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Baukultur questions

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Abstract

Françoise Choay, in her anthology *Le Patrimoine en questions*. Anthologie pour un combat calls for a return to the values of our cultural heritage, which are increasingly being lost in the course of globalization and commercialization. Choay ultimately argues for a heritage-led shaping of the environment. She brings together in her anthology, published in 2009, a number of the undisputed founding texts of heritage conservation. Her selection, however, remains oddly backward-looking and lacks more recent, groundbreaking texts. We expand the discourse with a call for a movement for comprehensive high-quality Baukultur. This lifts the conflicting antagonism between heritage conservation and contemporary creation and understands the treatment of the whole built environment as a single entity. If the latter is committed to holistic high quality and places the functional, social and cultural needs of people at the center, it also strengthens the preservation and maintenance of cultural heritage as a central reference of any development strategy. Such a new narrative seems to us today as important as necessary to overcome the current, obvious quality deficits of our built environment.

Keywords: Baukultur, Davos Declaration 2018, Davos Baukultur Quality System, second Neorealism, tradition crisis.

Crisis

Heritage conservation is in crisis. This is the conclusion reached by the reader of Françoise Choay's 2009 anthology *Le Patrimoine en questions*. In the wake of a normalizing globalization, she argues, our cultural heritage is becoming increasingly museified and commercialized, and people are losing authentic access to their heritage. We share Choay's critique of the development of the *cadre bâti*. At first glance, however, Choay's call for resistance and struggle today reads strangely backward. Her semantic reflections, based on Alois Riegl, are perceptive, but seem far removed from the *Realpolitik* problems of our time. Her critique of globalization persists in a culturally pessimistic attitude and, like her polemical rejection of the conventions, recommendations, and initiatives of multilateral cooperation, contributes constructively little to the debate. At the very end of the anthology, however, under the title "L'avenir", The future, Choay feels compelled to clarify her position in a few lines:

My apparent pessimism responds, like that of Günther Anders, to a rhetorical bias and it should not mask a fundamental optimism. In the same way the interest that I carry to the built heritage, historical or not, must, in no way, be interpreted as a mark of pastism. I militate against all the current forms of museification, but for a memorial practice which conditions the innovation¹ (Choay, 2009: 209).

¹ Original quotation: "Mon pessimisme apparent répond, comme celui de Günther Anders, à un parti rhétorique et il ne doit pas masquer un optimisme fondamental. De même l'intérêt que je porte au patrimoine bâti, historique ou non, ne doit, en aucune manière, être interprété comme une marque de passéisme. Je milite contre toutes les formes actuelles de muséification, mais pour une pratique mémorielle qui conditionne l'innovation."



THE CENTRAL SQUARE IN BIEL (BE). Image: ©FOC / Rolf Siegenthaler.

Choay thus calls for a shaping of the environment starting from heritage. We extend this concept to a fundamentally quality-oriented, holistic approach – the pursuit of *Baukultur* or high-quality-building culture

Indeed, today we must recognize that not only is the discipline of heritage conservation in crisis, but the entire approach to the built environment is showing a growing cultural deficit. This finding is evident in many places around the world and goes beyond the state of heritage. The crisis is the result of a disparity that has persisted for decades and ultimately highlights the failure of public land-use policy. Over the course of the second half of the 20th century, we have increasingly lost culture in planning and building. Growing economic, constructive and building material possibilities influenced building and planning; however, these were barely accompanied by a broad discourse on the cultural aspects of building. This discourse was conducted, if at all, only by experts and rarely in a transdisciplinary manner. Today, we lack the social capacity to take a precise position on the quality of space. This cultural deficit has led to a preponderance of mechanization and economization that has taken over the art of building. For too long, the debate has revolved around the functional and technically controllable development of space, rather than the art of building cities, villages and infrastructure - which is first and foremost, a cultural task. Whether this mechanization, as Choay insinuates, is a consequence of globalization or must be understood as a legacy of the Modern Movement remains to be seen. The climate debate, for example, is also dominated by questions of technical possibilities for energy efficiency and their costs, while the cultural and social aspects, which are also important for achieving climate goals, are left out. In these changes, heritage conservation finds itself in an ambivalent situation: on the one hand, it serves a broad need for remembrance, territorial identity and beauty, which is by no means only commercially motivated; on the other hand, it is constantly criticized as an impediment to innovation and development, which dangerously marginalizes it precisely in the context of this very debate on the climate issues. No one disputes the protection and

