

PLANET HOME

TOWARDS A CLIMATE-
FRIENDLY ARCHITECTURE
IN CITY AND COUNTRY

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Towards a Climate-Friendly Architecture in City and Country

Prologue

The dream of everlasting growth has come to an end. Reduction is not a fashion statement, but a necessity for survival. Ecological overhaul requires creativity and ideas.

What kind of legacy do we want to leave behind? Earth is the only home we have. As architects and urban planners, we're doing too little to preserve it.

Our imaginations, our visions for how we want to live in the future, are of utmost importance. We're creating that future now. The way we conceive cities, infrastructures, residential buildings, manufacturing facilities, and offices will determine whether or not humanity can bring itself into harmony with the environment. Architects and urban planners generate impulses, and their built works can be catalysts for change.

Ten years ago, in the climate manifesto "Common Sense for the World," architects, urban planners, and engineers formulated a voluntary commitment to work with the construction industry and property owners to achieve ecological change in planning and building (www.klima-manifest.de).

Changes have indeed been made in the intervening years, but they've barely scratched the surface of what's needed for environmental protection. That's partly due to an implicit assignation of roles whereby governments are expected to establish framework conditions beyond which autonomous action fails to materialize. We've long since reached the limits of our current approach, a combination of mild contrition, status anxiety, and lack of courage to radically change our everyday reality, which still remains driven by the idea of growth.

We must do more to fulfil the responsibilities of our profession, especially given the relevance of architecture in the face of climate crisis. Architects and planners alone, of course, will not save the world. But our shared responsibility for the global impact of steadily increasing resource consumption requires us to become pioneers of a climate-friendly architecture. By agitating in one context, we can initiate a rethinking in others.

It's not only the ecological, but also the social consequences of climate change that grow increasingly urgent. Climate justice affects all humanity. Internationally – and even within the European Union – the far-reaching consequences of climate change undermine trust in social and political systems and threaten our peaceful coexistence.

The quality of architecture and construction is of fundamental importance. Only a building that proves itself over decades of use, far beyond the current "most economical" lifespans of 30 to 50 years, can truly live up to the concept of sustainability and thereby be valuable to society.

In order to make good on our commitment, we need an acknowledgement on the part of public and private building owners, the construction industry and craftspeople, and the real estate and housing industries that something needs to change. The preservation of our existence must not be left to the free play of markets.



Think politically and get involved

Enough is enough. Every day, we threaten our future existence; every day, societies and governments threaten our future existence. The western attitude towards life, whereby we feel entitled to do and have anything at any time, must change. We must reorient our lives around new, more ecologically friendly criteria.

We can no longer be patient with hesitation and temporization, driven by lobbyists. We must think and act politically; we must get involved, develop our own initiatives, practice civil disobedience. We must show that there is an alternative to the daily environmental madness of unchecked sprawl, mobility fetishization, and the prioritization of new buildings. Otherwise, we need no longer even think about the future. It's our turn to act.



New narratives for the future

We're called upon to imagine, enable, and design an ecologically responsible life. With vision, creativity, and conceptual thinking, architects and urban planners can conjure an inspiring image of the future.

In order for ecologically responsible behaviors to be accepted and implemented, they must be imaginable and tangible, sensual and realistic. In both urban and rural contexts, architecture can be a strong motivator for ecological change, allowing it to be experienced not as a loss, but as a gain for both individuals and society.



Respect for the existing building stock

Architecture and planning must make do without new construction. Instead, priority should be given to the preservation and development of existing materials, rather than their frivolous demolition. The "gray energy" contained in existing buildings, from material to transport to construction, must become the yardstick for energy assessment both in the planning process and in legal regulations. We need a new culture of maintenance and repair.



Simply intelligent

Technical upgrading to "intelligent buildings" and an excess of often ecologically questionable insulation materials will not produce long-lasting and energetically sustainable construction.

Through typological, constructive, and thermal structures, climate-friendly architecture exploits and regulates local climatic conditions for the well-being of users. Traditional local construction methods can serve as a reference. The simple is ultimately superior to the overly technological.

V

Building as material resource

All materials required for construction must be fully reusable or compostable. That is the only way to reduce the enormous amount of packaging, secondary packaging, and materials used in building processes and buildings themselves.

Architectural design must make creative use of recycled materials in new constructions and renovations and ensure that building components can later become resources. This requires an ecological approach both to the materials themselves and the way that they're used.

VI

Complete decarbonization

Decarbonization requires a paradigm shift in the use of materials and energy. Avoiding materials whose manufacture emits significant amounts of CO₂ must supersede energy efficiency as an important ecological criterion.

Instead of focusing on energy-intensive materials like concrete and steel, emphasis must be placed on natural materials like stone, wood, and clay. In addition, emission-free construction machinery must be used throughout the building process and a CO₂-neutral energy supply secured for the building.

VII

New forms of mobility

Mobility is more than just a matter of infrastructure. It determines the quality of life in our cities and the environmental impact of the way we move within them. In order for our mobility norms to become fundamentally ecological and climate-friendly, mobility must be understood as a conceptual and design task for architects and urban planners.

As a guiding principle for holistic development, the "city of short routes" prioritizes pedestrians, cyclists, and public transport over individual motor traffic. Combined with attractive and appealing public spaces, it helps ensure that our cities remain dynamic. The connection between city and surrounding area must also be taken into consideration; instead of increasing traffic, a new infrastructure must constitute the basis for new forms of mobility.

VIII

Encourage polycentricism

Germany's growing polycentricism must be encouraged in order to limit the economy-driven growth of cities on the one hand and the rapidly increase of commuter traffic on the other. Small and medium-sized cities should be cemented as great places to live and work thanks to their cultural and social offerings and economic foundations.

As building blocks for a new ecologically oriented understanding of community and region, urban planning and architecture can help expand the range of climate-friendly living options in Germany.

IX

Culture of experimentation

Never before has there been such a diversity of ideas and suggestions for climate-friendly living – that is, for ways to assure succeeding generations a future on planet earth.

By experimenting and learning, by reworking and updating these ideas, we can generate innovations that will facilitate ecological behavioral change. To that end, a network of decentralized field laboratories can act as catalysts, places where architects and urban planners can experiment with intelligent and collective solutions in cooperation with other actors.

X

Political laboratories

New ideas cannot be tested without adequate political laboratories. Experimental clauses in legal frameworks create the necessary space for innovation and ensure that policy can be adjusted in the face of new developments. Experimental spaces are an important pillar of a contemporary politics and administration committed to sustainability.

Looking towards the future

Architects and urban planners are creators. Our designs are the physical and visible manifestations of a new sense of responsibility. We can strengthen the belief in the future of sustainable development by demonstrating how creative omissions and reductions can give rise to new living environments. We thereby insist that a conceptual rethinking of that which already exists in our urban and rural spaces become part of the social narrative – one that doesn't moralize, but rather makes palpable the benefits of ecological change. To that end, we must exploit the opportunities of new fields of activity and take on the challenge of more complex processes.

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