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# Hardt-Waltherr Hämer: The Cautious City

(Tuesday, 20 March 2007) - Contributed by Mark Reede, Ellen Weerman, Simon Maas, Hans Karssenbergh

What is the future of cities? Why is it important to invest into cities? What changes should we make in our investment policies in cities? Twelve leading European thinkers about cities answer these three questions. This week: Hardt-Waltherr Hämer: The Cautious City. Hardt-Waltherr Hämer can rightly be called the spiritual father of German urban regeneration. Together with his working group and others, he developed the twelve principles for cautious urban renewal for the renovation component of the International Bauausstellung (IBA) in Kreuzberg. These principles are still in official use. It all started in Berlin, where he was known as the Roaring Lion. "I never wanted to roar, I had to; if you don't, people destroy everything without noticing";

"In the 1970s, West Berlin was a disaster," explains Hämer. "The urban development of the city, with what we now call tabula rasa cleansing, was almost completely in the hands of project developers, the public and private housing associations of West-Berlin. There were particularly large-scale renewal operations in progress in Kreuzberg and Charlottenburg. The typical Berlin Mitzkasernen (deep residential complexes built around courtyards) were being demolished one by one. More than 100,000 people were forced to leave their homes. That wasn't my idea of urban renewal. I'm in favour of renovating buildings and getting residents and the business community involved in the this process";

## A change of course

"A pilot project in Charlottenburg brought about a shift in the policy," continues Hämer. "We were given the opportunity to renew 400 residential units in 'Block 118'. During the process, we worked closely with the residents. We carried out a study showing that renewal was in fact cheaper than demolition and rebuilding. The project became a source of inspiration for a completely different approach to large-scale renewal. "This was the first project of its kind and visitors from Kreuzberg thought it was just the model they needed. The parallel study turned out to be important because it provided a detailed description of the approach that took the residents into consideration and, as I said, it also made clear that renewal was cheaper and that rents remained low";

In 1971, Hämer joined the Institut für Wohnen und Umwelt (Institute for living and the environment) in Darmstadt, Hessen. He took a number of experienced people from the project "Putbusser Straße (Berlin-Wedding)" with him. They worked towards the adoption of the new approach by this influential German knowledge centre. The exchange resulted in new insights. In addition, Hämer was given the time and opportunity to elaborate the theories based on the practical approach in Berlin.

## The IBA Alt: from pilot project to movement

In 1979, Hämer was asked to work for the foundation board of the International Bauausstellung Alt (IBA Alt) in Berlin. Professor Kleihues was to be responsible for the organisation of the IBA Neu. IBA Neu concentrated on new, as yet unbuilt, residential areas and IBA Alt focused on the renewal of old city areas. Hämer sees IBA Alt as the birthplace of cautious urban renewal. "It was the first time that urban renewal followed the residents and old urban patterns instead of driving the people out and destroying the old urban patterns. From that point onwards, there was to be dialogue between new and old. After the IBA Alt, this approach became policy in the whole of West Berlin and then in East Germany. We developed the twelve principles for cautious urban renewal for the IBA Alt";

## Cautious urban renewal

The principles elaborated by Hämer and his working group were used in Berlin for eight years. They were gradually integrated into the more general approach and became the official strategy adopted by the Lower House. The next step was taken with the drafting of the Stadtvertrag (City Convention) for Berlin in 1992, which granted an important position to the principles. The City Convention was compiled by Krista Tebbe, Erhart Pfothner, Bruno Flierl, Hardt-Waltherr Hämer and Peter Zlonicky. Hämer explains why: "After the Wende, the thinking in Berlin was that the city would expand considerably. The expectation was that Berlin would grow from 3.5 million to 5 million inhabitants again; Berlin would have become the capital of the world. Things turned out differently, but at that time everyone was determined to establish proper control for urban development";

## The poor always suffer most

Poor people in the cities have no resources. They are weak in social terms and Hämer believes they are the ones who suffer most. "The poor will always be the victims of good intentions. Why don't we listen to them to find out what they want? What matters is to activate the social potential in an area and to help the residents to find solutions, not to solve the problems for them. Block 118, for example, was fitted out with new gas pipes and wiring. The residents had to be rehoused temporarily. Die Neue Heimat, the housing corporation, always moved people to expensive lodgings. We wondered how much it would cost to fly everyone to Majorca for the same length of time. It would have been cheaper. Die Neue Heimat heard what we were doing and ordered us to stop. That's the difference: we were looking at things from the point of view of people's daily lives";

## Ghost towns

What would happen if we stopped investing in cities altogether? What ghost towns would result? East Germany has wonderful cities, but they are empty and are being demolished. An extreme example is Eisenhüttenstadt. It was built

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around a steel factory that now employs far fewer people, and so the people have moved out. Hämer believes that developments like this have a major cultural impact. "In cities, everything is about negotiation and exchanges. More and more companies are interested only in profits. They descend on cities like locusts and destroy the culture, the daily contacts between people. Don't get me wrong: profit is not a dirty word; it's quick profits I don't like. Quick profits are fatal for city culture."

Think!  
"We can't compete with the economic growth of Asian cities," he argues. "Our opportunities are to be found in development, culture and in our intelligence. It would be a historical mistake not to use these assets. Western countries can only survive if they use their intelligence."

A hopeful example for the future  
"We can only prevent the destruction of culture by taking concrete action," he concludes. "I can quote one hopeful example for the future development of cities. The student village of Schlachtensee was built after the war in a very rich area of West Berlin with financial support from the Americans. The village had been built with cheap materials and the city administration decided to demolish it. There was a lot of money to be earned by building something else. The fact that the village was listed as having historical value was brushed aside.

"But the students got organised. And an influential protest movement was the result. The student village is now being renovated. The protest movement was the start of something good; as soon as there are protests, there is hope. We would be wrong not to put up opposition."

Hardt-Waltherr Hämer is a German architect and urban planner. In the 1980s, he was one of the founders of the *Behutsame Stadserneuerung* (Cautious Urban Renewal) movement in Berlin. It all started with "Block 118" in Charlottenburg, growing into a major success as a result of the Internationale Bauausstellung (IBA) in Kreuzberg, for which the 12 principles for cautious urban renewal were drawn up. Mr. Hämer is now 84. He is still publishing and is working on more building projects in Germany.

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This interview is part of a series of twelve, made by Mark Reede, Ellen Weerman, Simon Maas of ReUrbA and Hans Karsenberg of Stipo. They interviewed ten leading European thinkers about cities to be able to write the Statement for Strong Cities, that was presented to the closing conference of ReUrbA and to Danuta Huebner, the EU commissioner for Regional Policy.

#### Downloads / links

- > ErasmusPC article on ReUrbA's Statement for Strong Cities
- > Download this interview as PDF
- > The ErasmusPC article on the 12 Principles for Cautious Urban Renewal
- > View the compilation of quotes from the interviews on film.
- > View EU commissioner Danuta Huebner's welcoming response to the Statement for Strong Cities on film