URBAN CONSERVATION AS A CORE COMPONENT OF SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT – CONSTANCE ON LAKE CONSTANCE AS A CASE IN POINT

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Abstract

The maintenance and conservation of this city requires daily meetings with all the key players. The culture of planning in a city’s conservation and renovation demands a system of integrated planning: in Constance, urban conservation is linked to urban development and thereby represents a significant component of urban design with respect to sustainability. The working methods involved in urban conservation are characterised by a sparing use of the available resources, while at the same time being focused on longevity and cost effectiveness. In this way, urban conservation can rightly claim to have always been bound to the principles of sustainability. These principles can therefore be applied in general terms to the politics of urban development. Long-term conservation and permanent maintenance are actually reasonable principles to pursue in the design and architecture of a city. Urban conservation is a policy of preserving buildings that goes beyond mere utility-orientated thinking. Conclusion: Sustainability is a culture of prudence.

Key words: urban planning, integrated conservation, sustainability, prudence

1. Preliminary comments and definitions

We hear the word sustainability everywhere these days. Indeed, it seems to have become a fashionable term to use. We have sustainable urban development, sustainable car production and sustainable shopping baskets. The word sustainable has also now entered the vocabulary for discussing urban conservation. But can urban conservation be sustainable, or is this not a matter of preserving the past, whereas sustainability today is more concerned with planning, that is, with activities connected to the future? So what does sustainability in urban conservation and urban development really mean?

Ever since the UN’s Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the following definition has been widely accepted: sustainability means using the earth’s resources in such a way as to ensure that future generations can satisfy their needs. With this step, the ecological and economical term ‘sustainability’ was significantly broadened to include an ethical and social dimension. The increasing scarcity of both our natural and economic resources is forcing us to give greater consideration and commitment to the idea of

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sustainability. This does not concern the interests of individuals, but those of the entire community.

In May 2007, the European Union discussed the concept of sustainability in urban development and the results were recorded in a political document entitled the “Leipzig (a german town) Charter on Sustainable European Cities”. This states that the EU considers “European cities of all sizes which have evolved in the course of history to be valuable and irreplaceable economic, social and cultural assets”. This is where the subjects of urban protection and urban conservation fit in and I would like to take my home city of Constance, in this lecture, as an example of how urban conservation has always corresponded to the principles of sustainability.

2. The City of Constance

Let us begin with a few facts: Constance is located in the south of Germany, has a population of just under 82,000 and is considered to be the heart of the region around Lake Constance, at the very centre of Europe. On the remains of a roman fort (castellum) about 600 a bishop's see was established. From the Early Middle Ages, the city developed into a significant cultural and economic centre on the lake. The greatest historical event was the Council of Constance of 1414 to 1418 which marked the high point of the conciliar movement to reform the Church, and it remains deeply ingrained in the city’s collective memory. Constance was mercifully spared the fate of many other comparable cities in Germany, which lost their identities after being destroyed by wars and subsequently
rebuilt. This makes Constance a particularly beautiful city with an extremely rich history. The Old Town has managed to maintain its medieval charm and is today one of the most important cities in the Federal State of Baden-Württemberg. With all its historic buildings and open spaces, the Old Town is a precious and non-expandable resource. Its material and non-material wealth make it such an important centre of cultural value that its inhabitants and visitors alike can satisfy their basic human needs of remembering a shared past. The city boasts the “public interest” required by law to ensure its preservation and the Old Town of Constance has been officially listed as an historic site since 1982.

3. Conditions for sustainability:

Knowledge is sustainable

The maintenance and conservation of this ensemble requires permanent communication and meetings with all the key players. For day-to-day business a profound knowledge and understanding of the cultural and historic heritage in the city is absolutely essential to be able to carry out the conservation work. Heritage lists are obtainable for the entire urban area of Constance, and they were drawn up with the complete approval of the city’s inhabitants and finally adopted by the town council. Besides approximately 1,250 historic buildings and art monuments a further 55 archaeological sites have been recorded. This knowledge is available to all citizens and is continually being expanded – for example, at the annual “Heritage Open Day”. For it is only through information and knowledge that understanding and, for each individual, a personal and long-lasting devotion can grow. This is, therefore, an excellent reason to defend the world that we have constructed, the place we call home. Knowledge is ultimately a condition for sustainability and conservation.

Conservation is sustainable

As far back as 100 years ago, the German conservator Dehio set out the following principle: "Conservation, not restoration". Even at that time, the emphasis was not on making buildings look beautiful or new again, but on considering them as "historical documents" which must be protected and not allowed to succumb to decay or dereliction. Dehio’s demands were soon neglected, however, only to be taken up again with renewed vigour in the 1980s, marking a paradigm shift in the approach to working with historic buildings. Monuments were no longer expected to "shine in a new brilliance". Rather, "the traces of time" were considered to be of greater importance and value, with more efforts being made to protect and maintain them. In order to achieve this objective, the concept of urban conservation assumed new methods and strategies. The material circumstances, peculiarities and damage have to be explored and evaluated scientifically, and the principle of minimal intervention is to be applied in the implementation of conceptual action plans. These cautious new strategies are worthy of wider recognition and have made a significant contribution of urban conservation to the subject of sustainability.

Further use is sustainable

As well as preventing damage and minimising interventions, an acceptable continued use of a building can be a necessity. However, the changing needs of users – particularly regarding comfort and standards – place limits on the continued use of buildings in the same function. Nevertheless, any measures undertaken which are
appropriate for the materials and objects in question can be more readily guaranteed than conversions with a change of function. Although material and related non-material losses cannot be avoided, we can still speak of sustainability here, as the continuation or reuse of building materials have a significant ecological and economic impact. Furthermore, the inscribed historical traces and values are not completely lost, as is often the case when buildings are gutted and only the façades or exteriors are preserved.

