

## PECULIARITIES IN THE VISUAL APPEARANCE OF GERMAN CITIES – ABOUT LOCALLY SPECIFIC ROUTINES AND PRACTICES IN URBAN DESIGN RE- LATED GOVERNANCE

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With 1 table and 4 photos

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**Summary:** The peculiar architectonic and spatial appearance of German cities cannot be sufficiently explained from their historical development and their economic performance alone. In our article we show therefore that the urban form, or townscape (Stadtgestalt) of four case study cities – Munich, Cologne, Bonn and Brunswick – is more adequately understood as the result of complex negotiation processes between a broad range of stakeholders. These processes reflect moreover the appreciation of a high quality built environment as well as the bargaining power of the key actors to introduce building design related aspects into the agenda. Also structures of societal interaction as well as institutionalised and normative regulatory systems play an important role. Recent years saw the emergence of new constellations between public and private stakeholders, with their respective roles and weight shifting within planning processes. Established, formal norms and planning procedures have been increasingly supplemented in different cities with new, informal rules and modes that are developed by the different municipalities and that help to account for their differing spatial appearances.

**Zusammenfassung:** Unterschiede im baulichen und architektonischen Erscheinungsbild deutscher Städte sind nicht allein aus ihrer Geschichte oder ihrer ökonomischen Leistungsfähigkeit zu erklären. In unserem Beitrag arbeiten wir heraus, dass „Stadtgestalt“ in den vier deutschen Fallstudienstädten München, Köln, Bonn und Braunschweig vielmehr auch als Ergebnis eines Aushandlungsprozesses zu begreifen ist, in dem sich das Bewusstsein der beteiligten Akteure für eine hochwertig gestaltete gebaute Umwelt ebenso widerspiegelt wie die Verhandlungsmacht der am Bau- und Planungsprozess beteiligten Akteure, entsprechende Aspekte der Gestalt in die Aushandlung um bauliche Vorhaben einzubringen. Dabei spielen sowohl die gesellschaftlichen Interaktions- und Handlungsstrukturen der beteiligten Akteure als auch das institutionalisierte und normative Regulationssystem eine Rolle. In den letzten Jahren gewinnen neue Konstellationen zwischen privaten und öffentlichen Akteuren zunehmend an Bedeutung. Etablierte Spielregeln und Verfahrensabläufe im Bau- und Planungs-geschehen werden dabei durch neue oder modifizierte Regeln ergänzt, die stadtspezifisch eingesetzt werden und Unterschiede in der aktuellen baulichen Gestalt zwischen deutschen Innenstädten erklären können.

**Keywords:** Urban design, townscape, building and planning cultures, governance, actor-centred institutionalism, different visual impression of German cities

### 1 Introduction: building culture as a new topic on the political agenda

In recent years the production of the built environment and its societal implications has become widely discussed under the umbrella concept of ‘building culture’ (cf. BMVBW 2001, 13). These debates are taking place on all political tiers, reaching from the national level, to the federal states and to the cities and local communities (BBR 2002; BMVBS 2007a; BMVBS 2007b). As a result new architecture and urban development policies have been initiated, which aim at the formation of distinct local identities, image improvement, as well as economic promotion. These discussions address all stakeholders,

involved in urban planning and building, and call for a quality improvement of the built environment as a natural concern in the everyday planning practice on the local level.

Against this background the first point of departure of our article is the observation that (in our case German) cities differ in their spatial and architectonic appearance. The reasons for this are to be found, first, in their diverging geneses as civic centres, royal capitals, or industrial cities; second, in the different guiding principles, that informed their reconstruction after World War II, and third, in the locally specific socio-economic and political development trajectories. As every city relates to the regional, national as well as global socio-economic context in its

own particular way also its architectonic formation and adaptation processes lead to peculiar outcomes. The dynamic development history of a city can be therefore read from the particular design of prominent buildings or public spaces.

The second starting point of our article is the observation that the disparate appearance of today's townscapes is not only influenced by historic as well as societal factors, but that planning and building processes are, moreover, strongly determined by a web of formal regulations and instruments. These are then applied or combined by the stakeholders in unique ways as a response to the specific problems and challenges of a specific locality. In general, the production of the built environment is regulated and controlled in noticeably different ways in German cities; depending on the respective involvement of local politics and civil society.

