

ACE POLICY POSITION ON THE COMMUNICATION OF THE EU COMMISSION RELATING TO NEW EUROPEAN BAUHAUS

BACKGROUND

On 15 September 2021, the EU Commission adopted a Communication on the *New European Bauhaus*¹. This Communication sets out the framework, core principles and key actions that will drive the New European Bauhaus forward, as it moves from co-design to delivery. It is inspired by the input received during the co-design phase that ran from January to July where the Commission received over 2000 contributions from all over Europe and beyond. The present paper constitutes the ACE views on the Commission's Communication and how the NEB initiative has been developed since its launch.

HIGHLIGHTS

The ACE enthusiastically welcomes the New European Bauhaus (NEB), considering that, with this initiative, the European Commission brings an essential *cultural dimension* to the Green Deal. By making the Green Deal a *cultural project*, and by including architectural quality and design quality as key principles to steer the Renovation Wave, the Commission has initiated a fundamental shift that can be a game-changer for the transition to a more beautiful, sustainable and inclusive built environment.

The *holistic* and *cultural* approach that underpins the NEB can be a driving force for *quality planning processes* and thereby *quality projects*. If we really want to transform our built environment to make it more beautiful, sustainable and inclusive, this approach should lie at the heart of all the EU policies that have an impact on the built environment – starting with all initiatives flowing from the Renovation Wave strategy, the Circular Economy Action Plan and included in the Fit for 55 package.

ACE POLICY POSITION

1/ THE SHAPE OF THE NEB – Core values, principles and thematic axes

The ACE welcomes the preliminary co-design process that nurtured the NEB concept as it is presented in the Commission's Communication. Overall, ACE considers that the core values, key principles and thematic axes retained by the Commission are appropriate to drive the NEB initiative.

ACE generally recommends that future developments and implementation of the NEB take into account and inspire from the Council conclusions *on culture, high-quality architecture and built environment as key elements of the New European Bauhaus initiative*² and the report *Towards a shared culture of Architecture* produced by the Council's OMC Group³.

- **CORE VALUES: Aesthetics, Sustainability, Inclusion**

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2021%3A573%3AFIN&qid=1631781368249>

² <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14534-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

³ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/bd7cba7e-2680-11ec-bd8e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

The NEB core values strongly resonate with the concept of *quality* as developed by the *Davos Quality System*⁴. As far as the built environment is concerned, and considering the life-cycle of projects, two stages are of crucial importance as they have far-reaching consequences on the final quality of the built project – it is essential for the NEB core values to be reflected at these stages:

- **Public Procurement:** the choice of the procurement procedure by the client, whether private or public, has a strong impact on the final quality of the outcome. A beautiful, sustainable and inclusive built environment requires a suitable legal framework for public procurement that favors quality over price.
- **The planning and development brief:** Architectural skills and competencies can add value to the concepts and feasibility studies of any planned environmental development prior to committing and engaging the full spectrum of resources; therefore, there should be a provision for the timely and adequate engagement of architectural expertise at the early, pre-development stage of projects, including the design reviews and design brief developments.
- **The architectural project:** the architectural project makes things tangible and constitutes the right moment for bringing together all project stakeholders to agree on the best strategies to optimise and balance the often intertwined and conflicting factors driving aesthetics, sustainability and inclusion. If high-quality architecture can create significant values, conversely, ill-conceived places can cause considerable costs and harm sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion, both in the short term and for future generations.
- **Post-occupancy evaluation:** Architectural skills and competencies, coupled with the public function of the balanced and controlled environmental development can add value and contribute to monitoring, evaluating, remedying, innovating and developing new solutions and recommendations with a significant impact on the quality of the built environment, as well on the necessary and adequate adaptation of practices, training and education of built environment professionals. Therefore, the public building control function related to the interventions and new buildings needs to make a structural and procedural provision for such processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

⇒ **A high-quality built environment can only be the outcome of quality processes.** NEB core values should be clearly reflected in the EU Public Procurement Directive and the reform of the EU Public Procurement Directive should be at the core of the NEB. A cultural project cannot be procured like the purchase of bricks and needs therefore a special treatment in the procurement process. There is a need for intellectual services to be treated differently in the Directive. Public procurers must act as a spearhead of quality. More information: read the [Statement of the New European Bauhaus Collective on Public Procurement](#).

