

REVITALIZE THE LOCAL

The harmony of what supports life, what promotes life



Photo (of a rice field in the middle of a residential area in Japan)

As an urban planner, Ekhart Hahn has conceived and accompanied many innovative urban development projects, including an ecovillage project in Japan and the Wünsdorf project near Berlin, which is currently being planned. For him, the future of our living spaces lies in decentralized structures that combine city and countryside, change of consciousness and human coexistence.

evolve: You have planned and accompanied many urban development projects over the past decades. What is your basic intention in your work with these project designs?

Ekhart Hahn: Actually, all projects are about us living in a time that is characterized on the one hand by globalization in terms of mobility, information, communication, transfer of know-how and knowledge. On the other hand, we are experiencing a renaissance of the local, which also opens up healing possibilities for the problems and wounds in the relationship between man and nature, which have developed since industrialization, and in the relationship between people. This local dimension also promotes the need for communication and participation, thus strengthening civil society at the local level. Many aspects of the ten-thousand-year-old history of the urban have also been brought to bear here. For about ten thousand years there have been urban structures that have always been determined by this dominance of the local. In order to survive, one had to live in harmony with nature and this was of course also reflected on the spiritual level and in the organization of society. There had to be sustainability, harmony. With industrialization, people believed they no longer depended on it. In the meantime, however, we have discovered that this exploitative behaviour is not viable for the future. Today we live in a time when the same principles that have been valid for thousands of years have to be expressed in a new form, on a new level of science and technology.

Beauty and Harmony

e: Generally speaking, cities have both a natural and a cultural-historical environment. Every city and every place finds its way to itself and thus to its role as a way of life in interaction with its immediate ecological and global historical environment. Is that one aspect of your idea of urban development?

EH: In the ten thousand year history of urban cultures, the locations of human habitats and cities have been determined very precisely. In all cultures there are such traditions as Chinese Feng Shui, in our culture we call it geomancy. Feng Shui and geomancy describe laws of harmony and harmonious relationships between man and nature, between habitats and the handling of natural resources. This harmony, which also shows itself as beauty, plays a very central role. The question of the beauty of a room, a building or a city played a subordinate role in modernism. This is how we experience our cities today, and these cities have an effect back on the people who live in these cities. One can say that we experience a strong neglect of sensory qualities, such as the quality of the sounds - it is something completely different whether I hear engine noise or bird twittering and leaf rustling. The same applies to the odours or the sensual aesthetics of vision. In all areas where we perceive our environment, a strong brutalization has taken place, but this also affects our ability to recognize life-promoting and life-destroying processes. Therefore, a law of ecological urban development is this principle of beauty and harmony, in which things are brought back into a harmonious and thus sustainable relationship. This extends from our balconies to the buildings, from the home gardens to parks and neighbourhood developments.

Decentralized structures

e: You were also involved in several neighbourhood projects in Berlin, for example at Moritzplatz in the early 1980s. How can such an

approach be demonstrated in a neighbourhood concept in a large city like Berlin?

EH: In the 1970s and 1980s I developed the theory and action concept for ecological urban development. On the one hand, this involves a sustainable reorganization of the relationship between town and countryside, but above all a new ecological neighbourhood (residential areas) development. I also carried out my first practical model projects on both topics during this time. The latter included the neighbourhood project you mentioned at Moritzplatz. Even then, as part of my research, I had already argued that ecological urban redevelopment would increasingly lead to decentralised and cellular structures and that the neighbourhoods with the people affected would play a key role here. The guiding principle was: "The first ecological law is the inhabitants (people living there) " - they are the yardstick, the criterion for the reorganisation of the relationship between human being and environment in ecological urban development. For our cities today, I coined the term tankship society and I see a development towards a new sailing ship society. There too, the crew, the people, play a key role and so it will be in the cities again in the future. Our cities today are fossil cities, i.e. the energy is obtained from fossil sources. Oil and gas are brought here from the Middle East or anywhere in the world by large tankers, whereas cities used to rely on sustainable renewable local energy.

Today we are in the transition to a new solar age. In future, we will not need either the tankers or the fossil raw materials, because we can generate our energy directly anywhere in the cities, via photovoltaics or geothermal energy. The same applies to water. We have huge water and sewage treatment plants, which determine our water and sewage circuits in

the cities. But we can make it much smaller. We can use rainwater, recycle water and solve a lot on a decentralised basis at neighbourhood level. This trend is also evident in urban gardens, where we work decentrally with plants, with the soil, with nature to produce food in the city.

All these cycles, centralised by industrialisation, which have alienated man and nature from each other, and the resources we need for our lives are placed in a completely new relationship at the neighbourhood level. Many of the ideas for new mobility, such as a city of short distances, bicycle and pedestrian zones, also refer to the level of the neighbourhoods. In addition, the social dimension is gaining a whole new significance locally. In this context, there is also a trend towards a new local economy. These decentralized systems are operated and managed very differently from today's central systems. This enables new added value and meaningful work in the neighbourhoods.

I am, of course, idealising this somewhat in order to make it clear in which direction it is heading. But all over the world we observe these trends and see projects that consistently pursue such paths, these are pilot projects, models and fields of experimentation that go very far. But we can also see it in Berlin, in the new "Kiez culture", with small shops and local products. (Translator's note: Wikipedia: [Kiez](#) is a German word that refers to a city neighbourhood, a relatively small community within a larger town. The word is mainly used in Berlin.)

Blossoming/prosper together

e: You also work as a consultant with the "As-One Community" project in Japan. What are your experiences in this work?