Our third point of departure are the massive societal challenges that have evolved for cities over the last years and that have profoundly influenced their planning activities with regard to townscape (WOOD 2003). The economic globalisation with its manifold effects (cf. HEINZ 2008; HÄUSSERMANN et al. 2008), the new information technologies, or international migratory processes are beginning to have a tangible impact on the role and structure of cities. The increasing interdependence among cities within a national and international context leads to an intensifying inter-regional competition as locations for businesses and innovative industries on the one hand and as attractive living places, or tourism destinations on the other. This is framed by the socio-demographic change, which manifests in simultaneous and locally selective shrinkage and growth processes. All these developments have different implications for particular localities (cf. LANDTAG NRW 2004, 15, BMBW 2005, 4; MARCUSE 2004, 113) and greatly influence the urban policies of the respective cities.

From these three observations the central question of our paper evolves, namely to account for the different configurations of the built environment in German cities. For this purpose we have selected four case study cities in Western Germany: Munich, Cologne, Bonn, and Brunswick. Our objective is to identify the crucial factors that explain the formation of distinct local planning and building cultures in those four cities with regard to townscape. We focus then on the relative importance that the different actors, involved in planning and building processes, attribute to the material appearance of the built environment. Our underlying assumption is here that today's design or planning decisions are built upon

older, preceding resolutions, which have then gradually developed into existing formal and informal regulatory system. Although subject to the same regulatory framework on the national level, one city might put a recurring, strong emphasis on the outward appearance of prominent buildings, or public spaces within planning processes and the planning authorities might utilise all available planning instruments to their fullest. In another city the utilisation of formal regulatory tools might play a lesser role for municipal planners, who might negotiate and decide townscape related issues on a case-by-case basis anew. Local and regional institutional traditions as well as values and attitudes play an important role for the municipal administrative practice as well as for corporate investment decisions, or the establishment of citizen initiatives for building culture. These different forms of negotiation can concern the overall spatial development of the whole city (development principles, master plans), separate districts (quarters and areas covered by local ordinances), or even single projects (buildings, public spaces).

This paper will finally test the hypothesis that in German cities differently pronounced planning and building cultures exist, which are influenced by political decisions and thus bring about a spatial differentiation of the urban form.

## 2 Theory: planning culture, governance and 'actor-centred institutionalism' as analytical framework for townscaping processes

A peculiar townscape can be interpreted as the result of multitudinous activities within an institutional and political context. The awareness of urban design as a planning and building task that is deeply embedded in – partly competing, partly homogeneous – local traditions, norms, and values is widespread (cf. FÜRST 2007, 2). Against the background of a suspected homogenisation of urban forms under the conditions of globalisation this aspect of urban design is increasingly entering the focus of urban research (LÖW 2008).

In our analysis we favour the terms 'built environment' and 'townscape' over the rather normatively charged notion of 'building culture'. Nevertheless, in our account of differentiated urban forms and townscapes we make use of facts that are commonly addressed in recent scientific discourses under the term 'planning culture', if they are relevant to governance research. Planning culture stands for the way the broader urban public as well as all involved

segments of society handle current questions of urban development and how beyond individual cases general rules, procedures and valuations are established for the production and management of the built environment. According to WEICHHART (2007) planning culture is a “heuristic concept” that encompasses organisation, group, or country specific configurations of values, norms, orientations, as well as styles of communication and action in spatial planning. Besides stakeholder constellations, operating principles and employed instruments, the notion of planning culture also includes soft, culturally mediated aspects such as the appreciation of planning, or responsibilities held by those actors involved in planning processes (ILS NRW 2007).

From a cultural scientific and praxeologic perspective we are therefore interested in configurations of practices that are “a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings” in a city (cf. RECKWITZ 2008, 44) and that act as long-ranging guides for decisions and actions in urban design.