The ACE particularly recommends Architectural Design Competitions (ADCs) for commissioning architectural services. ADCs are quality-based and project-oriented

⁴ <https://davosdeclaration2018.ch/quality-system/>

selection procedure. They are a source for innovative, economic and sustainable solutions and make it possible to benefit from the extensive know-how available in the market. More information: read the [ACE-UIA Statement “ADCs: A key policy tool to ensure quality in the built environment”](#).

⇒ **A high-quality built environment is the result of the work of skilled professionals – in the construction sector but also upstream, throughout the administrative and policy decision-making process.** Europe needs highly competent professionals to support the transition to a sustainable, inclusive and beautiful built environment. We need to create a generation of professionals, civil servants and decision-makers that adhere to NEB core values. Innovative education and training models for architects and other professionals are necessary, notably to promote greater synergies between arts, architecture, landscape and interior architecture, spatial planning, design and craftsmanship. Acquisition of skills and competences and knowledge transfer occur at different levels and through various structures:

- School is the place of education of the youngsters on the importance of a high-quality built environment. There are professional organisations highly dedicated to the topic “Architecture and Schools” eg. Finland, Italy, Germany ([Stiftung Baukultur](#)). Educating and empowering children and young people in a participatory way to understand, experience and embrace sustainability and inclusion will create strong connections to nature for the future generation;
- Universities play a key role in shaping the future generation of professionals;
- Continuous Professional Development (CPD): Professional organisations at national level offer or organise CPD programmes and are therefore key partners for the upskilling of professionals.

⇒ **A high-quality built environment requires flexibility with respect to the regulatory framework.** Planning and building regulations provide a minimum baseline: they guarantee that technical standards are met but are insufficient to ensure quality outcomes in line with NEB core values. If applied in a strict manner, planning and building regulations may even prevent creative solutions from emerging and undermine the quality of projects. Flexibility and the possibility to experiment need to be engrained in planning and local government bodies.

⇒ **A high-quality built environment requires financing schemes that favour quality in the long term.** In this regard, Taxonomy will be a key driver of the transformation of our built environment and will create opportunities for sustainable architectural design. Taxonomy rules should reflect NEB core values.

▪ **KEY PRINCIPLES: a multilevel, participatory and transdisciplinary approach**

The ACE considers that the three key principles taken up by the Commission are very much appropriate and echo architects’ daily work:

Multi-level approach

While all governance levels have a role to play, ACE considers the role of local public authorities to be of utmost importance. The local level is the one where challenges become tangible, where collaborations among stakeholders are developed and where solutions can be

found with citizens. Local Authorities have key responsibilities for urban and architectural policies – they should play a key role in advancing the implementation of the NEB.

The role of the EU is also very important: it sets a political vision and a regulatory framework that impact all sub-governance levels, it provides funding that orientate the markets, and it is best placed to organise the sharing of experiences and transfer of knowledge across the EU.

Participatory approach

From its very beginning, the NEB has been a co-creation process, and it should continue to be so for the implementation of actions on the ground. By putting people at the heart of the design process, citizens are empowered to participate in the creation and regeneration of the urban fabric. Debates among citizens, professionals and public authorities boost social interaction and society's responsibility for the built environment. They help decision-makers to understand communities' needs and thus to achieve socially and economically sustainable projects.

Transdisciplinary

The responsibility for re-imagining our building stock is shared by many stakeholders. Multidisciplinary teams are needed, working in a collaborative manner from the very beginning of projects, in order to discuss technical, economical and legal possibilities and resolve possible contradictory interests. Such an expert discussion enables an objective assessment of quality to be built. Quality becomes a shared value and the project gains legitimacy in the long term.

RECOMMENDATIONS

⇒ **Thousands of excellent practices exist across Europe – the NEB should build on and give visibility to these.** The ACE encourages the development of knowledge transfer and peer-learning actions aimed at helping local authorities and professionals of the built environment to learn from each other. The Cultural Heritage in Action project⁵ – a peer learning scheme on cultural heritage for cities and regions, co-funded by Creative Europe – is a good example of such a peer-learning programme.

⇒ **Support and funding schemes should primarily benefit small-scales grassroots initiatives having a strong co-design dimension.** Grass-roots initiatives can have a major effect on the living environment because they consolidate the community's efforts and attention, while being strongly rooted in the local culture. In this context it is extremely important to go further and provide easy access to funding opportunities and special financing measures to those without the means to apply for fundings. Reaching this target requires close cooperation between the EU Member States, the European Commission, chambers of commerce and of the professions, education institutions and other relevant interest groups.

