

Of architectural blunders, good manners and a few pitfalls of ‘*Baukultur*’

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When first efforts to establish a new policy area were made in the 1990s, *Baukultur* emerged out of the linguistic oblivion in which it had fallen, including in German-speaking countries. One sought a term that would mean roughly the same as *Heimatschutz* or what *Heimatschutz* once meant, but had not discredited itself through an indecent past and become impossible to use owing to its inappropriate connotations. Unfortunately, that was a vain hope, as has already been made clear.¹ The notion of *Baukultur* has roughly the same history as *Heimatschutz*, and that history is also associated with roughly the same pitfalls. Looking back on these very German, as well as Swiss, trajectories can help us gain a sharper understanding of today’s debate, especially with regard to associating *Baukultur* and monument preservation.

Baukultur in the old days

In the nineteenth century, the notion of *Baukultur* was uncommon, but towards 1900 it did crop up very sporadically, which only goes to prove that it was not difficult to invent. From the beginning it served to broadly designate the vernacular building tradition, which was thus delimited from – academic – ‘architecture’, and thus constituted it as an object to be taken seriously.² Around 1910 the term spread rapidly in the context of the *Heimatschutz* movement in all German-speaking countries. Today, it is difficult to determine which publication was at the root of this. A few years later, occurrences of the term could no longer be

counted – whether it was a matter of awakening a sense of the “beauties of the home-grown Swiss *Baukultur* of earlier times”, whether one joyfully could observe the “development of a living modern *Baukultur*”, or whether one wished to praise recently built bridges and station structures of the Rhaetian Railway (a Swiss scenic railway) as a “piece of local *Baukultur*”.³

In the *Heimatschutz* movement, as we can see, the term was associated with a specific agenda (and since then has mostly implied ‘high-quality’ *Baukultur*). The goal was to raise the design quality of the built environment, and the way to get there did not pass through the construction of architectural gems but, rather, the promotion of *Baukultur* in a wide sense. ‘*Baukultur*’ stood for simple and everyday construction; it stood for the view that it is precisely through everyday construction that a much more faithful representation of the greater cultural whole can be revealed, rather than through the products of monumental architecture (which tend to be elitist); it also demanded to be connected to a cultural tradition that was understood as place-bound and moulded by the landscape – in other words, as ‘local’ and ‘authentic’.

Basically, this agenda was largely influenced by Paul Schultze-Naumburg and his *Kulturarbeiten*, and it has been at the core of the *Heimatschutz* movement for over 100 years.⁴ Even though – perhaps almost astonishingly – Schultze-Naumburg did not yet use

the term *Baukultur* in the volumes of *Kulturarbeiten* published from 1901, the mention of ‘culture’ in the title of the series stood for the same conception: like many of his contemporaries, out of concern about rapid changes in townscapes and natural scenery, Schultze-Naumburg called for a reform of the architecture of his time. In this sense, the purpose of the book series was “to work against the terrible devastation of our country in all areas of visual culture”, as Schultze-Naumburg wrote in the preface to the first volume.⁵ The solution that he offered called for connecting to the *tradition* of yore, whereas architecture and urban planning of his own time, i.e. the end of the nineteenth century, in fact were regarded as a break with tradition (see Fig. 1).

Schultze-Naumburg was expressly not concerned with the outstanding works of monumental architecture – and this was something new – but with a model to be applied across the board. With regard to the architecture and applied arts reform of the years around 1900, he said that “it had set into motion a movement that works with tremendous exertion of strength, but has primarily turned its attention towards the requirements for luxury or the needs of the more affluent”; also, the buildings that he promoted owing to their exemplariness were all examples taken from the field of ordinary and anonymous vernacular architecture, the “everyday fare” of architecture, as it was called in his tomes.⁶ What was decisive in the fight against

contemporaneous 'building sins' was not the avant-garde masterpiece but, rather, 'tactfulness' in dealing with the townscapes and natural scenery.