In this respect also the concepts of history of institutions and path dependency play an important role, as past decisions and petrified mindsets in the form of stylised and habitual actions influence development paths into the presence; thus “the Now (...) is the past of the present future” (cf. BEYER 2006, 1, 12; KLAGGE 2006, 24, *cit. translation Dimmer*). Consequently, we can analyse which mechanisms cause path dependent continuities and how they pre-determine or constrain potential actions. It is moreover possible to ascertain at which point in the decision making process and in the course of action new paths open up and under which circumstances new institutions help to create these. For our study the policy research offers us two different approaches for describing and comparing possible courses of action and restrictions in urban design or townscape formation processes.

Because of the profound challenges to the regulation of social processes and because of the need to institutionalise new management systems, governance research has been increasingly introduced into geographical research in recent years. Also other academic disciplines have made use of the governance concept for the development of local policy research. Governance distinguishes between regulation theoretical aspects (action oriented approach) on the one hand and the quality of those regulation structures (institutional approach) on the other (MAYNTZ 2004, 1; EINIG et al. 2005, II).

In an action-oriented perspective economic, political and societal transformation processes are

profoundly reshaping the relationship between state and civil society on the level of local communities (cf. EINIG et al. 2005, I). The development from an intervening state to a competing one, from the top-down government to a more cooperative one and from the regulating and restricting role of the state to an activating and enabling one has been described for many policy fields. These trends manifest in changing institutions and regulatory systems. Along with that also established responsibilities, power structures, and institutional propensities of the stakeholders and actor constellations change. Besides ‘traditional’ actor constellations with securely established sets of rules, new actor networks evolve for whose cooperation unprecedented, modified forms of interaction and norms have to be found.

Although a comprehensive and theoretical framework for the analysis of governance is absent, ‘actor-centred institutionalism’ in policy research has proved a useful tool for examining complex, multi-actor urban design processes. By utilising it, the relation between state control and societal self-organisation can be distinguished and thoroughly conceptualised. Furthermore, the action-centred regulation perspective and the institutional perspective with its focus on rules and organisational structures are rather complementary than ruling each other out (cf. MAYNTZ and SCHARPF 1995; SCHARPF 2000; MAYNTZ 2004, 7). Political interactions are considered in this respect as the accumulated result of rational and purposeful strategies of actors in their respective institutional context. Institutions widen, limit, or pre-structure courses of action as they provide actors the resources for achieving their objectives (SCHARPF 2000).

Through this theoretical framework we can thus combine an actor-centred approach with a structural analysis of the institutional frame. Our paper focuses on the political process as an interaction between stakeholders and extends from the first problem statement to the final political decision. Hence, we understand a particular urban form or townscape as the spatial and material outcome of political structures and processes. Our empirical approach emphasises the question how these processes develop as well as how the involved actors, actor constellations, patterns and interactions, objectives and instruments lead to a particular outcome (cf. ILS NRW 2005; GEISSEL 2005; STEGEN 2006; KLAGGE 2006; VOGT 2008, and similarly also SABATIER 1993; OSTROM 1999, 2005). This way the different interests and their respective power of self-assertion within the process of shaping the built environment can be discerned.

### 3 Own empirical approach: urban design as civic practice

In order to conceptually capture the differences in formation of the urban forms, locally specific urban design practices and strategies had to be determined. Historical key events, existing material building substance, cultural traditions, as well as the economic and political balance of power, all lead in their combination to a peculiar perception and interpretation of the urban form or townscape. In the sense of a locally specific and coherent logical system, this makes in turn certain courses of action more probable, while others become less likely. The system influences then the actions of the stakeholders, the actor constellations, the institutional frame, as well as those structures, in which courses of action become recurring habitual routines (cf. LÖW 2008, 77; LINDNER 2006, 64).

To answer the question which different practices of urban design developed in Germany, and how as a consequence the appearance of German cities varies, we have selected four case study cities for a closer examination: Munich, Cologne, Bonn, and Brunswick. The selection criteria have been their comparable size, their location in Western Germany and their economic prosperity. Although those four cities resemble each other in some ways they cover nevertheless a wide spectrum of conditions that allowed the unfolding of locally specific urban design routines in the sense of path dependency. The differences include for example the city's development history, the prevailing public attitude towards building culture, the reconstruction principles after World War II, the political majorities in the city council, the application of specific urban design instruments, or the presence of building culture related expertise in the form of local architectural associations, or planning and architecture departments at local universities.

