

# Quo vadis high-quality *Baukultur*?

An insider's view

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Meeting in Davos on 21–22 January 2018, the Ministers of Culture of the signatories of the European Cultural Convention and the observer states of the Council of Europe adopted the *Davos Declaration. Towards a high-quality Baukultur for Europe*.<sup>1</sup> Was there really a need for yet another declaration about the living environment? How does the *Davos Declaration* approach cultural heritage conservation? And can the *Davos Declaration* have a positive impact on heritage preservation?

The debate on the quality of interventions in monuments and the historic environment has a long history. Not only are there countless articles on the topic, but many architects and critics have used Riegl's *modern Denkmalkultus* and Article 9 of the *Venice Charter* to subsequently criticise or justify daring or contrasting interventions in historic settings.<sup>2</sup> Tensions between development and conservation are not new either, as demonstrated by two early UNESCO publications: the *Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding of the Beauty and Character of Landscapes and Sites* (1962) and the *Recommendation concerning the Preservation of Cultural Property Endangered by Public or Private Works* (1968).<sup>3</sup>

Concerns about the quality and impact of new buildings on the historic environment have been voiced both at the national and international levels. In the 1990s and 2000s the World Heritage Committee sought to ensure that new and much needed developments would not jeopardise

the outstanding universal value for which sites had been included in the World Heritage List in the first place. For example, this was at the heart of discussions on the Cologne Cathedral (inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1996) and the Historic Centre of Vienna (inscribed on the List in 2001).<sup>4</sup> The Committee's discussions prompted the organisation of an international conference in Vienna in 2005, 'World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture', where the *Vienna Memorandum* was adopted, as well as the drafting of the UNESCO *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* (2011).<sup>5</sup> Neither text, however, prevented the inscription of the Historic Centre of Vienna on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2017.

Tensions between contemporary interventions and care for heritage places are also rising at local level. This is due to pressures on land, requests for the densification of city centres and villages, soaring housing prices, and the trivialisation of design and construction methods. At the same time, new challenges and demands in terms of sustainability and demographics have to be met in towns, suburbs, villages, and the countryside. As a result, the quality of the living environment has gradually been declining, leading to chaos in too many places. Given the growing body of evidence that the built environment impacts people's health and mental well-being, a more comprehensive approach was needed. This was the trigger for the *Davos Declaration*.<sup>6</sup>

Obviously, the above-mentioned issues and challenges cannot simply be addressed by devising good conservation principles and a proper implementation of heritage legislation: a more global response is required. However, it is telling that the Swiss Federal Office for Culture initiated the Davos Process within the framework of the 2018 European Year for Cultural Heritage. In addition, whilst the composition of the drafting group working on the *Davos Declaration* shows a balanced representation of various sectors and stakeholders, their experience was firmly rooted in cultural heritage conservation.

The starting point for the *Davos Declaration* is that building is a cultural act. Indeed, every act shaping people's everyday environment is a cultural act. It reflects people's priorities and history, and their identity and culture. However, this cultural dimension is hardly ever used as a means to improve the quality of the environment and thus the quality of life. The aim of the 2018 Davos ministerial conference and Declaration was, therefore, "to debate, at a high political level, the cultural value of built environments. It will ascertain the synergy between the conservation of cultural built heritage and contemporary creation, facilitating the sustainable development of the changing built environment".<sup>7</sup>

The origins of the term *Baukultur* and the evolution of its usage in German-speaking countries are presented in other parts of this publication. In the

*Davos Declaration*, ‘*Baukultur*’ was defined as embracing “every human activity that changes the built environment” (Article 4). Given its overall aim — enhancing the quality of the built environment — the *Davos Declaration* has been promoting a holistic approach. Hence Article 4 specifies that “*Baukultur* encompasses existing buildings, including monuments and other elements of cultural heritage, as well as the design and construction of contemporary buildings, infrastructure, public spaces and landscapes”. *Baukultur* is also expressed at all levels, from policy and planning to the level of materials and skills (Articles 5 and 6).