It is actually not so surprising that we might still subscribe to this agenda *mutatis mutandis* today, even though its historical relativity is definitely worth considering. At least, the architectural blunders of the Belle Époque, as embodied in Schultze-Naumburg's counterexamples, sometimes fascinate us almost as much today as the model solutions that were formulated as an antithesis at the time. But one thing is certain: if one was to illustrate the book series today with the three-story blocks that are now so commonplace in peri-urban Switzerland – with their rock gardens, gabions, or polished granite stelae – one could almost agree with Schultze-Naumburg outright. Admittedly, the repellent personality of Schultze-Naumburg would stand in the way of our moral conscience, for he later turned into a racist and Nazi art propagandist, branding him as one of the most unsavoury figures in German architectural history.⁷

One may wonder how much of this development was inevitable or, to put it another way: why were large parts of the *Heimatschutzbewegung*, susceptible to totalitarian ideas in the interwar period, and why did the German *Heimatschutzbewegung*, which to start with did not differ too much from the Swiss one, let itself willingly be instrumentalised for National Socialism? In Germany, *Baukultur* had already become a battle cry against the modern movement before 1933.⁸ Many found it quite convenient that the term *Baukultur* not only meant something folksier than architecture, but also resonated with a 'local' and 'authentic' feeling: a traditionalist, popular *Baukultur* oriented towards the forms of historical vernacular architecture was now the antidote to 'architecture' poisoned by academism, internationalism and elitism. The magazine of the *Block* – the traditionalist architects' association around Paul

Schmittenner and Paul Schultze-Naumburg – was entitled *Baukultur* and, in this sense, it is no coincidence that the term, according to the always impartial Google Ngram Viewer, experienced its first cyclical boom around 1940 (see Fig. 2). Afterwards, silence reigned around *Baukultur*.

Baukultur today

This is no reason to consign the term to the rubbish heap or the building rubble of history. There is, however, every reason to ask where the problematic aspects of that conception stem from. Unfortunately, one has to come to terms with the fact that within the early *Heimatschutz* movement the widening of perspective and ideological tightening were closely related: both the discovery of the built environment as a field of action and the doctrinal narrowing down to a smoothed-out ideal of building 'tradition' were fed by concerns about the transformation of townscapes and natural scenery in equal measure. There was an attempt to remedy this perceived decline by elevating the harmonious further development of existing stock to the highest design principle. Of course, the problem lies less in the sensorium in respect of the beauties of the 'good old days' than in the claim to total design, which allowed past and present to merge into a homogeneous general view and thus negated differences of any kind from the outset. If you knew how things should be, then there was little room for the unexpected.

Nowadays, nobody would suggest that when we call for *Baukultur* we are standing for a rigid ideal of architectural 'tradition'. Yet the conception as somewhat retained its *penchant* for the creation of architectural harmony: namely, the desire to read something in the past that – whatever the degree of abstraction – is then projected into the future. From the point of view of monument preservation, this can be viewed as an expansion of one's own specialism or, at least, as a generalisation of subject-specific attitudes. Both the exponents of monument preservation and those

of *Baukultur* should ask themselves whether they really wish to embark on such a symbiotic relationship or whether, after all, they might rather pursue their causes separately – perhaps to their mutual benefit. At least, one should be allowed to put one's finger on a few points before trying to completely align the two subject areas.

Firstly, we have to look at the issue of idealisation. If we seek to understand the evidence of the past with the idea of harmonious further development in the back of our mind, then we will quickly be tempted to project regularities and development principles into the architectural context. If, in so doing, we rely on more abstract principles, it will not necessarily attenuate the problem. Indeed, if we try to extract design principles from an existing situation, we will necessarily be forced to read the architectural context as something that has arisen according to a regular pattern. But by projecting principles onto something that already exists, one idealises reality at the expense of (apparent) coincidences. Every future building decision will give preference to the choice that fits the principles established at one point – and in the course of time, the building will increasingly approximate its retroprojected ideal. This is well exemplified by the townscape-oriented renewal and restoration of old towns during the twentieth century (see Fig. 3).

