

## **Cultural heritage and improving the quality of urban life**

The face of cities is changing at an unprecedented rate: around the world, cities are characterized by rapid growth – of their populations, area and economies – and ever greater pressure to adapt to global trends. This is leading to ever faster processes of urban reconstruction, but in some city districts to stagnation and decay too.

The demand for land for urban expansion is often immense: areas are needed for living space, for industry and commerce, for infrastructure such as transport, supply and disposal, for schools, hospitals, green spaces and recreational areas, and much more besides.

In many cases, however, measures to promote urban growth, to modernize cities and to improve the quality of life are in conflict with the aim of preserving urban cultural heritage: not only buildings but also the social and institutional structures that give each city its own characteristic image. Cities, and above all their historic city centres, are often the witnesses in stone of historical and cultural identity for entire regions or countries.

Not only does the cultural heritage of the cities give their inhabitants an identity and provide social and cultural cohesion; the historic centres also dominate the city's image and cityscape. Traditional central districts often also act as the cultural heart of an entire region. They are an economic, social and cultural asset that attracts tourists and investors alike. Preserving this cultural heritage is more important today than ever before. In times of globalization and international competition to attract businesses, the cultural identity of a region is a significant factor in development: innovation and creativity thrive best in a lively city culture that embraces the diversity of both its historic heritage and its dynamic future development. Where old city districts fall into decay or are destroyed by ruthless modernization, it is not only the homes and the living space of the often poor population and the social and economic potential of the districts that are lost. A piece of urban identity is lost with them.

Experience has shown that wherever cities look after their cultural heritage, other areas of urban development usually benefit as well.

Cities are subjected to a never-ending process of transformation. They are constantly changing: socially, physically, economically and culturally. Merely preserving the old buildings and monuments is therefore not sufficient to protect cultural heritage. The needs of the population in terms of quality of life and development also have to be taken into consideration.

The necessary holistic approach to the renovation of historic city districts also encompasses the positive further development of those districts, in addition to conservation of the old fabric of the buildings. A whole host of aspects have to be taken into account: awareness must be raised, citizens mobilized, municipal administrations strengthened and their local capacities built up; decay must be stopped and buildings restored in accordance with accepted conservation practice; and infrastructure must be renewed and the investment base created for the future so that traditional crafts and trades, but also new businesses, have a solid foundation on which to work. Traffic calming, environmental protection and further improvements in residential surroundings can considerably enhance the quality of life in historic districts. These kinds of measures also make historic districts such as old city centres an attractive component of cultural tourism.

The requirements of urban development and predominant social trends place considerable demands on local politicians and authorities.

In the context of research work and development cooperation, Germany promotes processes that preserve the historical and socio-cultural authenticity of cities and improve the quality of life for the residents there. The individual measures have to operate hand in hand. Germany provides financial assistance and technical advisory services to local governments with the aim of securing sustainable urban planning and development.

### **Programme for Sustainable Urban Development (Syria)**

Syria is presently undergoing a process of rapid urbanization: on account of high population growth and the migration of large numbers of people to economic centres, the urban population is growing

by five percent each year. The situation is exacerbated by the absorption of 1.5 million Iraqi refugees. Rather than being accommodated in camps, they have been integrated into society. As a result, informal settlements are spreading, while the old city centres are losing residents because of poor living conditions and a lack of income-earning opportunities.

In a comprehensive programme, Germany is helping Syria to design solution strategies for sustainable urban development. In the capital Damascus, the German Government is promoting a fund to finance immediate measures for houses in need of renovation in the old part of the city. With the involvement of local entrepreneurs, maintenance and management concepts are developed for buildings, public spaces are upgraded and wells are repaired. Strategies to promote the sustainable generation and use of energy are being elaborated, and the capacity of the administrative authorities in the old city centre to perform their duties is being enhanced.

In Aleppo, it has proved possible to achieve clear improvements to living conditions in the old city through rehabilitation and development measures. Cooperation with the municipal administration and the Directorate of the Old City of Aleppo is now directed at devising a long-term development strategy. The central focus is on how to deal with informal settlements and the upgrading of selected residential areas. Economic development of the old city is also to be further strengthened.

### **Megacities – Megachallenge: Informal Dynamics of Global Change (Bangladesh/China)**

Megacities cannot be compared with the major cities we have known to date. They are an entirely new form of urban living. A programme run by the German Research Foundation (DFG) is designed to shed light on the situation. The research programme involves around 100 academics and researchers in 15 different disciplines from China, Bangladesh and Germany and covers seven individual projects in the Pearl River Delta in China and four projects in Dhaka (Bangladesh).

The Pearl River Delta is one of the most economically active regions in China. Within just a few decades, the growth of large cities such as Guangzhou, Foshan, Dongguan and Hong Kong has created a single urban mega-agglomeration with almost 50 million inhabitants. Researchers are interested in the relationship between this rapid rate of urban development and forms of local self-organization by the city dwellers themselves, not steered by the state, and in the influence that global transformational processes such as climate change and economic globalization have on these developments.

One of the many major challenges is the question of what effect this kind of rapid urban growth has on urban and cultural identity and how the protection of traditional structural heritage can be balanced with the need to provide housing and an adequate quality of life for millions of new city dwellers.