**ARCHITECTS' COUNCIL OF EUROPE**
**CONSEIL DES ARCHITECTES D'EUROPE**

## *ACHIEVING QUALITY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT*

*Statement presented on 4 May 2019 in Innsbruck (Austria) on the occasion of the ACE conference "How to Achieve Quality in the Built Environment: Quality assurance tools and systems"*

While there is a broad consensus on the fact that a high-quality built environment impacts positively on people's everyday lives, it can prove difficult for public authorities, project developers and built environment professionals to assess and guarantee the quality of the buildings and urban spaces they commission and design.

The intention of this Statement is to propose reflections on the concept of *quality* in the built environment and shed light on good practices for its assessment. It is meant as a contribution to the work of the future Expert Group on *High-quality Architecture and Built Environment for Everyone*, for which provision is made in the Council's Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022.

### What does *quality* mean? What are *quality places*?

Quality in the built environment is not an absolute truth that can be given in advance. It draws its meaning from the *context* and is therefore different every time. A building or urban development is not good in itself: characteristics that are considered to be qualities in one place can be drawbacks in another.

Quality is also, to a certain extent, dependent on the perception of the beholder. Stakeholders in a project (developer, designer, user, etc.) may assess the quality of a place in different ways as they do not have the same requirements of or attitudes towards the built environment and do not all attach the same value to the various features that characterise a *quality* place.

Some essential characteristics of a place can be identified as drivers of quality as they undoubtedly bring benefits – of an economic, social, environmental and cultural nature – to individuals and society. While everyone may give a greater or lesser value to these benefits, all of them should be considered when assessing the quality of a place. Essential features of a high-quality places include:

- **Aesthetics**: architectural quality has an artistic dimension; buildings and cities must be beautiful and exciting;

- **Habitability:** the place serves the purpose and achieves the functions for which it is designed. Its technical characteristics make it safe, healthy and comfortable. It is well maintained and provides a feeling of safety. At district level, it integrates harmoniously all necessary functions and services that people regularly require (homes, workplaces, shops, public services, etc.);

- **Environment friendly:** the place is designed to be low-carbon, energy-efficient and resilient to climate change throughout its life-cycle;

- **Accessibility and mobility**: the place is well-connected (public transport) and it is easy to move from one point to another - in particular using soft modes of transport (walking, cycling) - including for persons with reduced mobility. The distribution of volumes and spaces is straightforward, making the place easy to perceive by users;

- **Inclusiveness**: the place is designed for all: everyone, regardless of age, gender and ethnicity must feel welcome and have the opportunity to participate;

- **Distinctiveness and sense of place:** the place is specific, fitting the local context, and has distinctive characteristics, generating a sense of place;

- **Affordability:** there is a strong compatibility of the programme with the place and the budget of the client;

- **Integration into the surrounding environment**: the place is integrated into its built, natural and cultural environment in a harmonious and coherent manner.

The quality of a place is therefore the outcome of multiple interrelated factors. Designing quality places requires bespoke solutions, based on a careful assessment of the context and needs of the end-users, in order to optimise the economic, social, environmental and cultural values of the place. Conversely, standardised and "one-size-fits-all" solutions, single-minded approaches, and excessive focus on economic or technical aspects cannot result in qualitative outcomes.

## The multiple benefits of high-quality architecture

Designing a high-quality built environment is a creative and innovative process whose final outcome has a fundamental impact on how people perceive, function and behave. Quality makes a direct contribution to our everyday lives and should be considered as an agent of change. High-quality architecture can enrich our lives as individuals and as a society in different ways:

- **People and communities:** quality places encourage people to connect with each other and foster inclusive and cohesive societies, thus resulting in communities with a high level of interaction;

- **Culture and identity:** quality places can contribute to create and sustain a sense of place and to strengthen identities and engender civic pride;

- **Sustainable development:** quality places help to reduce our resource consumption and carbon emissions and thereby help to mitigate climate change;

- **Economic advantages:** high-quality built environments arouse interest and generate dynamics that help to attract investors, workers and visitors. By contrast, poor quality places can have detrimental impacts causing significant long-term costs;

- **Health benefits:** quality places have positive impacts on people's health and well-being and are a considerable impetus for healthier lifestyle choices. Conversely, poor quality surroundings are more likely to cause chronic stress and physical disease.