proper care of important monuments. However, the valuable stock of heritage from a regional and local point of view, the so-called everyday “petit patrimoine,” townscape and settlement structures as well as cultural landscapes are suffering. This is hardly due to the museification and commercialization that Choay puts in the foreground and which may at best apply to a few hotspots of tourism, but by often completely insensitive interventions, justified by the adaptation to the so-called contemporary standards and functional needs, in other words, by a worthless further building without any qualitative claim.

In any case, it is barely possible any more to make a clear distinction between dealing with the historical building stock and planning and building new assets. Cultural heritage and the benefits of its conservation gain meaning as part of a comprehensive qualitative consideration of the entire built environment, and this is precisely what matters: that society recognizes again the cultural values –and besides also the values of nature– of its entire living space, and actively demands it for any activity that changes the space, not just limited to heritage or to the listed and protected monument, which by its very nature has an inherent elitist character. The new is just as important. To put it in a blunt way, what good is the wonderfully repaired old timber-framed house if I have to fight my way through an unspeakable agglomerate of uninspired urban sprawl to get to it? The causes of the malaise we are facing today may be manifold, but there is no getting around the depressing confirmation: there is a large and still growing deficit of general architectural quality everywhere. Heritage preservation alone will not solve the problem for us.

Choay illustrates her arguments –for an understanding of the historical quality of space and a resurgence of regional qualities– with a highly selective choice of texts. Her anthology essentially lies with the founding fathers of the discipline. Their pioneering and, at times, extremely far-sighted contribution to the development of (European) monument conservation and its institutionalization is undisputed and need not be discussed further. However, the questions of the 21st century can no longer be answered convincingly with these texts and their inherent approaches alone. Choay omits more recent and equally central contributions to the topic. The UNESCO *World Heritage Convention* of 1972 is quoted in excerpts as the conclusion of the collection, to a certain extent as an illustration of the vehement criticism of UNESCO, which is held as a symbol of globalization and of the standardization of cultural heritage. Criticism of the *World Heritage Convention* may be justified in various respects, but its merits nevertheless remain impressive: for decades it has allowed a worldwide discussion of concepts and practices regarding natural and cultural heritage, and the early link between natural and cultural heritage alone was trend-setting. The debate on cultural landscape was significantly shaped, or if not shaped, at least certainly broadly anchored by UNESCO; the international discussion on authenticity stems from the World Heritage system; and the *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape*² –adopted after Choay’s anthology– has advanced the discussion on how to deal with complex, multi-layered settlement structures, to name just a few examples. In many countries, the Convention has also contributed in very concrete ways to the protection and conservation of outstanding sites. The reduction of World Heritage to the indeed sometimes unfortunate synergetic connection with the tourism industry or to a supposed best-of-cultural-heritage falls short. There are apparently no texts worth mentioning for Choay from the post-1980 period. What about the Council of Europe’s 2005 *Faro Convention*³ and its pioneering conception of cultural heritage as a resource for society? Whose participation in heritage makes it meaningful in the first place? How would the associated change of perspective from the object to the human being be classified? What

² UNESCO *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* (2011).

³ *Convention on the value of cultural heritage for society* (2005).

is the relation of heritage to the discourse of sustainability? Choay is silent on this. Her appeal therefore falls flat without a strong forward-looking vision and is limited to three demands: an improvement in education and training in the field of cultural heritage, the strengthening of the appropriation of monuments for contemporary use (today we would speak of “adaptive reuse”) and the participation of the population. Significantly, these postulates are also important concerns of the very texts Choay did not include in her anthology.



