Integrating cultural heritage into the living city: example Bamberg

Karin DENGLE-R-SCHREIBER

Summary

In 1993, Bamberg was included in UNESCO’s ‘List of World Heritage’ as a ‘unique example of a central European town that developed on the basis of an early medieval structure’. It is taken to demonstrate problems, methods and chances of the integration of cultural heritage into a living city. Cultural heritage does not only mean great objects of art history but also includes the structures and substance of a historic city. Problems: the historic city becomes alienated from its citizens, for example, by overdrawn claims of commercial use, traffic, and the displacing of its functions to the outskirts. Methods: to encourage citizens to say ‘my town’ by, for example, cultivating an awareness of the worth of cultural heritage, disseminating the results of research, creating a network of different institutions in the field of cultural heritage, and aiding house owners with restoration (‘The Bamberg model’). Chances: well-preserved and living cities create identity. Identification of citizens with their city/region creates economic and social stability.

History and development of the city of Bamberg

When talking about Bamberg’s history, the year 1007 is a good starting point. This was when King/Emperor Heinrich II founded an episcopal see there, the Prince Bishopric, which constituted a relatively independent ‘state’ until it was dissolved during the secularisation of 1803. For centuries before, there had been a castle on what was to become the hill of the cathedral. For a long time, Slavs and Germans had lived in peaceful cohabitation on this shallow elevation overlooking the Regnitz valley. The castle was the administrative centre of power for a large region and guarded the river crossings of very old trade routes.

The establishment of the see and the king’s intensive support opened new economic possibilities for Bamberg. Within a mere 60 years, five magnificent churches were built: the Cathedral, the Benedictine abbey of St. Michael, and the churches of St. Jacob, St. Stephen, and St. Gangolf. In the 12th century, the city outgrew its old boundaries at the feet of the cathedral mount and a new settlement was established on an island between the two arms of the Regnitz. It is interesting to note that the distinction between the two parts of the city can still be distinctly felt today: the old, episcopal areas around the large churches in the western part of town, spreading over the famous seven hills (seven hills like Rome, since Bamberg was conceived as a secula Roma) are still relatively quiet residential areas with romantic alleyways. The economic centre of the town, however, and the lively core of the inner city, is the large market square of the new settlement. It is called the ‘Green Market’ because of the vegetables that are sold there. Vegetable farming has played an important role in Bamberg’s expansion since the 13th century. This was when the farmers’ fields were developed, the third medieval element to still affect the city’s shape today. Bamberg’s citizens invested significant sums of money in the cultivation of the land to the east of the Regnitz. They reaped a rich profit: Bamberg’s vegetables, especially liquorice, became lucrative export goods. The number of employees in the horticulture business grew steadily until the 19th century.

Like most other European cities, Bamberg underwent a transformation during the 19th and 20th centuries: its walls and gates were razed, the city expanded, the railway was built, and industrialisation set in. But the basic structure of the medieval town survived. You can use a 1602 map, which shows the town at the end of its medieval development, to find your way round Bamberg’s centre today.

The aspect of the city has noticeably changed, however. After the destruction of many buildings during the 30 Years War, especially between 1632 and 1648, Bamberg received a new appearance during the Baroque era. All churches and public buildings were ‘Baroquified’, and citizens who could pay for it
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provided a Baroque facade for their houses, behind which we often find an older core. The prince bishop, lord over land and city, supported this development through tax benefits, very similarly to the methods we are familiar with today.

Nowadays, Bamberg is a city of 70,000, the administrative and economic centre of a large region, a major hub for national and international traffic, and the largest industrial centre of Upper Franconia, as well as home to a university which offers, for example, a specialisation in the preservation of historical monuments. This brings me to my second point, Bamberg’s contemporary state and its way of dealing with its cultural heritage.