Secondly, the task of monument preservation is not to create harmonious sceneries, but to maintain genuinely ancient stock. Monument preservation is meant to hand down the most important pieces inherited from bygone eras for as long as possible. Sometimes such monuments strengthen our identities and our hearts; sometimes they can perhaps provide inspiration for current or future building tasks; but sometimes they can also tell of harrowing events that might teach us how things should not be; and sometimes they just tell us something about the past – nothing more. The *Baukultur* point of view

will, on the contrary, most probably tend to favour those monuments that appear to offer a positive contribution to the history of architecture in a specific location or are part of a harmonious scenery. This applies to many monuments – but not to all. Perhaps ‘uncomfortable’ monuments most obviously slip through the cracks, even though this is a rather rare monument category. But there are definitely more everyday examples and stages from the history of architecture and urban development that can hardly be included under the term *Baukultur* and whose meaning lies more in social, cultural or settlement history. Let us cite a Swiss example at random: do we really wish to deploy *Baukultur* arguments when we talk about the historic-monument value of an ensemble like the Spreitenbach high-rise quarter? That case was just as important for Switzerland during the years of prosperity as it was exceptional (*ex negativo*) for subsequent criticism of modern urban planning (see Fig. 4).

Thirdly, we need to turn to the boundaries of the discipline: if we wish to hand over buildings devoid of any practical function because they can tell us something about a time that was completely different from our own, and if we wish to make an enormous effort because, in several respects, these buildings do not fulfil our current requirements at all, then this will work fine as long as it constitutes a rare exception. But if the exception becomes the rule, this could have an impact on the discipline itself. If the boundaries of the discipline are drawn too broadly and if monument preservation requirements affect too large a proportion of the building stock, we will first of all be inclined to reach similar compromises everywhere, for a very large monument stock makes it simply impossible to demand a permanent preservation of the building fabric. At the most, an extended practice of townscape preservation is feasible. However, from a monument preservation point of view, this is hardly what we might want. Such an expansion of

one’s own specialism is also unlikely to meet with public approval. Monument preservation should take care not to seek to involve an all-too-large proportion of buildings. Otherwise, it will come under such public pressure to justify itself that it will hardly be able to cope with it. In some cases, we are already seeing the consequences of this trend today. In the interest of the discipline, it is important to acknowledge its boundaries.

As early as 1900, *Baukultur* and heritage protection differed from monument preservation, and this is still the case today. The *Heimatschutz* movement helped the already established discipline of monument preservation to achieve an undreamt-of wide appeal. With its area of activity having potentially expanded to the entire townscape and natural scenery, the discipline now often focused more on a harmonious overall appearance and on building in the historical context. A harmonious overall picture carries conviction thanks to its identification potential for the general population, but an excessive emphasis on ‘identity’, as we also know from present days, is poisonous for a contentious debate.

Baukultur is future-oriented and should give us indications as to the direction in which building could develop. Monument preservation does not know how things should be or, at least, it should not know about it. It takes care of the legacies of history and looks after them so that we can continue to understand them in all their otherness in the future. From the point of view of monument preservation, there is not necessarily something compelling about making something completely different into a role model for today. From the point of view of the *Baukultur* debate, if one derives the future from the past, it might become rather cramped. Could it be that it would be mutually beneficial for both sides if they could develop at a respectful distance from one another?