NATURBAD RIEHEN. Outdoor swimming pool. Image: ©Iwan Baan.

Ten years after the publication of *Le patrimoine en questions*, the time, therefore, seems more than ripe to go a step further down Choay’s path and to dissolve the supposed antagonism between heritage and contemporary creation. Refusing to use digital tools in drawing and converting historic palazzi into university buildings, examples Choay uses to explain her demands, is not enough. Isn’t our *Tradierungskrise* based precisely on the insistence on interpretive sovereignty and the lack of openness to the further development of our theoretical concepts and practical approaches?

Baukultur

I am convinced that we need to adopt a new approach to our monuments and thus a new narrative that places people and their cultural and social needs at the center, in other words, a new approach to building that is committed to the common good. That is high-quality *Baukultur*.

We must learn to understand the built environment, the space, as a unit, and align the inevitable transformation of it with a common set of values: a high quality for the wellbeing of people. Today, the conservation mandate for cultural heritage must be extended (and by no means replaced!) with a qualitative design mandate for the entire built environment. In this way, heritage conservation becomes part of the pursuit of quality that applies to any building task.

The relationship with the built cultural heritage is simple in this context, but requires a precise statement in order to avoid any misunderstanding: cultural heritage is a central reference for our *Baukultur*. Preservation of historical monuments and also archaeological measures are –among other aspects– an important part of any sustainable development strategy. Therefore, the holistic and high-quality oriented understanding of spatial development does not weaken the protection, care and preservation of cultural heritage but, on the contrary, strengthens the relationship with the stock and the common understanding of monument value. Only when the historical reference is recognized as part of the high quality of the entire space, the preservation of historical monuments will be able to assert itself and ensure a prudent treatment of cultural heritage in a sustainable and continuous manner.

The concept of *Baukultur* was anchored at the political level in Europe with the *Davos Declaration 2018: Towards a high-quality Baukultur for Europe*⁴ and has met with a wide positive response. With the adoption of the *Davos Declaration*, the European Ministers of Culture have committed themselves to strengthening our building culture. Since then, the goal of a high-quality built environment has been an explicit cultural policy demand.

Our entire built environment is an expression of our *Baukultur*. How we deal with the built environment, how we protect and maintain monuments or abandon them; how we treat the archaeological legacies in the ground, how we plan our cities and villages, which processes we use for this purpose, which construction methods and materials we apply, which environmental impacts we trigger with the building and the use of the built environment are all aspects of our *Baukultur*. Even the projects planned and realized without any pretensions –but nonetheless legally– the constructively careless construction, this too is an expression of our contemporary *Baukultur*. What we are striving for is a high-quality *Baukultur* or, in other words, the re-emergence of cultural values in dealing with space.

In various languages, there is no term with an exact equivalent for the concept of *Baukultur*. For this reason, the German term *Baukultur* was adopted in English and Spanish, for example. In other languages, there was a translation or conceptual constructs were used.⁵ In the end, the chosen terminology is not of highest relevance, but the common understanding of the underlying principle is: it is about the comprehensively perceived expression of the treatment of the built environment. *Baukultur* is therefore not to be confused with the far less comprehensive, so-called “good design”.

Quality

The concept of “quality” has a key role to play. The *Davos Declaration 2018* refers to quality as a strategic imperative. If high-quality *Baukultur* must also be judged according to time and context, then it is neither an entirely subjective impression, nor a purely formal matter. The individual experience of the quality of a place may vary depending on the life situation, but nevertheless common denominators and values of high quality can be defined and objectively evaluated.

