

Building is useful. Its fundamental purpose responds to individual and collective primary needs, to common decency, to the minimal conditions of living together; it organizes societies in their political and cultural aspirations and defines the relationship between the same society and its territory. This is not neutral. Building generates profit. It serves powers, transcribes inequalities, and prolongs spatial injustices in many ways. Building is also violent. Building even the most virtuous artifact means that resources are ripped away from their natural cycles and diverted from their ecosystemic functions. These elementary materials are often charged – by the effects of their transformation, transportation, or even their promise of demolition – with an environmental impact that was foreign until then. Building entails disrupting natural habitats, encouraging the growth of anthropic lifestyles, and worsening a critical climate balance.

If we understand Transition as the set of socio-ecological pressures to adapt an inherited state of the world towards environmental sustainability, and Baukultur as the expression of a traditional and consolidated culture as well as of shared social expectations on the built environment, then Baukultur is not yet a culture of Transition. While this may be a harsh assertion, it has the advantage of immediately setting the framework of this book.

Acknowledging this non-equivalence certainly does not require rejecting the ambitions of their rapprochement, stated as an objective by several recent political agendas. On the contrary. Going beyond such a non-alignment would only be possible by looking at

the tensions and frictions remaining between the two cultures, on either side of a line whose course could perhaps, the following will tell, be redrawn by architecture.

### *Baukulturen*

Baukultur spans architecture, infrastructural systems, and productive landscapes. Rigid systems of power clash – to a certain extent – with the idea of Transition as a socio-ecological agreement, established to adapt an inherited state of the world. The culture of Transition questions and compares Baukultur to its essential idea of transforming the world. At the same time, a consolidated culture of a “transitioning” era does not exist; neither experimentally, nor culturally and politically. One of the main problems with Transition and its associated cultures is that they are alternatives to the principal contemporary systems.

The equally diverse expressions of Baukultur benefit from a great historical and geographical depth. The first cultural expressions related to the identification of built environments are those that define themselves, pragmatically, and in their plurality, as the sum or average of certain practices and values giving forms to houses, infrastructures, icons, streets, parks, or rivers. Being representative of given periods or changing geographical areas, they can be interpreted as concomitant or successive in time and overlapping in space, in the shape of a territorial palimpsest; playgrounds for anthropologists, as resources for reading facts, habits, as well as distinctive landscapes.

From such a cultural mosaic, however, certain constants emerge that specific times – especially ours – have tended to generalize. In Europe in particular, the convergence of ambitions, methods, tools, and techniques in the field of urban and territorial planning and design has led to the emergence of a shared culture of the built environment, which does not substitute for local specificities, nor for their sedimentation over time. In its singular form, the notion of culture goes beyond the neutral postulate of given units being representative of several states of practice. It already implies a qualitative aspect, assuming an appreciative and judgmental character. What takes shape under the singular notion of Baukultur is first of all the recognition of a shared framework for identifying certain qualities of the built environment. In such a perspective, it is also defined according to its opposites, as the contrary of carelessness, overkill excess, compulsive planning or automatic design, as well as the absence of any sense of subtlety. Before being a political project with forward-looking objectives, it is a reading grid, drawing up a portrait of good practices and the extent to which others may be moving away from them. It thus provides a qualitative overview of a given state of common practices and concrete results, with regard to culturally established criteria. Technical stability, hydraulic system control, land artificialization, construction rates of buildings, or their thermal efficiency, are just a few examples. On its own scale,

the European culture of the built environment could then reflect a certain level of development set and reached by the community that identifies with it. It simultaneously embodies its weaknesses and shortcomings, which are still widely shared. Such an assessing culture of the built assumes significant inertia in the evolution of its ambitions and the criteria that define them. The notion of “good” practices nevertheless remains relative to the level of expectation with which the protagonists of a given culture identify themselves, and to the rate at which they are inclined to question it. Among the mass of practices that it embodies, a large part is inherited from previous customs and engages, with its sets of embarrassing manias, a structural delay in any aspirations of transitory evolution.