⇒ Many citizens, public authorities, researchers and professionals are still unaware of the NEB. To ensure a real participatory movement, **a strong awareness raising communication campaign about the NEB is necessary**, in order to spark interest and get a large number of stakeholders involved.

⁵ <https://culturalheritageinaction.eu>

⇒ A participatory process requires informed citizens. Education nurtures aspirations for quality in the built environment and the appreciation of communities to the importance of their surroundings. **It is of great importance to stimulate knowledge, understanding and appreciation of high-quality architecture and built environment** and its benefits to people's lives. Creating "*a shared culture of architecture*" requires raising awareness, disseminating information and promoting the role of high-quality architecture and built environment. Existing entities already engaged in this field, such as local architecture centres, should be further supported in their missions.

▪ THE THEMATIC AXES

The ACE shares the Commission's analysis with regard to the four thematic axes identified. Some comments:

The construction and building sectors operate largely within a linear economy model of "take, make and waste", assuming that resources are abundant and that we can dispose of them without consequences. There is an urgent need to develop more regenerative economic models, which allow resources to flow in a *circular* way within the economy for as long as possible. Developing circular economy principles in the built environment is fundamentally about changing the way we design our buildings to ensure that they can be easily operated, maintained, repaired, re-used or adapted to new needs. More information: read the [ACE Statement Designing for a Circular Economy](#).

Current legislation focuses almost exclusively on the energy consumed by buildings. However, around 10% of energy-related GHG emissions are attributable to embodied carbon, which is caused by the manufacturing of construction materials, their transportation and the whole building process. This embodied carbon is almost entirely unregulated, so that cheap construction materials with high embodied energy transported over long distances can be considered as the best options. A deeper evaluation of the full environmental impacts of buildings over their life cycle, taking into account both *operational* and *embodied* carbon, is necessary. More transparency on the carbon embodied in construction materials could help professionals and clients to decide on the adequate materials to be used. More information: read the [ACE key messages in the area of building performance and sustainability](#).

ACE fully agrees that "*there is a need to go beyond a human-centred to a life-centred perspective, getting inspired by nature and learning from it*". Notably, this should require the creation of the business case for bio-sourced materials. In some EU countries, it is not legal to build with earth, even though it has long been part of the regional building culture. The costs of materials need to reflect the effect they have on the environment and society. If building with natural materials remains more expensive than building with materials that have high levels of embodied energy, truly sustainable buildings will not be affordable for the majority of people. ACE warns against "one-size-fits-all" approach. Local and regional craftsmanship, materials, and construction techniques must be taken into consideration. Genius loci varies with climate, culture, traditions, urban rural areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

⇒ **A deeper evaluation of the full environmental impacts of buildings over their life cycle, taking into account both *operational* and *embodied* carbon, is necessary.** This would create the business case for prioritising lifecycle extension over demolition and would foster the use of local and bio-sourced materials. The costs of materials need to reflect their real impact on the environment and society.

⇒ **Efforts to promote the Level(s) framework towards professionals should be pursued.** It offers a common set of indicators to measure the environmental performance of buildings across their whole life cycle and can thereby support such a move towards a whole life carbon approach.

⇒ **While demolition can be the best option in specific cases, building conservation and retrofit should always be envisaged as a preferred option.** It is crucial to renovate and extend the life of existing buildings instead of demolishing them and building new ones, to improve their performance and quality, save the carbon they embody and avoid generation of waste. Feasibility studies should always be conducted to thoroughly explore the potential for renovation.

⇒ **The transition to a truly sustainable built environment requires us to produce and mainstream the use of the local and low carbon construction materials** – the upcoming revision of the EU Construction Products Regulation (CPR) and the modernisation of the current standardisation system will be key.

⇒ **Public and private pilot projects of high aesthetic and environment value need seed funding to improve the image of locally produced bio-sourced and geo-sourced materials, particularly earth.** At the same time these pilot projects could function as built experiments to test new technologies and gather data on the performance of natural building materials, as well as in relation to building physics, energy efficiency and well-being.

⇒ **Priority should be given to simple, passive, low-tech, locally tested solutions that do not consume energy and are less prone to human error.** Smart technical systems are often regarded as a panacea for better performing buildings. Without denying their benefits, there is ample evidence that these systems might have unintended consequences, including higher than expected energy consumption, due to the complexity of their installation, operation and maintenance.

