high-quality Baukultur and how to measure its impact?

The conference “Getting the measure of Baukultur” mainly documented successful examples, the new working spaces of the middle-class creatives and the urbanites empowered by digitalisation. The main societal challenges of urban transformation seem to be overlooked. Those are: a) a growing internal socio-economic polarisation (rich vs. poor neighbourhoods, including environmental inequalities such as climate-resistant conditions of housing, quality of the living environment, traffic density, ...), b) a cleavage between policies addressing the residents and the mobile population, and c) the falling apart of consumed and lived spaces within the cities, especially the public spaces. Another challenge, as I feel, is the missing confidence that we can counteract these processes through policies and innovative practices in our cities.

My contribution defends a view on “heritage” as a common good, which has to be reconnected with marginalised parts of the city. In past years, heritage was treated more as a private good or a collective good only accessible to the well-to-do, at the service of a selected public only. In many European cities, planning offices became toothless entities, giving up on the governance of collective action and sustainability for the sake of



short-term economic benefits.

I first briefly focus on theoretical reflections on culture and social life as the sine qua non for sustainable cities. I argue that situations of exclusion and alienation can lead to the reaffirmation of tangible and intangible heritage. I put emphasis on the role of migration since this has often become a starting point for urban regeneration and heritage valorisation. Cultural diversity beyond the comfort zone in different contexts instigated urban transformation more generally. I present three case studies, alluding to past, present and future.

Existing answers

Today the literature on Baukultur is dominated by architects and a few urban sociologists, who consider the relationship between the built environment and culture (which is embodied by people, e.g. inhabitants). The proponents of the concept push forward a holistic approach to planning (Lampe and Müller 2013). First, initiatives by architects such as “Forget Heritage” and G124 (2019) start from the assumption that social and cultural life should become part of urban planning initiatives and they embrace a culture-centred and holistic approach to the built environment. As we read on the website of “Forget Heritage”, an INTERREG project funded by the European Commission, a major task is to transform “heritage sites as cultural enabling spaces” by letting culture in. It reads: “Cultural projects at vacant urban spaces have the potential to be key factors of heritage preservation and an essential part of spatial urban transformation processes towards the development of new life and diversity. However, cultural operators, administrations and initiatives have to consider precarious effects like gentrification, fertilisation and creative placemaking without a social conscience.” In a similar vein, G124, led by the star architect Renzo Piano, asks to start from the peripheries and to involve the people to “change the world”.

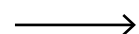
Accordingly, Pålsson (2017) asks for “humane Städte”, suggesting to start from the built environment and get away from the project-to-project planning. Instead he asks for more emphasis on the lived space, especially the public space. He claims that measures against segregation are needed and that public functions have to be brought back to the public space. He points to online shopping and the large shopping malls in the outskirts both contributing to the anaemic city centres we see today. His plea is for a condensed city with a clear identity of its own. His focus is also on successful examples of revitalised inner cities that are inhabited by the middle classes. His approach, however, ignores the fact that the former inhabitants had to leave the space and that restoring a real mixture of all sorts of inhabitants is a slow process that requires time and energy. Sennett (2018), following the thinking of the American Jane Jacobs (1961) and her vision of resident-friendly, not car-friendly, cities, speaks of the need to develop an *ethic of the city*. He asks for more migrant knowledge to make our cities liveable again. Migrant knowledge implies that there is contact with the unknown and that alienation is part of urbanity. Today the experience of alienation that is at the heart of the urban experience predominantly affects those citizens who no longer feel they belong to the regenerated city. They start to protest or even to rebel.

A promising scientific approach reaching out for solutions to obtain social cohesion is that of social innovation (SI) as put forward by Moulaert and others. Searching for a holistic framework that allows for the inclusion of formerly excluded neighbourhoods, they promote integrated area development (IAD) and the transformative power of “bottom-linked yet hybrid governance”, new forms of cooperation across trans-local networks of like-minded initiatives. This appears to (still) be a promising approach: connecting integrated strategies, actors and assets, especially in urban neighbourhoods in decline, e.g. in cities like Bilbao, Antwerp, Athens, Charleroi and Milan. The implementation of the model was supported by institutional dynamics and policies of the time such as the European Commission’s Urban Programme, other sections of the European structural funds, national, regional and city-governments. The goal of the Davos Declaration to develop European policies that aim to achieve a long-term improvement in the future design of the built environment, can possibly learn from SI by reconsidering the social component of heritage policies.