The current built environment is thus an expression of *Baukultur*. However, this does not imply that it is well-designed, in line with societal needs and/or preserves its historical characteristics. The challenge is precisely to move from ‘*Baukultur*’ to ‘high-quality *Baukultur*’ in order to prevent or counteract the erosion of the quality of the living environment. This is what the *Davos Declaration* is about. It puts culture centre stage, moving from the ‘act of building’ to the ‘art of building’, the latter being a conscious process whereby every actor is aware of his/her responsibilities. From that perspective, high-quality *Baukultur* is a new approach to shaping the built environment, an approach that “is rooted in culture, actively builds social cohesion, ensures environmental sustainability, and contributes to the health and well-being of all” (Article 7).

The essential role of cultural heritage in high-quality *Baukultur* is expressed in Article 8 of the Declaration and even more explicitly in Article 9: “Cultural heritage and its conservation is a crucial component of high-quality *Baukultur*. The way we use, maintain and protect our cultural heritage today will be crucial for the future development of a high-quality built environment.” However, high-quality *Baukultur* is not synonymous with the quality of the built heritage or the quality of cultural heritage

conservation projects. It is a reflection of society’s and stakeholders’ attitudes towards people’s living environment.

When they adopted the *Davos Declaration* in 2018, the Ministers of Culture committed themselves to mainstreaming and promoting the ideas and principles of high-quality *Baukultur*. One area where more work was needed was finding ways to assess *Baukultur* quality. The conference ‘Getting the measure of *Baukultur*’, organised by the Swiss authorities in Geneva in 2019, provided input into the development of the *Davos Baukultur Quality System*, a framework for defining and assessing the *Baukultur* quality of places and projects.<sup>8</sup> Whilst high-quality *Baukultur* may seem elusive, it is not a subjective matter of taste; neither is it a simple matter of fulfilling a set of technical or programmatic requirements. *Baukultur* quality can be debated in a rational way according to the following eight criteria: Governance, Functionality, Environment, Economy, Diversity, Context, Sense of Place, and Beauty.<sup>9</sup> To some extent, these criteria are interrelated. The novelty is that social, cultural and emotional criteria are placed on an equal footing with more widely used technical, economic and environmental criteria.

The *Davos System* used to assess the *Baukultur* quality of places and projects was inspired by the Selection Criteria that ICOMOS developed as part of the *European Quality Principles for EU-funded projects with a potential impact on cultural heritage*.<sup>10</sup> Both tools work with the aid of key words, principles and short questionnaires. They have something else in common: they are a communication tool and use plain language so as to reach decision makers and all stakeholders, not just experts. After all, the ICOMOS Selection Criteria were developed at the request of the European Commission as a ‘Venice Charter for decision makers’.

The ICOMOS Selection Criteria can be applied to interventions in non-heritage places. Indeed, would anyone

wish to invest in projects that fulfilled the opposite criteria: not Knowledge-based; lacking in Public Benefit; wanting Compatibility and Proportionality as regards historic elements and surroundings; deficient in Discernment; marked by poor Sustainability; and displaying bad Governance? Quite obviously, non-compliance with the ICOMOS Selection Criteria would inevitably result in chipping away at the existing quality of the built environment instead of enhancing it. Moreover, applying heritage conservation methodologies (e.g. ‘Conduct research and surveys first’ and ‘Call upon skills and experience’) would be common sense for any building act.

There is a compelling case to be made to view both assessment systems as complementary tools that reinforce rather than compete with each other. This is why ICOMOS is a partner to the Davos process. The ICOMOS Selection Criteria were specifically developed to assess projects and places in order to better preserve cultural heritage; the holistic approach of the *Davos Baukultur Quality System* puts additional emphasis on the attitude required to achieve and sustain high-quality places. Together, they provide guidance for healthy and constructive debates, which are a necessity if we are to ensure the best cultural heritage preservation today and for the generations to come.

In conclusion, the *Davos Declaration*, and the *Davos Baukultur Quality System*, builds upon the ICOMOS Quality Principles and Selection Criteria. It is not just another statement, nor does it duplicate existing standard-setting texts on cultural heritage preservation: it puts culture centre stage, works on attitudes, and shows the interconnection between cultural heritage conservation and new creation with a view to increasing the quality of the living environment and people’s well-being.