⇒ **The ACE underlines further important issues that should not be overlooked, as identified during the conference organised in April 2021 by the New European Bauhaus Collective⁶:**

- *Craftmanship*: craftmanship must become affordable again, especially in relation to transport costs. It cannot remain cheaper to buy new objects transported all over the world, instead of working with local craftsmen for production and repair.
- *Mobility*
- *Enhancement of biodiversity* in urban and rural areas
- *Depopulated areas*: what is the future for rural territories and communities?

⁶ Conference report available at: https://www.ace-cae.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/NEB_report_v3.pdf

2/ DELIVERING THE NEB

▪ MOBILISATION OF EXISTING POLICIES AND FUNDING PROGRAMMES

The ACE supports the Commission's approach to use existing EU initiatives and funding programmes to support the implementation of the New European Bauhaus.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ⇒ Access to EU funding programmes can prove to be extremely difficult for a vast majority of architectural firms which are micro / small enterprises, as well as for many stakeholders of the construction sector and cultural and creative sectors (eligibility requirements, complexity of the procedures, etc.) and grassroots associations. A large-scale participatory process, mobilising operators from these sectors, will require new funding models and procedures, tailored to their profiles and ways of working.
- ⇒ ACE considers that the NEB core values and principles should be mainstreamed as quality criteria for EU funding programmes with a direct or indirect impact on the built environment, urban and rural development, cultural heritage and cultural landscapes.
- ⇒ NEB is currently supported via existing funding programmes (Horizon, Creative Europe, etc.). ACE considers that a dedicated funding programme is necessary to secure the initiative on the long term.

▪ NEW SPECIFIC AND DEDICATED ACTIONS

The ACE welcomes the specific and dedicated actions proposed by the EU Commission to deliver the New European Bauhaus.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ⇒ The ACE calls for genuine synergies between the NEB movement and future legislative developments relating to the Green Deal, and more generally all legislative developments having a direct or indirect impact on the built environment and professionals therein. The NEB should contribute to the formulation of concrete proposals for improving the EU regulatory framework, so it can become more supportive of NEB ambitions.

NEB Lab

- ⇒ ACE welcomes the concept of NEB Lab, which **continues and deepens the participatory approach of the co-design process**. However, its detailed rules of operation are not yet known.
- ⇒ The ACE welcomes the fact that **regulatory analysis and experimentation are a priority of the NEB Lab**:
 - As already explained above, beautiful, sustainable and inclusive solutions for the built environment largely depend on ensuring a suitable legal framework for

public procurement. The revision of the Public Procurement Directive should therefore be at the core of the Lab.

- The EU regulatory framework relating to building performance and sustainability are also of utmost importance and should also be considered in the Lab: the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive; the Construction Products Regulation; the Whole Life Carbon Roadmap; the Circular Economy Action Plan; the Renovation Wave Strategy, to name but a few. The EU regulatory framework impacting on the built environment should duly reflect NEB core values.

NEB Prize

⇒ ACE very much welcomes the NEB Prize and encourages the Commission to continue to organise the Prize on a yearly basis. It helps to make the NEB visible to the general public and building professionals and put excellent and innovative projects and practices under the spotlight.

NEB Festival

⇒ ACE very much welcomes the NEB Festival as an excellent opportunity to mobilise the NEB community and make the NEB visible to general public. In future, it should become a yearly event with side events organised all over Europe. NEB should also be featured during other yearly EU events: EU Green Week, EU Sustainable Energy Week, EU Week of Regions and Cities, etc.

Label / Seal of Excellence

⇒ ACE notes the intention of the Commission to create a Seal of Excellence that would prefigure a NEB Label. ACE warns that it is particularly difficult to define criteria for certain quality aspects, in particular aesthetic. ACE recalls that other labels already exist. If a NEB Label should be developed, relevant institutions (professional organisations, green building councils) should be consulted.

National contact points

⇒ ACE welcomes the establishment of NEB national contact points. These contact points should work closely with civil society organisations, including national professional organisations which can act as partners for concrete actions and relays of information towards individual professionals.

Commissions building strategy

⇒ ACE welcomes the Commission's strategy to integrate the New European Bauhaus in the development of its presence and actions in the places where its services are established. All public authorities should lead by example likewise.

ANNEXES

Links:

- [Communication on the New European Bauhaus in all EU languages](#), including
 - o Annex 1: Report on the co-design phase
 - o Annex 2: Mobilising EU programmes
 - o Annex 3: The New European Bauhaus policy ecosystem

- [Press release](#)