A common understanding of the definition of high-quality *Baukultur* and of the possibility of assessing it is therefore indispensable for any further discussion. Considerations in this regard have been the subject of debate for some time. However, there is currently no method or tool to holistically assess the *Baukultur* quality of a site. Various existing instruments,

⁴ *Towards a high-quality Baukultur for Europe* [www.davosdeclaration2018.ch].

⁵ French: Culture du bâti, Italian: Cultura della costruzione. The Open Method Coordination Group of the European Commission on this theme in the context of the European Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022 was for example entitled “high-quality architecture and built environment”.



SUNNISBERG BRIDGE (GR). Image: ©FOK / Rolf Siegenthaler.

initiatives, principles or even certification systems only touch on different, individual aspects of a comprehensive *Baukultur*.⁶ They do not refer comprehensively to *Baukultur* with all its aspects, including cultural heritage, contemporary creation, all parts of the built environment as well as the processes of its change.

Davos *Baukultur* Quality System

The Davos *Baukultur* Quality System was therefore developed as part of the Davos Process.⁷ By Davos Process, we mean the efforts of many public and private actors to further concretize the *Davos Declaration 2018*. The various aspects of *Baukultur* and ways to achieve the goals of the *Davos Declaration* require further elaboration; at the same time, the concept of *Baukultur* should also remain topical on the political agenda.



CONFERENCE OF MINISTERS OF CULTURE, DAVOS 2018. Image: ©FOC / Ruben Speich.

The Davos *Baukultur* Quality System chooses a multidimensional, choral approach to map the holistic notion of high-quality *Baukultur*. It proposes eight quality criteria and principles to define and assess high-quality *Baukultur*. It is thus the first approach to place social, cultural and emotional criteria on an equal footing with the more usual technical, ecological and economic criteria, thus giving them due prominence in a comprehensive and balanced assessment.

⁶ For example, sustainability and the “green construction” (for example SNBS, DGNB, LEEDS, BREEAM), housing and building (for example the *Wohnungs-Bewertungs-System WBS-CH* (housing assessment system), The Design Quality Indicator DQI), or urban design (for example *The Quality Ladder*), spatial development instruments, cultural heritage (e.g. ICOMOS European Quality Principles), historic urban landscape (e.g. UNESCO Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscape); or *Baukultur*-specific standards and declarations (for example, Austrian Federal Guidelines on *Baukultur*, Innsbruck Declaration of the Architects Council of Europe ACE).

⁷ The Davos *Baukultur* Quality System, published in May 2021 [<https://davosdeclaration2018.ch/quality-system/>].

The eight quality criteria are Governance, Functionality, Environment, Economy, Context, Diversity, Sense of place and Beauty. The individual criteria are interrelated and there are thematic overlaps in their content, but they are all equally important. If they are met for a place, it is high-quality *Baukultur*.



8 CRITERIA OF BAUKULTUR. Image: Davos Baukultur Quality System.

Governance, in the sense of *Baukultur*, promotes quality-oriented and site-specific processes led by qualified actors working in teams. It facilitates public engagement and contributes to transparent and inclusive participatory decision-making, management and maintenance of place. *Functionality* is expressed in design and construction methods that meet human needs for health, comfort, safety and accessibility. Places with *Baukultur* are durable and adaptable to existing and changing uses and purposes, while preserving the built heritage. In terms of the *Environment*, high-quality *Baukultur* is sustainable; it helps conserve natural resources and biodiversity and mitigates climate change. It preserves, promotes and develops an intact natural environment and diverse cultural and natural landscapes through responsible land use and urbanization, sustainable mobility, energy efficiency and the use of durable building materials and methods, taking into account the entire life cycle. From an *Economic* perspective, high-quality *Baukultur* prioritizes cultural values and long-term –over short-term– economic gain, preserves and enhances economic value, and leads to places of high-quality use. It preserves and develops resources through long-term uses that are appropriate to the site and design, through economy in construction and operation, and through the use of high-quality, durable building materials. Demands for social *Diversity* are met by promoting inclusive societies and mixed uses. High-quality *Baukultur* facilitates togetherness and shared responsibility that lead to social and spatial cohesion. It contributes to a diverse culture of planning. Places of high-quality *Baukultur* also relate to their built and natural *Context*. They embrace built heritage and contemporary design and communicate with local conditions and their characteristics in terms of time,