- 1 Davos Declaration 2018.
- 2 Alois Riegl, *Der moderne Denkmalkultus*, 1903.
- 3 UNESCO, *Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding of the Beauty and Character of Landscapes and Sites*, 1962 ([portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=13067&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13067&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html), accessed 13.03.2022). UNESCO, *Recommendation concerning the Preservation of Cultural Property Endangered by Public or Private Works*, 1968 ([portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=13085&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13085&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html), accessed 13.03.2022).
- 4 Working documents for the World Heritage Committee on the Cologne Cathedral ([whc.unesco.org/en/list/292/documents](http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/292/documents), accessed 13.03.2022). Working documents for the World Heritage Committee on the Historic Centre of Vienna ([whc.unesco.org/en/list/1033/documents](http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1033/documents), accessed 13.03.2022).
- 5 *Vienna Memorandum*, 2005 ([whc.unesco.org/en/documents/5965](http://whc.unesco.org/en/documents/5965), accessed 13.03.2022). UNESCO, *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape*, 2011 ([portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=48857&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=48857&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html), accessed 13.03.2022).
- 6 Context Document for the Davos Declaration. *Towards a European vision of high-quality Baukultur*, 2018 ([www.davosdeclaration2018.ch/media/Context-document-en.pdf](http://www.davosdeclaration2018.ch/media/Context-document-en.pdf), accessed 13.03.2022).
- 7 First announcement of the 2018 Davos Ministerial Conference, 7 April 2017.
- 8 Information on the 'Getting the measure of Baukultur' conference, Geneva, 4–5 November 2019 ([www.davosdeclaration2018.ch/conference-2019-geneva](http://www.davosdeclaration2018.ch/conference-2019-geneva), accessed 13.03.2022).
- 9 More information on the Davos Baukultur Quality System ([www.davosdeclaration2018.ch/quality-system](http://www.davosdeclaration2018.ch/quality-system), accessed 13.03.2022).
- 10 ICOMOS, *European Quality Principles for EU-funded projects with a potential impact on cultural heritage*, Paris, revised edition November 2020 ([openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2436](http://openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2436), accessed 13.03.2022). Abridged version incl. Main Recommendations and Selection Criteria ([openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2440](http://openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2440), accessed 13.03.2022).

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## Abstract

# Auf der Suche nach einer hohen Baukultur

## Die Sicht einer Insiderin

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Wie wird die Bewahrung des Kulturerbes in der *Erklärung von Davos. Eine hohe Baukultur für Europa* behandelt? Brauchte es eine weitere Erklärung zum alltäglichen Lebensraum? Die *Erklärung von Davos* beruht auf der Erkenntnis, dass sich die Qualität des Lebensraums allmählich verschlechtert hat, während eine wachsende Zahl wissenschaftlicher Arbeiten die Auswirkungen der gebauten Umwelt auf die Gesundheit und das psychische Wohlbefinden der Menschen belegt. Auch wenn die Umsetzung der Kulturgüter-Gesetzgebung und

der Richtlinien zur Denkmalpflege nützlich und sogar notwendig sind, um die Qualität der gebauten Umwelt zu gewährleisten, ist ein ganzheitlicher Ansatz erforderlich, um der Erosion des Lebensraums Einhalt zu gebieten. Die *Erklärung von Davos* geht vom Prinzip aus, dass jeder Eingriff in die gebaute Umwelt ein kultureller Akt ist und dass man von einer «Baukultur» zu einer «hohen Baukultur» gelangen muss. Das *Davos Qualitätssystem für Baukultur*, das auf den von ICOMOS vorgeschlagenen Qualitätsgrundsätzen und

Auswahlkriterien beruht, erlaubt, die Qualität der Baukultur zu messen. Die Erklärung und das Qualitätssystem überschneiden sich nicht mit den bestehenden normativen Texten zur Bewahrung des Kulturerbes. Sie stellen die Kultur in den Mittelpunkt, benennen einzunehmende Haltungen und betonen die enge Verbindung zwischen der Bewahrung des Kulturerbes und dem zeitgenössischen kreativen Schaffen, um die Qualität des Lebensraums und das Wohlbefinden der Menschen zu steigern.