Confronting realities beyond the shiny surface

Berlin Kreuzberg – isolation as a laboratory

The history of Berlin Kreuzberg is of interest because here for the first time in Europe the concept of mixed

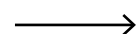


neighbourhoods outplayed the modernist planning after World War II. After August 1961, Kreuzberg was suddenly no longer in the centre, but surrounded by the wall and condemned to the periphery. Urban planning intended to demolish the existing, ramshackle housing in Wilhelminian style and to set up new housing blocks in a functionalist manner (during World War II 42 per cent of the housing was either destroyed or severely damaged). Regeneration implied substituting housing with more comfort for housing with little comfort, but also giving up on the social mixture. Until then the Kreuzberger mixture of housing, working and leisure places reflected the dominant lifestyle, weaving a strong social web with its own specific identity in the area. In 1963 the first remediation areas were cleared. The official planning policies aspired to set up a car-friendly city with a highway crossing right through the heart of Kreuzberg. Due to this uncertainty in planning (when will the highway be built?) the landlords kept their houses in a provisional status, waiting for a good moment to sell. In the meantime, they offered the run-down apartments to foreigners who could not find another place to live due to discrimination and the lack of financial means. They substituted for the declining native workforce at the invitation of the German enterprises. Many native people left Berlin and especially Kreuzberg. The neighbourhood transformed into a marginalised place, inhabited mostly by foreign people, the elderly and persons considered unemployable. Then, with the protests of students and the search for alternative forms of living in the late 1960s, the Kreuzberg inhabitants started to oppose the demolition of the old houses. Many houses became occupied, artists and intellectuals frequented places such as the Weltlaterne or Leierkasten, constituting a Kreuzberger Bohème. In an alliance of activists, planners and politicians the international exhibition of Bauausstellung was used to introduce a new type of regeneration: cautious regeneration, meaning that people started to take care of the restructuring themselves and made new forms of living together possible. By establishing new, binding rules for regeneration, it became possible to preserve many of the houses. Hardt-Waldherr Hämer succeeded in involving youngsters, citizen groups and social workers and formulated twelve principles on how to build in a socially and also ecological manner. The neighbourhood became the place for experimental forms of living, such as shared housing and integrated neighbourhood development (see Singocom and Katarsis). Also many initiatives of intercultural work started here, a bottom-up museum on local history. A vibrant neighbourhood with pockets of poverty as well as many migrant economies emerged. Today the formerly run-down houses are restructured, speculation has taken over and Kreuzberg is among the most expensive areas in the city [of Berlin] in terms of housing prices. Still, it is among the most multicultural and vibrant neighbourhoods in all of Germany.

Genoa La Maddalena – strategic heritage for the cruises

For most of the twentieth century, Genoa was a city with a hidden heritage. Once the financial capital of the Mediterranean, the old city hosts fantastic *palazzi* and Renaissance streets. Industrialisation and the petrochemical industry after World War II cannibalised the beauty of the town. From the 1960s onwards tourists came no more, Italian tourist guides generally skirted the town. The first attempts to regenerate the urban heritage took place in 1992, in 2004 the city became European City of Culture, in 2006 a UNESCO World Heritage Site. From the outset, regeneration policies deliberately focused on the city centre, ignoring the difficult condition of the peripheries with their high-rise housing from the 1980s. Much of the regeneration policies concentrated on the built environment: painting the facades, establishing pedestrian zones, bettering the pavements – also a subway was built. The waterfront was revitalised and, after many years of separation from the old city, reconnected to the urban tissue. The city makers found inspiration in the regeneration processes of Glasgow and Barcelona, pointing to internationalisation and tourism – as suggested by the mayor and Renzo Piano among other experts. An Urban Lab was set up to interact with the city administration, public-private partnerships started and a participatory process began. Much of the public goods, mostly run-down buildings, were sold to finance the transformation process. After World War II, the old town, especially the part of La Maddalena, was home to the offices of the city administration and to many traditional shops, a place of in-migration of workers from southern Italy and at the same time always an area where the Mafia had rooted and criminal activities taken place. It was also the area where many of the old wonderful *palazzi* were located. However, in the 1980s, the city administration was moved into a single building, which led to a decline in customers and visitors and consequently to the closure of shops.