In each of the four case study cities we have examined the overall urban design strategies as well as two concrete projects with a special attention to their planning and design processes. One of those projects was respectively

- one inner city retail development as example for the initiative of private actors, while the
- second one was a public square in order to exemplify municipal planning initiative.

The studied projects in the four cities were selected in such a way that they are comparable in terms of their location and the scope of the project as well as the involved actor spectrum (cf. Tab. 1).

We surveyed initially the respective local institutional context as well as the key actors and their actor constellation. The analysis of planning documents, information brochures, policy statements, as well as the records of city council meetings and municipal committees was helpful to reconstruct planning and decision making processes. At the same time we investigated relevant organisations and social associations as a part of the institutional frame that had significantly influenced the course of the projects. Also important were the organisational structure of the local government authorities concerned with urban planning and management issues, their institutional history over the last 20 years, local political majorities, the political key actors, civil society groups with a concern for the built environment, and finally, the importance and the influence of local media. We identified furthermore regular discussion fora and other public events that dealt with planning and building activities, as well as important instruments that were utilised to control and regulate urban design processes such as development and design principles, or local ordinances.

We also screened the local sections of relevant newspapers for topics connected to broader building culture issues as well as to our case study projects in

**Table 1: Case study cities and projects**

Case study city	Munich	Cologne	Bonn	Brunswick
<b>Overall city</b>	political decision makers, municipal administration, lobby groups, media			
<b>Public spaces</b>				
Design of square	Rindermarkt	Station front square	Bottlerplatz	Kohlmarkt
<b>Building construction</b>				
Retail building projects	Fünf Höfe (shopping centre)	Peek und Cloppenburg (P&C) (retail store)	Wehmeyer (retail store)	ECE Schloss- Arkaden (shopping centre)

order to determine the intensity of public debates as well as to identify the relevant actors.

In semi-standardised expert interviews we enquired then the attitude of key actors in the decision-making processes regarding the city's overall urban design perspective and the surveyed projects in particular. These interviews in the four case study cities were clustered according to stakeholder groups such as politicians, planning authorities, architects, journalists, benefactors and so forth. Finally we carried out expert hearings with actors that exert an influence on the design of the built environment on a supra-local level (e.g. Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning, International Building Exhibition {IBA} Emscher Park, Montag Foundation for Urban Space, European House of Urban Building Culture) in order to contrast this with our locally specific findings.

#### 4 Selected results: differences in the utilisation of the 'building culture toolkit'

Inherently urban design is not only a question of aesthetics but also more importantly a process in which the collision of competing interests manifest in the urban form or townscape. The findings from our four case study cities suggest that this is true for the design of buildings as well as that of public spaces.

The redesign of downtown squares in Munich, Cologne, Bonn, and Brunswick showed moreover that the municipal planning departments are not equally in control of the planning process in all four cases. It became clear that municipal actors need to enter into various public/public, or public/private partnerships in order to overcome growing financial constraints and to achieve their respective planning objectives (cf. BRZENCZEK and WIEGANDT 2008). To harmonise the different strategy approaches and conflicting interests within an ever-widening actor spectrum, intensive moderation and 'management of interdependencies' is necessitated.

The construction of retail projects in the four cities showed that mainly the interests of the building owners and their architects, of municipal planners, as well as consumers determine the deployment of the respective strategies and instruments and define the building's material appearance (cf. BRZENCZEK and WIEGANDT 2009). It becomes clear that architecture and urban design have to strike a delicate balance between the principally conflicting logics of building function and use value on the one

hand and its design aesthetic on the other. Economic necessities and design aspirations need to be reconciled. Although the building owner's requirements regarding use, economic efficiency and occupancy considerations determine the actual 'building program', both city and owner negotiate the preservation of the urban structure, or the response to the urban context in the public interest.

Through differences in the routine interpretation and application of formal legal regulations, the organisation of responsibilities, the planning and design effort, as well as a peculiar use of townscape related planning instruments municipalities place distinct emphases in planning and building processes, which in turn exerts a long-term impact on the urban form. The following sections will discuss some of these parameters more in detail in order to explain how they influence the varying appearance of German cities.