With reuses and conversions, a further basic principle of urban conservation, namely reversibility, can also be understood and implemented in the context of sustainability. If measures of conservation, care or stability are required and designed with reversibility in mind, it will then be conceivable and feasible to remove them at a later date. Future generations will not be denied the opportunity to put forward new questions and adopt a different approach to caring for our historical heritage. This also guarantees the correction of errors. Reversals are possible; reversals are sustainable.

Our predecessors also acted on behalf of reversibility and protection, as a rather interesting example illustrates. While carrying out some redevelopment work, it was with great surprise that a banquet hall, which had been concealed by modern chipboards, was discovered and subsequently opened up. After some conservation and restoration work, this testament to the home furnishings of the early 19th century in Constance was made accessible once more.

Integration is sustainable

“Urban design is the most political of all the art forms” (Jobst Siedler).

The entire city of Constance is a monument and it can be sure of the attention of a great many people due to its archaeological and historical value. For not only conservators and citizens, but also the politicians have long since recognised the Old Town’s functional value as well as its importance in creating a sense of identity and quality of life.

It goes without saying that the role of urban conservation in any city is dependent on a multitude of factors. It has undoubtedly been beneficial that the election to the local parliament of the city’s conservator and her successor has enabled them to act on a politically legitimate basis. This communal level of urban conservation serves to increase awareness of local historical dimensions. With the presence of this professional level of competence in urban conservation, the city of Constance underlines its planning jurisdiction and autonomy. Indeed, the city’s politics recognises urban conservation as an independent aspect of culture and development. The protection of its cultural heritage is seen as central to the way society views and understands itself.
Conservators were already planning in the context of urban design as early as 1900. However, it took the social movement of 1968 and "European Architectural Heritage Year of 1975" for the citizens themselves to question the dominance of economic factors in urban development and pay more attention to the concept of urban regeneration through conservation. Since then, a culture of planning has developed which takes all the different interests into account. Such a culture of planning in a city’s conservation and renovation demands a system of integrated planning: in Constance, urban conservation is linked to urban development and thereby represents a significant component of urban design with respect to sustainability. Dealing with the existent deliberately and thoroughly must be understood as the best way to improve quality, as this approach treats the existent as a valuable asset.

4. Two Examples

Masterplan / Framework plan for the Old Town

The growth and development of the city have never been turbulent, but have progressed continuously in an orderly fashion. Constance is a long way from major conurbations and key transport connections. Its geographical location as a peripheral region has always served to slow down the city’s economic strength. On the other hand, it is precisely this charming location on the lake that guarantees uninterrupted influx into Constance, seriously adding to the pressure on this medieval city to change. Due to its proximity to Switzerland and the preservation of the landscape, nature and ecological systems, there is hardly any availability of land for building. Urban development in Constance is, therefore, an internal development in the form of urban regeneration.

Irrespective of this, all the political powers in Constance have been focused for the past 30 years on ensuring that the historic Old Town remains capable of fulfilling all its functions as a place to live and work, a shopping hub, a service centre with local authorities and cultural facilities, and a place of interaction for both its own citizens and tourists. Back in 1991, a framework plan was passed with the consent of the inhabitants to act/serve as an overall concept ("Leitbild") for the Old Town. Particular attention is paid here to securing the role of the Old Town as a place to live and not succumbing to the typical marketing ploys of so many Old Towns in other cities. Nearly 6,000 people live in
the Old Town of Constance and they take good care of their urban environment, appreciate the social aspect of their lives and guarantee the city’s security. Urban conservation has played an essential part in this process and has also been of benefit to sustainability.

Advisory board for planning issues

A modern city never reaches a state of completion, but is engulfed in a continuously changing process in which the old and the new have to live side by side. Nowadays, however, laws and regulations no longer have the same acceptance as instruments of governance. Instead, it is in the constant exchanges and discussions with other parties that beliefs and values can be explained and successes achieved when dealing with justifiable, professional needs on the one hand, and private interests on the other. In order to implement the qualitative and democratically agreed preservation and further development of the Old Town, an advisory board for planning issues was set up in 1983 comprising interested parties from a variety of professional, political and economic backgrounds in an honorary capacity.

Urban conservation has had to assert itself in endless public discussions and has even assumed a leading role in this process. In consequence, the function and activities of the advisory board has been expanded since 2009 to include the city’s entire administrative area to ensure high-quality building work throughout the city from the perspective of architecture and sustainability.

5. Conclusion

In our fast-moving times, a standstill does not necessarily mean a step back, but is a time to slow down, collect oneself and reflect. In my view, the working methods involved in urban conservation can therefore be applied in general terms to urban development. For the methods and strategies of urban conservation are characterised by a sparing use of the available resources, while at the same time being focused on adaptability, longevity and cost-effectiveness. In this way, urban conservation can rightly claim that since it began 200 years ago, it has been bound to the principles of sustainability and is also well versed in seeking compromises and thinking beyond its own scope.

Long-term conservation and permanent maintenance are actually reasonable principles to pursue in the design and architecture of a city. Urban conservation is a
policy of preserving buildings that goes beyond mere utility-orientated thinking. It would be fatal if local politics chose to focus exclusively on economic requirements. Urban conservation can and must be decided upon together with the inhabitants – the ideal owners – as the future will bring other social interests that may conflict with our heritage of historic buildings and properties. Therefore, sustainability is more important than ever before. Sustainability should not be understood as a cost driver but, over the long-term, as a gain in values from ecological, cultural and social perspectives.

Sustainability is a culture of deceleration and prudence.