## Good practices and general principles for assessing quality in the built environment

The complexity of the concept of *quality* in the built environment, makes it difficult to assess whether quality is actually achieved. Beyond the outcomes, it is important to think about the process: quality places can only be the outcome of quality processes. The following principles should be taken into account:

- **Cross-disciplinary discussion:** quality must be discussed from different perspectives, by experts with various competences, able to build bridges and balance the various interests at stake in a project. Such an expert discussion enable an objective assessment of quality to be built; *quality* becomes a shared value and the project gains legitimacy in the long term;

- **Political involvement:** politicians, as representatives of public authority, have a great responsibility for the planning of cities. It is important that politicians, both at State and city levels, commit to creating conditions for well-functioning cities and communities of great architectural quality, with a focus on good living conditions;

- **Citizen's participation:** consultation with end-users, to understand their needs, is decisive. Only by putting people at the heart of the design process, can we create quality places in the long term;

- **Place-based approach:** it is essential to take into account the specificities of a place, including the overall context and history;

- **Holistic approach**: quality requires an approach that considers all impacts – societal, environmental, cultural and economic. All decisions should prioritise social, environmental and cultural values over short-term economic gain;

- **Flexibility with respect to regulatory framework:** planning and building regulations provide a minimum baseline: they guarantee that technical standards are met but are insufficient to ensure quality, which is specific to a place, functions and end-user's needs. If applied in a strict manner, planning and building regulations may prevent creative solutions from emerging. Flexibility and the

possibility to experiment need to be engrained in planning and local government bodies to enable them to follow the dynamics of contemporary culture;

- **A 'living' attitude vis-à-vis the built environment:** the nature of a city cannot be taken as an image. A living attitude is necessary; an attitude that considers our built environment as a man-made landscape that can be re-worked and re-modeled, starting out from the social, cultural, environmental and economic needs of our time; an attitude that considers collisions as opportunities and allows juxtapositions and hybrid approaches to questions not previously asked. The re-use of the existing built environment must be fostered.

- **Diversity of use and functions**: The built environment should reflect the diversity of the European city regarding the social and cultural mix of the inhabitants, as well as the diversity of uses and functions of buildings and urban areas that need to adapt to the changing social and economic conditions of our times.

Architectural policies, Advisory Committees, Architectural Design Competitions and Architecture Prizes are good practices to put these principles into practice and promote high-quality architecture:

- **National laws and policies** are essential to set out the ambition, key principles and actions a government intends to take to encourage improvements in the quality of the built environment;

- **Advisory Committees** are platforms established at local/regional/ levels to lead the reflection on urban issues. They provide advices in the areas of architecture, city planning, urban developments, as well as technical know-how and assistance for the conception of new projects or renovation of existing buildings and their integration in the urban environment;

- **Architectural Design Competitions (ADCs)** are a quality-based and project-oriented selection procedure, which enable a contracting authority to acquire a plan or design selected by a jury. Providing they are properly remunerated, ADCs are a source for innovative, economic and sustainable solutions and make it possible to benefit from the extensive know-how available in the market[1];

- **Architecture and Clients Prizes** are important tools for highlighting good practices and promoting innovative and high-quality architecture towards professionals of the built environment, policy-makers and citizens.

Signed on 4 May 2019 in Innsbruck
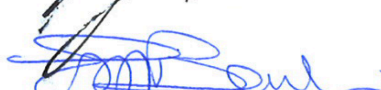
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Joao Ferreira BENTO
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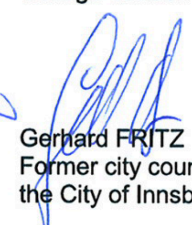Planning, University
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[1] See the ACE recommendations for the organisation of Architectural Design Contests: https://www.ace-cae.eu/fileadmin/New_Upload/5._Policies/UPDATED_Policy_2017/GA2-17/EN/6.1.1_GA2_17_Compet-Rules.pdf