##### 4.1 Provisions for building and planning processes leave sufficient margin for city specific adaptations

Numerous laws on the national as well as the federal state level provide a regulatory framework, which leaves local communities sufficient freedom (e.g. BauGB) for adaptation to their specific problems. In recent years these 'hard tools' have been increasingly supplemented with 'soft instruments' that evolved through the different initiatives for the promotion of building culture by the national government and the federal states. Endowed with a far-reaching local planning authority local communities can then substantiate higher-ranking plans and development principles for their overall territory, sub-areas and districts, or single building projects. A uniform, nationwide relevant building planning law (e.g. BauGB), state-wide building regulations (e.g. LaPlaG), or Preservation of Historic Monument Acts (LDschG), as well as municipal ordinances all regulate the development, planning and building on the local level and thus influence the material appearance of the city. For this reason all the available urban design instruments such as architectural and urban planning competitions, urban design councils, townscape ordinances, or town hall meetings among others, are legally applicable in every German city.

De facto, however, the actual application of these planning tools depends on the stability and continuity of political constellations and administrative structures, as well as the key actors in the plan-

ning administration and their knowledge of the existence of these instruments and their effects. From this follows the conclusion that specific structuring of planning processes or the application of different instruments can open up opportunities for cities to improve their urban form. Such opportunities can then offer new resources for action but by the same token these can go unutilised.

#### 4.2 Differences in form of organisation and responsibilities

Besides the application of the different instruments, also the organisation of responsibilities within the planning and building processes was an important factor in the four case study cities. This organisation structure depends largely on the political stability and the arrangement and division of government portfolios within the municipal administration. A stable institutional context favours the formation of a locally specific and institutionalised planning culture with individual quality standards. This culture takes a long lasting root through the establishment of new procedures and processes (BRZENCZEK and WIEGANDT 2007). The decision making of single project-related design questions is therefore not made in isolation but rather embedded in a framework of known, connected and overarching paths. In contrast, unstable political constellations and volatile organisation structures with changing responsibilities within the planning and building related local government departments thwarts the formulation and institutionalisation of comprehensive long-term development guidelines and urban design procedures.

The expertise to evaluate the aesthetics and design of buildings is another critical resource for achieving a high quality in urban design processes. As it is not equally accessible for all stakeholders, it requires either a knack for design, or otherwise design decisions must be delegated to more competent actors or specialists. In all four case study cities individuals or groups exist within the planning administration that are in one form or another specifically concerned with 'public space', or 'townscape'. This facilitates then the evolution or maintaining of an attractive townscape. For such specialised and aesthetically trained urban design professionals it is easier to win allies within project-specific actor constellations. Communication is playing a vital role as instrument for the presentation of design alternatives and the persuasion of the negotiating partner.

With sufficient professional competence individuals in municipal administration can assume the quality control and facilitate a co-ordinated design of single projects. These 'people in charge' of downtown public spaces and the townscape are met in all four case study cities with univocal approval by the municipal administration, local politics and public, as well as expert circles. Organisationally either a specified office can handle public space issues within the municipal administration or the position of an urban space manager, or a master architect for townscape is set up, who is concerned with the overall urban form beyond just public space. These two examples indicate that the heads of the municipal planning and building control department ascribe a great importance to the design of prominent public spaces.

Moreover, the case studies identified interdisciplinary action groups such as the 'task force inner city', or the 'working group townscape', in which planning officials, academics, members of the business community as well interested citizens debate questions of downtown development, or townscape and which even initiated projects. However, ideas and concepts developed here cannot be implemented against the powerful particular interests of the local economy or retail, thus necessitating intensive mediation and co-ordination.

#### 4.3 Spatial differentiation in the regulation intensity of townscape and application of instruments

Depending on the type and size of a building project, or the local spatial as well as political context not only the municipal council and the administration are involved but also other project and interest-specific coalitions and actor constellations evolve. Although the Federal Building Act (BauGB) prescribes nationwide standardised planning procedures, the regulations leave the cities enough freedom to develop and introduce own supplementary instruments, organisation forms and procedures.