The ‘Bamberg Model’: some money and a lot of advice

Compared to other cities, the Second World War left Bamberg relatively unscathed: this is why, with nearly 1,500 historic buildings, it boasts the largest historic city centre in Germany. The situation after the war was difficult none the less. 65 percent of buildings were damaged, and 6,800 people were homeless. Then there were the fugitives. 12,000 people tried to find shelter in Bamberg; they were put up in schools, barns and pubs. The American Army had requisitioned hundreds of houses. These were not exactly the ideal conditions for exercising restoration and preservation.

A first estimate calculated the cost of restoring the city’s historical buildings at one billion deutschmarks – a staggering sum in those days. It was Hans Rothenburger of the city’s planning office who came up with the so-called ‘Bamberg way of small steps’ in this situation, a solution that came later to be known as the ‘Bamberg Model’. It aimed at main-
taining not only the architectural, but also the social structure of the city. It has provided a system that helps citizens, through financial support and in-depth advice, to take restoration into their own hands. According to the historical importance of their houses, home-owners receive financial aid from the city for preservation and restoration measures that are determined in intensive discussions with the municipal authorities and the Bavarian State Department of Historic Monuments. The success of this model is evident from the fact that by now, some 50 years after it was put into practice in 1956, 80-90 percent of the city’s historical buildings have been restored – practically the entire city centre.

In 1981, Bamberg’s inner city, including the 19th century expansions, was declared a Stadtdenkmal which means that not only certain buildings but the entire old city is ‘national trust’. In 1993, the medieval core of the town was included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The justification of the committee’s decision says that ‘the cityscape, with its numerous 11th to 18th century monumental buildings, is a synthesis of medieval churches and Baroque patricians’ houses and palaces. We find there living remainders of architectural moments that influenced all of Europe. The architecture of Bamberg strongly influenced northern Germany and Hungary, and reveals close connections with Bohemia. The ‘Franconian Rome’ on the banks of the river Regnitz forms an urban structure of great rarity; the Cathedral and the Old Court, the Boettinger House, the Old Town Hall, perched on a bridge across the river, or the row of river houses known as ‘little Venice’ are some of the most remarkable sights.’

Identification of citizens with their city

It is noteworthy that one of the other reasons for including Bamberg among UNESCO’s World Heritage sites was the extraordinary level of involvement of the town’s citizens. To me, next to the existence of well-conceived legal regulations and practicable administrative solutions, this seems one of the most important preconditions for the successful preservation of historic buildings: that the population at large concurs fundamentally with the principles of preservation. This agreement, in my experience, is directly linked to the level of knowledge and information provided to the people. The more people know about their town, their village, or their region, about their history, architectural history, and culture, and the better founded that knowledge is, the more likely they are to identify with them. Identification here means saying ‘my village’ or ‘my town’, not in a proprietary sense, but in the sense of being responsible, like when one speaks of ‘my children’. This does

Figure 2. The gardeners’ fields are a part of the city of Bamberg to this day.
not mean that sentiments will always lead to action. If money or labour is at stake, it is usually only a select few who choose to become effectively involved. All the same, such a positive mood is an extremely valuable basis, for instance where local political decisions are concerned.

In Bamberg, an interest in the city’s history and its buildings has been fostered for a long time. Even in the 19th century, citizens’ groups were formed that saved numerous churches and chapels that were threatened with demolition after the secularisation. One key motivation here was of course a strong Catholic piety; but even then, a kind of historical consciousness played a large role. So they also salvaged the town’s castle, the Altenburg.

This tradition continues today. Every major building project will cause citizens to make their voices heard. Lectures on every Bambergian subject can count on sizeable turnouts. For decades, I have been conducting tours through Bamberg for Bambergers, and they have always been fully booked. The local media are keen to address issues concerned with Bamberg’s history, art, and culture, but this, of course, has a reciprocal effect: because the press reports on issues, they appear relevant to its readers. The local newspapers play a vastly important role in the identification process.
Every successful approach to integrating cultural heritage into the life of a contemporary city has to start with its people. This points to the major difference between this project and the treatment of important individual monuments like the Taj Mahal, the Pyramids, or the Residence in Würzburg, where questions of restoration and conservation are often the most important concerns. Cities, however, are living organisms that undergo perpetual change. What lives, dies and is reborn, renews itself. The variable here is the speed and the character of that transformation. It has shown to be beneficial to try and base this process of change on as much in-depth knowledge as possible, and to plan it carefully and slowly. Gathering the requisite knowledge before embarking on the planning of major projects helps to prevent conflict.