This prospective aspect brings us to the last of the three definitions we could formulate here, as an introduction to the main concept addressed in this book. In line with its most recent manifestations, *Baukultur* finally focuses on political expectations on the built environment. It does not simply reflect an implicit state of being, nor determine a level of value, but plans a condition to be reached. It embodies a promising set of principles and values engaging a societal awareness related to the quality of places, of buildings, of the environment, at large and as a whole. The cultural aspect is much more focused here. It goes beyond anthropological expressions or heritage dimensions by assuming an aspiration for control, shaping, and new types of architectural, urban, and territorial “good manners.” According to this third orientation, *Baukultur* approaches the political agenda as a collective goal to be achieved, if not as a common good to be recognized, considered, and secured. It becomes highly demonstrative of a stated requirement, exhorted in the urgency of environmental issues.

At the crossroads of these three definitions, a starting postulate might attenuate the initial antithesis by identifying the emergence of a series of new virtuous territorial practices and results that are relatively convincing in ecological terms. Their convergence could be seen as representing the foundations of a certain culture of the built environment (among others), or as capable of significantly orienting the qualitative compass that *Baukultur* is starting to represent earnestly on political agendas, towards a fully reformative transitory perspective.

Nevertheless, the emerging more techno-green culture of the built environment may not be aligned with a demanding culture of the Transition, as it drives former inherent principles that do not take into account low material use, renewable resources, wellness improvement, socio-spatial equity, local empowerment, coexistence of indigenous species, or “innovations” that do not evaluate the overall consequences of their use and remote side effects. Not only does energy consumption matter, or even the overall carbon footprint of the transformation, but so do the cultural, qualitative, and transversal positioning that motivate change. As a culture, the Transition implies certain characteristics, balances, and priorities. It focuses especially on ecosystemic functions, resource preservation, water cycle, air qua-

lity, and biodiversity development, but also includes a socio-ecological dimension including health, spatial justice, and solidarity-based economics. As a paradigm shift, it includes several vectors: relocating the anthropocentric perspective towards the common ground of the living, renewing the approach through impact studies in favor of a “making do” logic, and broadening thinking by sectoral functions into cross-disciplinary dynamics. Its culture is one of hybridity, transposition, and decompartmentalization. It’s a culture of systems, of complementarity, and horizontal relationships.

The clash of cultures, no matter how conflictual, can be a source of fruitful frictions for locating critical points of unrest, dissatisfaction, or rejection, but also for imagining points of attachment, curiosity, and even wonder. Both cultures being confronted here are full of sensitive levers, creative retrenchments, and forces of commitment. The fact that the culture of Transition can challenge the culture of the built environment may even be encouraging. Perhaps it represents the opportunity for a long-awaited repositioning of the resources of architecture on the renewed terrain of their most recent legitimacies.

### Political concern and cultural awareness

Pointing out that *Baukultur* is a German word is a truism not worth mentioning, except to recall its relationship with the geographical, political, and cultural context in which it is particularly discussed. The history of continental Europe is based on interconnection and overlap, which have more than once challenged the idea of physical and political borders in favor of wider cultural understandings. In such a perspective, *Baukultur* aims to operate in a borderless territory defined by ambitions and shared considerations. In its shift from a generic term used to describe any intervention on the built environment (from urban and landscape design to architectural preservation), *Baukultur* has been adapted to describe both the involvement of the broader public in architectural matters and a sustainable attitude towards the same built environment. If Transition (social, ecological, and political) requires radical technical and technological change, on the other hand, we can count on a building culture inclined to absorb transformation, changes, modifications, and selections by its very definition. In this context, the usually slippery and rather controversial operation of making a distinction between one culture and another, one identity and another, would come as a theoretical relief: not only are we not starting from scratch, but the prospect remains geographically open. *Baukultur* can be carried wherever transformation is not only an embedded project in a given territorial condition but also the living or revived cultural habit that defines this very territory.

