

How should we interpret the *Davos Declaration*?

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The initiative for a broad discussion of a 'high-quality *Baukultur*' originated at the Federal Office for Culture. Under its impetus, the head of the Federal Department of Home Affairs, Federal Councillor Alain Berset, invited the European Ministers of Culture to Davos in winter 2018 and they all signed the *Davos Declaration*. The declared starting point of this document is the realisation that, on the one hand, we are witnessing a decline and an obvious quality deficit in contemporary European buildings and, on the other hand, historic buildings are handled with too little care. Thus, we can read in the Declaration, for example, "of a trend towards a loss of quality in both the built environment and open landscapes all over Europe, evident in the trivialisation of construction, the lack of design values, including a lack of concern for sustainability, the growth of faceless urban sprawl and irresponsible land use, the deterioration of historic fabric, and the loss of regional traditions and identities".¹ In addition to findings, definitions of terms and a vision, the Declaration also mentions social benefits, measures and obligations. Ministers usually seek to convert their concerns into new laws or funding opportunities. Neither of these appear to play a central role in the document and one wonders what it is all about anyway.

The Declaration lends itself to the following readings:

- It is a call for more carefulness in construction.
- It articulates the merging of efforts to preserve historically valuable buildings and promote high-quality new ones into a joint, and therefore powerful, movement.
- It postulates the claim to leadership of those who wish building to be apprehended as a culture and not as a technology or an investment.

Other interpretations are certainly conceivable. In the following, however, only the three above-mentioned ones will be briefly discussed.

The *Davos Declaration* as a call for more carefulness

The document did not emerge from a political initiative by a party or an interest group, but was an appeal by European culture ministers. However, they not only addressed their own services or building, planning and monument departments, but also everyone who has anything to do with construction and buildings. So it is the case that the culture ministers are calling on all citizens to make joint efforts to enhance *Baukultur*.

But can a high-quality *Baukultur* actually arise out of targeted, joint efforts? Can an official call for more carefulness directed at the general public deliver hoped-for success? At least since Nietzsche, we have known that culture does not arise from an

act of will of society, but grows out of constellations of meanings, and unfolds over generations. These constellations of meanings are meaningfully related to prevailing conceptions of the world and of humanity and, especially in a multicultural society like today's, cannot be changed through a simple call. We have to admit that we know nothing about how to deliberately elevate a culture. It is simply not the case that, for whatever reasons, people living in Europe have lost sight of the importance of a high-quality *Baukultur* and that a targeted appeal could now drag it back into focus. The fact that today many people no longer view building as a part of culture but, rather, as a technology or an investment, is related to their conceptions of the world and of humanity, and forms a meaningful whole for them. An appeal that addresses only one aspect, and not the meaningful whole, probably cannot bring about any change.

The *Davos Declaration* as a bundling of the interests of monument preservation and contemporary architecture

This bundling of efforts to both preserve valuable old buildings and provide an impulse for high-quality new buildings is nothing new, at least in Switzerland: the Swiss Heritage Society, founded in 1905, is an organisation of laypeople that championed both significant monuments and thoughtfully designed new buildings and still does so today. Under the motto "Preserve what is old,

design what is new”, the Society has achieved remarkable successes. But their story also shows that whenever the line between the two activities risked becoming blurred, the results were occasionally problematic. It must also be emphasised that the Heritage Society has always viewed itself as a lay organisation and has therefore not sought to connect monument preservation and new building interests at the technical specialist level.

Not so long ago, many architects did not have a kind word to say about monument conservation efforts. They perceived their own concerns as different, if not occasionally outright conflicting. It is utterly gratifying to see that the two professional groups are closer today than they used to be. However, we must assume that larger differences may well arise again at some point, because the two endeavours are always mutually exclusive. A fundamental difference is that the preservation and care of monuments not only raises architectural questions, it also rests on the pillar of the historical humanities. As much of monument conservation legislation emphasises, monuments are testimony to a bygone era — and thus constitute records. It is precisely this cultural and historical aspect of monuments that cannot be addressed through architectural means alone. It requires detailed historical knowledge and, also, an argumentation making reference to the philosophy of culture. A short history of monument preservation shows that architects began to look after historical ‘antiquities’ some two hundred years ago and, towards the end of the nineteenth century, art historians increasingly claimed leadership in what was now called ‘monument preservation’; then, in the twentieth century, close cooperation between the two disciplines developed. From this perspective, it is to be feared that if monument preservation were to move closer to current architectural production, this could weaken its cultural and historical dimension, which I would consider a step backwards compared to the previous interdisciplinary orientation.