The spatial urban context also influences the constellation of stakeholders in its combination of collective and corporate actors. As a rule, the more central and prominent a project location is, the more increases the concern and sensibility for the urban appearance and the townscape. Hence, the spectrum of involved actors widens and along with it the plurality of opinions in public discourses. Thus, many more actors get a chance to express their opinions and ideas than only stakeholders directly related

to a project. In this respect a spatial hierarchy of problem awareness for urban design processes can be observed, which is also often reflected in the applied qualification instruments. Design projects in the central city and at sensitive gate situations, along important arterial roads are often subject to stricter design requirements, while other projects in residential areas or more peripheral locations face less demanding planning procedures and qualification processes. The reason for this is the significance of downtowns as traditional tourist destination, centre of commerce, or civic representation, all of which are further developed as central components of the townscape. Thus, a hierarchisation of urban spaces evolves with regard to design effort, which can also affect the building design quality.

#### 4.4 Possibilities for qualifying building design

The historic urban building stock determines the design of new building projects to a certain degree. According to section 34 of the Federal Building Act (BauGB) a development project is only permissible within built-up areas if it blends with the characteristic features of its immediate environment in terms of the type and scale. Although the building owner's requirements regarding use, economic efficiency and occupancy considerations determine the actual 'building program', both city and owner negotiate the preservation of the urban structure, or the response to the urban context in the public interest. However, the planning authorities have, moreover, the option of an internal basic resolution that politically legitimises the stipulation of specific building



Photo 1: Retail building projects: "Fünf Höfe" in Munich (Photo: C.-C. Wiegandt)



Photo 2: Retail building projects: "Peek und Cloppenburg" in Cologne (Photo: C.-C. Wiegandt)

programs for specific city locations. These can control the integration of a project into its urban context and have to be respected for the following concretisation of building uses. As it is not possible to regulate the structuring of facades, or the selection of building materials and colours with formal planning instruments, the detailed outward appearance of building projects becomes subject of negotiation processes within the building approval procedures. (Photos 1 + 2)

In these cases the building authorities need to argue skilfully in order to persuade builders of the merits and the added value of good design. The actor constellation with their respective interests they lobby during a building process changes through the course of a construction project. Design decisions concerning building program requirements are usually made in so-called 'closed shops' at the beginning of a political process. Decision makers from local politics, the municipal administration, or business community are acting and interacting based on schemes that were commissioned from architects, so that the general public is de facto neither informed about the process nor involved in it.

Planning competitions and urban design councils can be helpful instruments in this respect in order to involve the citizens, however, private builders cannot be coerced into making use of them. It requires therefore good persuasion of the municipal administration to induce these kinds of additional qualification processes. Particularly under the conditions of economical prosperity with a strong competition on the inner city real estate market, and coupled with strong public attention because of the coverage of the media, the municipal bargaining power in-

creased markedly. It can become customary practice then to win investors for an additional qualification procedure. By pointing out that the development of alternative planning proposals is likely to create an added value for the building project investors can be convinced to accept higher costs and longer planning processes.

It has to be pointed out, however, that the investors cannot be committed to adopt the winning proposal of a planning competition or the recommendations of the urban design council. They only serve as facultative recommendations. It happens often therefore that the result of a time and cost consuming competition is never realised.

It is a different situation however, if the building project is located within an area that is covered by an advertisement or townscape ordinance. If parts of downtowns are designated as ordinance areas, changing existing buildings, building new ones, as well as installing advertisement structures require compliance with the regulations. There have been heated debates in the four case study cities whether to legislate such by by-laws or not. The opposition comes here mainly from the retailers, who fear disadvantages for their businesses but there are also concerns about the efficiency of such measures, as cities find it difficult to sanction violations. Moreover, the instrument is only effective in the long-run as it does not address the existing building stock but only applies to new construction and renovation projects that are launched once the ordinance is in place.

Another basis for public discussion and point of reference for the design quality evaluation of buildings and public spaces are masterplans and programmatic building and development principles. While these instruments are seen as effective for the visualisation of the development potentials and downtown design principles in some case study cities, in others they are criticised for being too rigid and inflexible since they can confine and frustrate the plans of project developers and investors from an early stage on.

#### 4.5 Possibilities of qualifying the design of public spaces

Especially when it comes to the creation and re-designing of public spaces the management of municipal authorities play an important role. The appearance of many downtown public spaces such as parks, squares or promenades is outdated in terms of design and furnishing. The era has fur-

thermore ended when people's squares were rededicated to parking lots, or built over with facilities. In order to adapt pedestrian malls and squares to the changing needs of today many cities are taking therefore great effort to re-design their public realm.