The regeneration process of Genoa began with that part of the town, while the more problematic areas such as the peripheries would be taken care of in a second stage. Many of the regeneration activities made use of European funding and spurred creative activities in La Maddalena. The beautification of the town was successful as it helped to restore many of the old buildings as numerous events and the museum system. This



brought the town back on the tourist agenda. At present, the number of tourists, mainly cruise ship tourists, is on a steady increase, as is the number of Airbnb apartments in town. At the moment we see a fragmentation of the old town into some *vicoli* (*alley*) where the tourists go to admire the beauty of the town, while areas in the immediate vicinity are inhabited by marginalised Africans, who easily accept the jobs offered by the Mafia. We also see a native local population who feels ignored by the urban policies and who starts to express frustration and protest as they bear the negative consequences of the transformation.

Rome Esquilino – the strength and weakness of the inner periphery

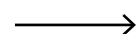
The area south of the main train station Termini, Esquilino, has always been a place of border and passage. Erected after the Italian constitution in 1870 in Victorian style by Piedmontese architects to provide housing for the employees of the newly established government site, for the petty bourgeoisie and the upper classes, like in other big cities such as London and New York, its regeneration schemes also included public spaces, for instance the gardens in Piazza Vittorio. In the 1930s, a library and other buildings of the Catholic Church were established and the area was inhabited by students and white collar workers. The neighbourhood saw a steady increase in the resident population until 2016 when it started losing residents. Today it is the most multicultural neighbourhood in Rome. Thanks to the foreigners who came to live here and the native population who decided to stay, Esquilino is not shrinking. A third of the population is of foreign, mainly Bangladeshi, origin. Many migrant economic initiatives exist, transforming the area into an inner periphery. Once there was a thriving market at Piazza Vittorio Emanuele, which was then relocated to the Nuovo Mercato Esquilino – a major regeneration project. The city administration under Veltroni started to offer the public space to the associations, which used the square for cricket training for the youngsters, for example. In the neighbourhood a dense net of associations taking care of the migrant population has now evolved, integrating the local residents: a baseball club, a cricket club, a local school with many intercultural activities (San Donato). In 2002 the “Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio” playing multicultural music came to life and is now famous and invited all over the country. The movie about the cricket club of Piazza Vittorio was shown at the Rome Film Festival 2019 (“This is not cricket”; also: Piazza Vittorio di Abel Ferrara), there is a local newsletter on the neighbourhood and also a cinema club (Apollo 11), owned by the municipality and serving as a meeting point for cultural activities. While many describe the place and the neighbourhood as genuine with solidary participation, i.e. a lived space (Banini 2019), the media frequently stress the reality of ramshackle housing and a “Chinese Mafia”.

Weaving the web: encouraging fragile connections – heritage is future

I chose these three examples of urban regeneration because they represent outstanding examples of peripheral situations that have stimulated urban regeneration and because they relate to the principles of the Davos Declaration. In two of the cases (Kreuzberg and Esquilino), processes of social innovation have contributed to urban regeneration as the involved parties made use of the existing mix of working, housing and leisure, and gave an important role to the inhabitants in the urban regeneration and area development. All three neighbourhoods are considered to be arrival areas and the presence of a marginalised population has instigated bottom-linked cultural activities such as orchestras, a local museum or intercultural activities in schools alongside ethnic cuisines. The case of Genoa, on the other hand, reminds us that urban regeneration that is connected mainly to the built environment and that has no other focus than attracting non-residents to the city, may be less effective in creating sustainable development – but also here local initiatives added to the revalidation of the heritage. Heritage is future – when it is used to produce bottom-linked activities as suggested in the concept of social innovation of weaving connections between different interest groups within the city itself. The focus of high-quality Baukultur thus should be on the lived and mixed public spaces as these provide possibilities to engage with bottom-linked activities through heritage.

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