The Davos Declaration as a manifesto by those who interpret building as a culture

On the occasion of an anniversary celebration of the SIA (Swiss Association of Engineers and Architects) in Aarau in 1987, the guest speaker Heinrich Ursprung made the following demand: “By no means do we want aesthetically outstanding buildings whose functional and structural properties are then optimised but, rather, functionally and structurally outstanding buildings whose aesthetic aspects can be optimised.”² He pleaded in favour of engineers assuming the leading role in construction, instead of architects as before. At the same time, there was a clearly noticeable professionalisation wave in the real estate investment sector, because the law on occupational pensions was introduced in 1985: the new, increasingly financially strong pension funds and their financial advisers started thronging the real estate market. In response to the new needs, main contractors and design-build firms appeared, who promised to meet both the original concerns and those of the pension funds in terms of precisely calculable costs and returns; they increasingly challenged the leading role of architects in construction. Since then, a bitter struggle for supremacy has raged in the construction industry.

With this in mind, it is completely understandable that architects — who view themselves as members of a cultural profession — should read the *Davos Declaration* as a confirmation of their views and welcome its backing. Their opponents, for whom construction is a matter of technology or primarily a financial investment, probably have far less use for the Declaration. It contains no description of their ways of looking at things, whilst it hardly refutes their arguments in a convincing manner. Although the document does take a clear position in the prevailing power struggle, it does not seek to understand the various parties, and even less to reconcile them. Moreover, the increasing technicization and economisation of many areas of our society are deep

trends that by no means have only taken hold of the construction industry. Naturally, building technologists and building economists feel validated by these megatrends and will probably sneer at the *Davos Declaration* as the ‘swan song’ of ‘the cultural profession’ in the construction industry.

Conclusion

Although I fully and completely agree with the depressing starting point of the *Davos Declaration*, and also perceive current European *Baukultur* to be languishing, I fail to detect the long-awaited way out of this misery in the document. I neither expect a noticeable improvement in *Baukultur* to flow from a call for more carefulness, nor from an alliance of monument preservation with high-quality new construction. I also find it extremely regrettable that many people no longer see buildings as a form of cultural expression. Admittedly, I regard the growing technicization and economisation of all areas of our life as a trend that reaches far beyond the construction industry and in the long term can hardly be stopped in sealed-off, individual specialist disciplines.

1 *Davos Declaration* 2018, p. 8–9.

2 Heinrich Ursprung, ‘Zur Dynamik der Ingenieurberufe’. Lecture at the 150th anniversary of the SIA in Aarau, in: *Schweizer Ingenieur und Architekt* 105, 26.1987, p. 806.

Comment faut-il interpréter la *Déclaration de Davos* ?

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En règle générale, les ministres tentent de mettre en œuvre leurs projets à l'aide de nouvelles lois ou de mesures incitatives. L'Office fédéral de la culture de la Suisse semble, en tant qu'initiateur de la *Déclaration de Davos*, emprunter une nouvelle voie et la proposer aux autres offices européens de la culture.

Ce texte englobe trois interprétations possibles de ce document :

- Il s'agit d'un appel à davantage de prudence dans le domaine du bâti.
- Il formule la jonction des préoccupations en matière de conservation de bâtiments historiques de valeur et du soutien en matière de nouveaux bâtiments de qualité au sein d'un mouvement commun et, partant, plus efficace.

- Elle postule la primauté de ceux pour qui l'acte de bâtir ressort du domaine culturel, et non de celui de la technique ou de l'investissement.

En ce qui concerne la première interprétation se pose la question de savoir si un déclin culturel, comme le constate la déclaration dans le domaine actuel du bâti, peut être effectivement inversé par un appel à plus de soin et de précaution. Une culture bâtie de qualité n'est pas une question de bonne volonté.

À propos de la deuxième interprétation se pose la question de savoir si un rapprochement de la sauvegarde du patrimoine et de la production de nouvelles constructions ne néglige pas les aspects de l'histoire architecturale et culturelle dans

le domaine de la sauvegarde du patrimoine. Cette dernière et la production de nouvelles constructions ne suivent pas forcément un développement parallèle, lorsqu'elles ne divergent pas profondément.

Et dans le cas de la troisième interprétation, on peut douter que ceux qui considèrent avant tout le bâti en tant que technique ou investissement financier puissent être touchés et retournés par ce document. La primauté actuelle apportée à une approche économique dans les domaines politique et sociétal ne peut pas être inversée par un tel document, si sympathique soit-il.