In contrast to the indirect design control for private building projects, the direct power of disposal over public space further heightens the municipality's planning responsibilities for a proper design and need-based maintenance. As 'master of the planning process' the local government has the possibility to initiate a renewal at any time. If a redesign is found necessary the funding of the project must first be secured, as well as a proper decision making process established. If the respective space is municipally owned and if sufficient financial resources are available, the planning authorities can develop a design scheme for the project internally and implement it. The municipality is thus "plan initiator (*Plangeber*)" and "plan addressee (*Planadressat*)" in one (legal) person (REISS-SCHMIDT 2006, *cit. translation Dimmer*). (Photos 3+4)

However, the budgetary shortages of local communities are increasingly constraining this initiative. Urban development grants (*Städtebauförderung*) – a form of hybrid financing, consisting of communal, federal state, as well as national government funds – can help to overcome these financial difficulties. In order to qualify for this, the state of North Rhine-Westphalia requires its municipalities for example to draw up integrated strategic concepts for their future downtown development (*Integriertes Handlungskonzept Innenstadt*). In the case of prominent central squares also additional planning competitions can help to qualify the design. Also through the cooperation between city and private investors the design of downtown public



Photo 3: Design of public squares: "Kohlmarkt" in Brunswick (Photo: C.-C. Wiegandt)





Photo 4: Design of public squares: “Botplerplatz” in Bonn (Photo: C.-C. Wiegandt)

spaces can be additionally influenced. Urban development contracts (*städtebauliche Verträge*) offer for example cities the opportunity to impose a financial contribution for the improvement of a public space as a condition for a building permission for an adjacent private building project. Both the scope of the contribution as well as the design quality are subject to negotiation between investor and municipality.

For the design of public spaces the urban planning authorities can also formulate development principles in a rather vague and programmatic form. Moreover, manuals and ordinances can help to visualise, suggest or stipulate a certain design quality. With such a codified and mandatory formulation of design requirements cities are not pursuing the goal of achieving a uniform appearance of their downtowns. Rather, the aim is to promote the formation of a diverse, structurally rich and distinctive townscape for their citizens as well as for tourists or potential investors.

## 5 Conclusions and outlook

In our article we argued that differences in the spatial and architectural appearance of German cities are not sufficiently explained by differing local histories and the city’s economic performance. We showed that the urban form of the four case study cities Munich, Cologne, Bonn, and Brunswick is to a greater degree also the result of complex negotiation processes between a broad range of stakeholders. These processes reflect, moreover, the appreciation of high-quality built environments as well as the bargaining power of the key actors, involved in

the planning and building process. Recent years saw the emergence of new actor constellations between public and private stakeholders, with their respective role and weight shifting within planning processes. Established, formal norms and planning procedures have been increasingly supplemented in different cities with new, informal rules and modes that are developed by the different municipalities and that can explain their differing spatial appearances.

For a clearer understanding of the planning processes that led to a particular urban or architectural design outcome the institutional context – formal norms, habitual processes, and institutionalised practices – is most important. By using ‘actor-centred institutionalism’ in policy research we identified criteria for a comparative analytic framework of building and planning cultures in German cities and applied it to account for differences in the production of the built environments.

The negotiated urban or architectural forms depend furthermore on the application and combination of the various planning instruments that influence urban form, as well as on the expertise and consciousness of the stakeholders, deploying them. The varying appearance of German downtowns results therefore from an interplay between the existing urban form and ongoing planning and design processes. Good urban or architectural design became increasingly seen as an important location factor that can foster or inhibit the future development of the quality of life in or the economic competitiveness of a particular city. Moreover, it becomes clear that the material form of urban spaces and buildings is not always in the focus of negotiation processes and that the topic ‘townscape and building culture’ is only beginning to enter into public discourses.

## Abbreviations

BauGB Federal Building Act (*Baugesetzbuch*)  
 LaPlaG Regional Planning Acts of the federal States  
 (Landesplanungsgesetz)  
 LDschG State Act for Historic Monuments Preservation  
 (*Landesdenkmalschutzgesetz*)

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