scale, typology and materiality. High-quality *Baukultur* contributes to the *Sense of place*: it exhibits characteristics that foster people's emotional response to and positive relationship with place. It promotes attachment to place through its strong identity and distinctiveness, contributing to the fulfillment of social, psychological and cultural needs. Finally, high-quality *Baukultur* leads to *Beauty*. It takes into account sensory perception and understanding of the relationship between objects, spaces and people, thus increasing people's life satisfaction and quality of life. It emphasizes the need for positive aesthetic appreciation and a fulfilling relationship between people and place.

The Davos *Baukultur* Quality System then also proposes a series of central questions to be answered for each criterion when assessing a site. Those who wish to go even further can objectify these questions –and above all the answers to them– and measure them with suitable indices and appropriate benchmarks. Admittedly, the concrete assessment of a place necessitates a context-specific application of the criteria and an individual determination of the relevant questions or even indices. In its general form, the system serves as a basis for a holistic view of space that is focused on quality –on precisely this high-quality *Baukultur*.

Returning to humanity

In view of the current, extremely urgent tasks –such as climate protection, the promotion of biodiversity or, more generally, the fight against environmental pollution of all kinds as well as social challenges such as growing social disparities– a fundamental return to the collectively human seems evident for all building tasks. This may seem naive at first, but it deserves attention. Inherent in the demand is a political repositioning of the public and the private, which is an essential point, especially in relation to *Baukultur*. How we build on our environment is not a private matter. A high-quality *Baukultur* is inclusive, contributes directly to the common good, and is therefore of particular public interest. The dominant focus –at least in Western societies– on private property and the freedom that comes with it does not require a revolutionary reordering, but a fundamental rethinking. The priority established in our legislations and rules for private freedom seems increasingly obsolete, and a reversal of the principle of proportionality would be appropriate. What is permitted is not what does not restrict the common good too much, but what serves it.

We therefore call for a movement for high-quality *Baukultur*. And like Françoise Choay, we remain optimistic: in very recent times, the call for a return to human values is gaining strength and we are observing a momentum of the concerns of high-quality *Baukultur*. This is not a coincidence, but an expression of the growing frustration in the face of the shape of our environment. The importance of quality-enhancing, informal and formal processes and tools is increasing; numerous initiatives dedicated to improving space are gaining momentum. People's wellbeing is always central to this. Formally, this can be concretized in the most diverse ways, depending on the place and context, and far from us is any paternalistic style prescription. In Europe, a new realism is sometimes heard that, astonishingly, takes up the premises of Italian neorealism of the 1950s again. As a backlash against fascist monumental architectures, post-war Italy saw a return to vernacular structures, constructive and decorative detail, and human scale. The move away from dematerialized, unscaled, smooth language can also be increasingly observed again in contemporary architecture: organic figures, rhythmic and haptically materialized facades and small-scale are again becoming leitmotifs of this "second neorealism." Fundamentally and independently of any formal expression, this return to the human also opens up positive perspectives for the care and preservation of cultural heritage as part of the overall built environment. Coupled with broad sustainability goals, it embodies a view that takes existing structures and values, preserves them, reuses them and renews them where necessary. The goal is not a mimetic

architecture or the abandonment of all rupture and innovation, but the conscious and debated consideration of all criteria for high-quality *Baukultur*. If at present these approaches can be observed mostly only in selected places, usually of special value, the great task of our time is to apply them to the whole territory. Even there, where nobody cared about quality so far. This is the great demand of a high-quality *Baukultur*, and in my opinion, this is also the sustainable strategy for our cultural heritage.

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