Problem: integration of large modern structures into the historic city

This brings me to my final point, a brief case-study of the planning process of a recent building project in Bamberg, and the role historical knowledge played in that process. On the land of 13 former plots, a central shopping arcade with 15,000 square meters of sales floorspace and an underground parking lot with a capacity of 450 is planned to be erected.

The municipal administration was keen to develop space for shops and businesses since over the last decades large areas on the outskirts had been turned into shopping districts, so that a disproportionate amount of purchasing power had been directed out of the city centre to the periphery. But members of the population and the university voiced strong opposition, particularly against the building of the parking lot, which seemed to run counter to the long-standing principle of avoiding additional traffic in the city centre. The main problem, however, is the destruction of inner-city microstructures effected by the replacement of 13 individual plots, with their yards, gardens, houses and utility buildings, with a single block of concrete.

This situation led to a feeling of insecurity in the city council. They instituted a committee of experts for commerce, traffic, city planning, architecture and preservation to investigate the project. They analysed a number of problems such as parking, delivery of goods, waste disposal and the changing of important historic structures in the narrow-built old town.

This points to a fundamental problem. The concept of shopping centres was developed for the outskirts of cities. This is where there is space for cars and all the aspects of running a shop that customers should not have to confront. This space was the original reason why shopping precincts moved from the city centres to the periphery. These days, this trend is being reversed in the western regions of Germany – in itself, a positive tendency. People are clearly fed up with the soulless, ugly shopping deserts on the outskirts. Companies are now trying to apply the model they used with such success on the periphery to the centre of towns. This is the case not just in Bamberg – in the Bavarian Council for cultural heritage, we had to deal with four similar problem cases during the past year. But the application simply does not fly. Historic city centres have not changed: there still is not enough space for projects of such magnitude. They have to offer something different: history and its remnants.

Every foot of a medieval town bears traces of its history. Historical structures form the fundament for everything: plot borderlines, old streets, the inner and outer parts of blocks and all that was necessary for their operation: approaches to wells, fire alleys, sewage canals and so on. Investigations that had been necessitated by the planned shopping arcade in Bamberg showed this clearly and revealed, moreover, that there was a former Jewish quarter and the crossing of two town walls.

Thus, the above-mentioned committee of experts recommended in its final paper that the project not be carried out as planned – largely because of the results of the historical and architectural explorations. The committee suggested a new search for ideas based on the new discoveries about the area, a form that has to be adapted more to the microstructures and tailor-made for Bamberg. The monitoring group of UNESCO (members of ICOMOS) agreed with this recommendation.
Conclusions

In integrating our cultural heritage into the living, contemporary city, we crucially depend on knowledge and information. We need expert knowledge gained through intensive, careful studies and investigations. This knowledge then needs to be mediated, in suitable form, as information to a broader audience. Only then is it possible to generate the kind of identification, the sense of responsibility, the pride, the love, without which it is difficult, if not impossible, to keep our old towns alive in their historic substance. It is this substance that forms the basis of our European community’s collective: it is utterly indispensable.

Karin Dengler-Schreiber
Bavarian Council for Cultural Heritage
Volkfeldstr. 35, 96049 Bamberg, Germany
e-mail: kdschreiber@gmx.de

Graduated in history at the University of Würzburg in 1975. Articles and books on Bamberg, its history, buildings and conservation. Since 1983 Representative for Cultural Preservation in Bamberg, since 1999 Vice-president of the Bavarian Council for Cultural Heritage. Member of many institutions concerning culture and history.