- 1 See Ákos Moravánszky, ‘Politik, Prozess oder Produkt. Historischer Wandel des Begriffs “Baukultur”’, in: *TEC21*, 36.2015, pp. 32–38.
- 2 Earliest evidence found with the help of Google Books: Hermann M. Schirmer, ‘Der Studienbezirk zur Aufklärung der norwegischen mittelalterlichen Baucultur’, in: *Zeitschrift für das Bauwesen*, 1889, col. 37–72; Hermann Schiller, ‘Geschichte des Altertums’ (*Weltgeschichte* 1), Berlin: W. Spemann, 1900, p. 384, where the “Baukultur of the Etruscans” was mentioned.
- 3 The earliest use of the term in the (Swiss) heritage movement can be found, characteristically, in a rather innocent article by Benedikt Hartmann about ‘ancient Chur’ of 1911 (‘Aus dem alten Chur’, in: *Heimatschutz* 6, 5.1911, pp. 33–39, here pp. 34 and 39). A search on e-periodica.ch provides sufficient evidence of the widespread use of the term from around 1913. Quotes: *Heimatschutz*, 9.1914, p. 143 (Arist Rollier); *ibid.*, 5.1913, p. 65 (Jules Coulin); *ibid.*, 1.1913, p. 13 (*idem*).
- 4 On Schultze-Naumburg in this context, cf. by the present author, Melchior Fischli, ‘Paul Schultze-Naumburg: Staedtebau, 1906’ (*Kulturarbeiten*, vol. IV), in: Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani, Katrin Albrecht, Helene Bihlmaier, Lukas Zurfluh (eds.), *Manuale zum Städtebau. Die Systematisierung des Wissens von der Stadt, 1870–1950*, Berlin: DOM publishers 2017, pp. 94–111.
- 5 ‘Paul Schultze-Naumburg: Hausbau’ (*Kulturarbeiten*, vol. I), Munich: Callwey, [1901], n. pag. (preface).
- 6 *Ibid.*, n. pag. (preface), p. 92.
- 7 On the person of Schultze-Naumburg, see Hans-Rudolf Meier, Daniela Spiegel (ed.), *Kulturreformer. Rassenideologe. Hochschuldirektor. Der lange Schatten des Paul Schultze-Naumburg*, Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net 2018 (www.doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.352.486, accessed 13.03.2022) as well as reflections by Fischli 2017 (see Footnote 4).
- 8 See Moravánszky 2015 (see Footnote 1).

À propos de l'enlaidissement général, de la bienséance architecturale et de quelques pièges dans le domaine de la « culture du bâti »

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Dans le contexte du débat sur la culture du bâti, cet article revient sur l'histoire de ce concept afin d'identifier un certain nombre de pièges. Dès les années 1900, le concept de *culture du bâti* – et de « *Baukultur* » dans les pays germanophones (il s'agit justement d'un phénomène très germanophone à cette époque) – servit sporadiquement à désigner la tradition du bâti vernaculaire, que l'on délimitait ainsi par rapport à l'*architecture* académique. Vers 1910, le terme se répandit dans le domaine des mouvements Heimatschutz en Suisse, en Allemagne et en Autriche et fut associé à un programme concerté. L'objectif était d'améliorer la qualité architecturale de notre environnement bâti, la voie qui y conduisait ne passant pas par la réalisation de chefs-d'œuvre, mais bien par une large promotion de la *culture du bâti*. Fondamentalement, il s'agit d'un programme largement marqué par Paul Schultze-Naumburg

et ses *Kulturarbeiten*, constituant depuis plus de cent ans le cœur du mouvement Heimatschutz, respectivement ses divers rejets.

Le fait que l'on se retrouve ainsi avec un personnage qui sera plus tard connu comme l'un des protagonistes les plus antipathiques de l'histoire de l'architecture allemande peut nous interpeller. La contradiction se situe à vrai dire à un niveau plus fondamental. En effet, si nous pouvons nous rallier aujourd'hui encore à certaines exigences de la période 1900, nous constatons rétrospectivement que l'élargissement de la perspective et la limitation idéologique au mouvement des débuts de la sauvegarde du patrimoine étaient étroitement apparentés. La découverte de l'environnement bâti, ainsi que la limitation doctrinaire à une image idéale lisse de la *tradition architecturale* se nourrissent également de l'angoisse face au bouleversement de notre environ-

nement bâti. On tenta de répondre à ce que l'on percevait comme une déchéance en prônant un développement harmonieux du tissu existant.

Dans ce contexte, l'article soutient que les tentatives de rapprocher étroitement la culture du bâti et la préservation des monuments peuvent faire courir le risque de trop se concentrer sur l'image globale harmonieuse des monuments (et à l'inverse de considérer trop la culture du bâti du point de vue de son histoire). Trois champs thématiques sont ainsi abordés qui, dans la perspective de la sauvegarde du patrimoine, doivent faire l'objet d'une attention toute particulière :

1. l'idéalisation du passé ;
2. la manière d'aborder un monument qui ne se résume pas au concept de *culture du bâti* ;
3. les limites de la sauvegarde du patrimoine et sa signification pour cette discipline.