EH: (Translator's note: I assume Dr. Hahn here means the Yamagishi Villages when he refers to the "ecovillage movement".) The ecovillage movement in Japan began in the 1950s. Gradually, in the 1970s, a network of 34 eco-villages was established, spread throughout the country and cooperating closely with each other. I first got to know these eco-villages in 2005 and in the following nine years I had the opportunity to get to know many of these village communities. The special feature of these eco-villages is their "blossoming/prospering together". This means that people, animals and nature come together to form a new community where they blossom/prosper together. Good eggs and good meat only come from happy chickens. Only happy chickens produce good compost and only good compost produces a good harvest that achieves a special quality and defies adverse weather. This makes the animals, the plants, the soil and also the people feel good/comfortable. These communities came to the principle of freeing themselves from money and work in order to create optimal conditions for people's happiness and satisfaction. Social security must be possible independently of gainful/paid employment. They founded a community economy in and between the villages, which functions without money; the money economy exists only outwardly. They are doing economically well because their high-quality products are well known throughout Japan.

Photos:



- Ecohouse in Berlin-Tiergarten, Cornelius Street under construction and finished. 1984– 1990.



- Princess Garden at Moritzplatz, Berlin-Kreuzberg. © Marco Clausen.



- Eco-quarter in Tokyo in 2015.

The communities go one step further by sharing everything and there is hardly any private property. It is unique to practice this consistently and, above all, successfully over a period of almost 50 years. About 3,000 people live in these villages. In addition, there is a circle of about 30,000 sympathizers who have organized themselves as a kind of supporting association.

In 2010

(Translator's note: I think he means 2000 and not 2010), a group left these village communities and started an urban experiment in the city of Suzuka. The approx. 100 members all come from the eco-villages and bring with them the many years of experience of this community. The biggest experiment they have undertaken is to bring these experiences to the city and at least partly to network with the local population and to test them in various experiments: What does a sustainable society of the future look like?

I am fortunate to be in close contact with them and to be invited annually to accompany the progress of the experiment. This concerns the social, environmental and economic dimensions. Of course, they continue to put people first. This is different from the ecology movement here (in Germany), which usually begins more technically and on the material level of nature..

When people are in peace with themselves and with each other, they can be in peace with nature; so the principle of blossoming/prospering together is also in the foreground here in the urban experiment. They built up such a community in a district in Suzuka that has no money and shares everything with each other. The difference is that the 52 families do not live together, but are spread all over the neighbourhood. They manage their own economy and have created their own companies with sufficient jobs not only for their own members but also for external employees.

- I THINK THE FUTURE OF THE CITIES WILL BE THE NEIGHBORHOODS (residential areas, quarters). -

- ONE OF THE LAWS OF AN ECOLOGICAL TOWN BUILDING IS THE PRINCIPLE OF BEAUTY AND HARMONY. -

A social basis for this community that shares its property and has no money economy is a method called Kensan. It's a kind of training, a training of new thinking. Kensan means drilling; you drill until you get to the core of a problem or conflict and it dissolves as a result. Once the community invited me to a one-week Kensan seminar. An example on the topic of possession was that in the seminar we were asked to place our luggage in front of us to answer the question "Who does this bag belong to? This question was asked a full day, twelve hours. It was a big challenge because we reached a stage where we got angry, because we thought we had said everything we

thought about it. But after these twelve hours, the relationship to property changed and to whom a pair of underpants or a shirt belongs. We experienced this discussion once and under seminar conditions, in the village communities it is in many ways part of daily life. This question is asked again and again and forms the basis for a new way of thinking towards one's own biography, the environment and other people, animals, plants. In this Kensan seminar I understood how such a community can function and develop successfully over such a long period of time. In the urban context of the As One Community in Suzuka, the Kensan method was further developed under the term "Scienz" (Scientific Investigation of Essential Nature + Zero) and is now the basis of various similar initiatives in other Japanese cities.

Photos:



- After work in the pigsty: tea ceremony in the eco-village Toyosato.



- Bento Lunchbox Factory in the As One Community Suzuka (60 employees).



- Welcome-Diner for Ekhart Hahn at the As-One-Community. The food comes from their own production.

Connecting urban and rural

e: What other forward-looking/trendsetting ideas in terms of ecological urban development have you experienced in Japan?

EH: Since I was invited by the JSPS (Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science) to Japan for half a year in 1998, I have been in Japan for several weeks almost every year, giving lectures and seminars on the topic of ecological urban development at various universities and to organisations which deal with this topic. In this way I have a fairly good overview of developments on this subject in Japan. However, my greatest interest is still in traditional Japanese culture. I think it is one of the most ecologically mature/well-developed of all - from which we can still learn a great deal today. This is why it also plays an important role in my teaching on ecological urban development. Japan has always been a very densely populated country. There are few settleable areas and limited resources. Both

have always had to be dealt with in an extremely sustainable way in order to secure one's own life and that of future generations. It starts with the way they construct buildings, how they deal with tea and how they deal with flowers. The forest in Japan also belongs to this cycle. The ecosystem of the forest is called Satoyama. This is an ancient tradition in Japan, because the forest with its fruits and ecosystems is important for villages and towns. Like many other ecological traditions, the Satoyama system of the forest has almost completely lost its importance in modern times.

I find the As-One community in Suzuka so interesting because in many respects it continues and rethinks this tradition under current and post-industrial conditions. This also applies to the Satoyama system. Not only do they incorporate a new type of urban agriculture with the entire food chain into their ecosystem, but they also extend it to traditional forestry. Here too, the Community is trying to overcome the urban-rural divide, which I believe will be part of a new, holistic urban and rural design.



PROF. DR. EKHART HAHN is one of the pioneers of ecological urban development and urban redevelopment. Since 1975, these topics have been at the centre of his professional activities. He teaches at various universities in Germany and abroad. His latest project is "Wünsdorf 3000- Campusstadt. Eco-city. City of Peace". www.ekhart-hahn.de; www.icec-wuensdorf.org.