Among other things, the framework of a collective *kultur* in Europe has historically been characterized by notable relationships with the use of material goods (as in Sombart’s “Technology and Culture”), making the spatial manifestation through architecture, design, and territorial control a fundamental part of its inherited

ethos. The call for a culture of Transition challenges more than a recent technical trajectory in building culture, but something as deeply rooted as the original principles that have long governed the relationship between culture and technology, with consequences affecting many aspects of social life.

In his essay “Identity and Crisis of European Architecture” published in 1999, Vittorio Gregotti seems to catch a glimpse of this upcoming, yet constant, crisis. The “ability to build upon the dialogue (and conflict) with places, conditions, with others and to propose, from time to time starting from them, the emergence of a truth: limited, provisional and specific as well as universal in its intentionality” is not only a handy solution for overcoming any critical state of change but the very essence of what he calls, in a perhaps unavoidable simplification, European Architecture. Gregotti’s identification of some possible invariants within an articulated and extensive tradition in time and space might suggest a potential path for further reflection on the features of a situated culture of the built environment.

While the profoundly political nature of design decisions concerning the built environment is strongly confirmed in the international literature (See Carmona, Bento, Gabrieli, 2023), the rise of Baukultur at the political level represents the involvement of supra-national dynamics in defining the cultural features of this evolving process. The traits of a possible internationalism of science (as in Gregotti) are recognizable in the current discourse on Transition applied to the built environment: “Their internationalism and that of technical and productive rationality at the service of the society as a whole, of the expression of the essence of the problem, and the foundation of a language without classes or nations.” (Gregotti, 1999) From the shared observation of the “usure du monde,”<sup>1</sup> the search for new positions is taking shape across regions and disciplines. They fully invoke architecture and its techniques of transformation to regain margins for action successively canceled out by: the need to reduce greenhouse gases, the obsolescence of inherited heritage and the carbon cost of its renovation, the weakening of public action, or the expectation of new economic and social balances. Still challenged by the question of how to distribute the efforts required by any ambition for Transition, architecture could find a way out in the injunction to “re,” which the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale courageously opened in 2012. That same year, the RE-CYCLE exhibition at Rome’s Maxxi Museum called for a fresh look at the territory, inspired by the re-cycle, re-use perspective.

Far from revolutionary illusions or nostalgia for reformist precedents, a new set of processes, values and, experiences calling for reparation has emerged across territories.<sup>2</sup> By bringing the general

1 Title of the symposium organized by the *Société française d'architecture* on May 20–21, 2022. See also *Le Visiteur* no. 28 (2023).

2 In their collective book entitled *Positions on Emancipation. Architecture between Aesthetics and Politics*, Florian Hertweck and Nikos Katsikis (2018) also look for the revival of architectural autonomy, by exploring the possibility and topicality of a renewed emancipatory paradigm in the “Re-use” formula. See also *The Great Repair – Politics of the Repair Society*, ARCH+, No. 1, May 2023, Berlin.

ambition of the architectural project towards a culture of care for the built environment, this new generation of positions abandons the vision of generating qualities for their own sake, as renewed and undifferentiated ideals. On the contrary, it redefines a new conception of context as an unequalled heritage, as precious as it is obtrusive. The relationship to a precise environmental condition is an unavoidable theme when dealing with the subject of transformation. While new construction can also operate in abstract spatial terms, when it comes to transformation there is no blank canvas. If the notion of context is not limited to the definition of spatial spheres, and if its most political manifestations are more and more often to be found in territorial relations, according to new logics (Interreg) or theoretical experiments (New Bauhaus), then Baukultur and the culture of Transition define a contemporary and up-to-date context that more than ever deserves to be described in greater detail.

### Generative process and complementary perspectives

What the book presents as “Architecture revalued: Baukultur and the culture of Transition” is a collective project.<sup>3</sup> It gathers, introduces, and questions the positions of six architectural and urban practices whose research and academic work took place within the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne in recent years. The six research laboratories present different approaches toward the notion of Baukultur, elaborating on the methodological aspects that deliver a critical reading of the existing built environment. Additional essays from – or inspired by – the corresponding seminar held at EPFL on March 28, 2022, provide a broader theoretical framework to the six illustrated contributions.

The publication edited by the Habitat Research Center is not only the sum of different experiences. The methodological aspect that underpins the progress of the editorial project plays a key role in shaping the book’s content. A longstanding debate between different approaches, strengthened by the outcomes of a recent series of internal workshops organized by the HRC,<sup>4</sup> provides a strong, shared conceptual base between the contributors. The following contributions thus outline as a whole what could be considered a common declaration and articulate a theoretical and methodological framework for an updated culture of the built environment in the wake of a socio-ecological transformation.

Three essays frame the theoretical reflections of Baukultur on the renewed relevance of the architectural work. Ludovic Pépion revives the topicality of the notion of the project, which is no stran-

3 This collective project has been promoted and curated by the Habitat Research Center, under the lead of Professor Paola Viganò.

4 A series of internal workshops, PhD seminars, and public seminars called “Baukultur and the Culture of Transition” was held at EPFL in March 2022.

ger to the drivers and modalities of Transition,<sup>5</sup> while Pierre Caye and Valentin Bourdon, respectively, confront the architectural discipline with the demands of duration and appropriation by and for the greatest number. Between these more general considerations, the six illustrated positions follow one another, complementing and responding to each other. Each assumes the specificity of its entry. Even the most emancipated vision of Baukultur, freed from the constraining grip of categories, could still refuse to renounce the complementarity of the different viewpoints that compose it. These are recognizable by the orientation of their readings, or by the specificity of the tools they use to read. These are six readings of the concrete elements that characterize the same world, seen in the light of so many spotlights with intertwined shadows.

Following Pierre Caye's essay, Franz Graf and Giulia Marino open these positions with an attentive look at the pre-existing qualities of things as they are, where they are, and for what they can still propagate of meaning and identity in their given configuration. In particular, the qualities and values of modern and recent architectural realizations which are not always, or not yet, considered as heritage to be valorized. With them, the culture of the built environment emerges through an architectural gaze, sharpened as much by time as it is informed by history. Célia Küpfer, Maxence Grangeot, Barbara Lambec, and Corentin Fivet complete this approach by unveiling the built environment. Their contribution takes an uncompromising and mischievous look at the structural potential underlying any transformed entity. This ability to read is more than just technical, it involves an engineering of misappropriation that reverses a series of reflexes inherited from modernity, from reading to making. In a line of thought similar to Franz Graf and Giulia Marino on heritage, Eugen Brühwiler extends Baukultur from the field of building to that of infrastructure and engineering, in a broader acceptance of what the built environment embodies. He presents the condition of structural resistance and the need for maintenance as a critical emphasis of a finite relationship with existing resources, not only natural ones but also modern capital. In another way, and following Ludovic Pépion's essay, Paola Viganò's contribution telescopes the cultural ambitions of the Transition to the wider scale of the territory, its reading and reframing, without abandoning the architectural gaze: multi-scalar, multi-factorial, and fundamentally inclusive. In a different light, Anja and Martin Fröhlich place building culture in both a constructive and phenomenological perspective. They support a typological reading of the possible manipulations of forms and the extension of their own rationalities into committed practice. The other "tinkerer" is also someone who, like Jo Taillieu, develops the art of assemblage, not by successive additions, but by selected retrenchments and promising concatenations. As the last position before Valentin Bourdon's essay, he brings to the polychrome view

5 See Bernardo Secchi Days 2022, Fondation Braillard - Habitat Research Center.

on Baukultur the poetic layers of an assumed fragility of and for the meticulously constructed environment.

At its very end, the book presents a series of points that may serve as fertile grounds for new topologies between a moving Baukultur and the emerging culture of Transition, which experimentation, research, and dedication can still aspire to build and shape.