TOWARDS A SHARED CULTURE OF ARCHITECTURE

INVESTING IN A HIGH-QUALITY LIVING ENVIRONMENT FOR EVERYONE

ABSTRACT

Born out of the 2019-2022 EU work plan for culture, this report compiles prevalent trends and best practices in the governance of contemporary spatial design, to provide recommendations at multiple levels ensuring high quality in architecture and the built environment for everyone. Based on the Davos Baukultur Quality System, the report provides concrete definitions of high-quality architecture and built environment. It provides answers to how these terms can be defined, detailing key criteria for their assessment. Through a collection of case studies, gathered from across Europe and examined by the OMC expert group in 2020-2021, the publication suggests ways to operationalise those quality criteria, which have been put into action at multiple governance levels. Quality aspects should be considered across all funding areas that concern spatial development and the built environment, in particular those that are integrated into public procurement procedures. The recommendations target different scales, such as EU policies, national frameworks and the local level, in addition to private-sector stakeholders and the professional realm.

INTRODUCTION

Under the priority 'Cohesion and well-being', the Council's 2019-2022 work plan for culture established an Open Method of Coordination (OMC) group of Member State experts focusing on high-quality architecture and built environment for everyone. In 2020 and 2021 a group of 39 experts nominated by 23 Member States, plus Norway and Switzerland, collaborated closely with the aim of addressing current challenges and long-term strategies for our living environment. Through the process, which was coordinated by the European Commission, the experts exchanged knowledge, analysed case studies and synergies with existing initiatives and policies, and developed recommendations on the many ways high-quality architecture can help to improve and further develop the quality of the spaces and places of Europe for the benefit of everyone. With its inclusive and holistic approach, this report provides various stakeholders with new ideas and approaches, in particular decision-makers in the fields of architecture and the built environment, culture and cultural heritage and those tasked with spatial planning and sustainable development at the local, regional, national and European levels. But *Towards a Shared Culture of Architecture – Investing in a high-quality living environment for everyone* is also meant as a valuable resource for clients, civil servants and other relevant stakeholders.

What are we talking about?

Building and planning for the benefit of everyone creates not only cohesion and well-being but also sustainable places to live. A focus on high-quality architecture by all people and agencies involved will therefore also contribute to sustaining the planet and combating climate change. This report looks far beyond the question of good architectural design and the discipline of architecture to take a holistic view and understanding of quality when referring to our living spaces. It considers all human activities that alter the built environment, which are broad in scope and relate to past, present and future building and planning. From the outset, *Towards a Shared Culture of Architecture – Investing in a high-quality living environment for everyone* includes the open landscape but also encompasses the built and the unbuilt, and in-between spaces. High-quality architecture relates to the planning and pro-

duction processes that shape our surroundings, while also being concerned with craftsmanship and the planning of developments in various forms. In addition to the quality of contemporary creation, it includes the concept of cultural heritage and its preservation. How we shape our environment as a whole is an expression of our culture, or *Baukultur*. The built environment requires a comprehensive, culture-centred approach on how to design the places in which we live, and to ensure that the legacy that society leaves behind is of value. High-quality design solutions develop common values because they not only fulfil functional, technical and economic demands, but also connect people and promote social interaction.

The experience of how we have used spaces and places during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted that access to quality housing, outdoor space and natural recreation is hugely important to our existence and our well-being. For too long, however, the overall objective of quality architecture and a quality living environment, with all its key aspects, has been neglected, and has been limited to functional, technical and economic aspects. What is often ignored is that a quality living space not only meets functional, technical, ecological and economic requirements, but also fulfils design objectives when it comes to aesthetic, social and psychological aspects and cultural needs, such as a sense of belonging.

Promoting a sense of place

Ideally, high-quality spatial design generates lively and mixed-use neighbourhoods and counters isolation and segregation by creating contemporary places that can reference past traditions, while at the same time integrating new cultural values and supporting diversity and biodiversity. As places, especially cities and peri-urban areas, are becoming increasingly heterogeneous and complex, diversity-oriented urban planning has been essential in meeting the various needs of different communities in modern societies. High-quality design solutions are the basis of all places that fit into the local context and respond to it. There is a dynamic relationship between diversity in society and diversity in the built environment, which in turn has an impact on society and can be crucial for empow-

ering local stakeholders. Architecture and spatial planning explore and affect the surrounding landscape, whether it is urban or non-urban. Improving the liveability and attractiveness of rural life has also helped to counter rural flight.

An integrated approach – the value of dialogue

As this expert group was at work, the European Commission launched the New European Bauhaus (NEB), which aims at transforming the European Green Deal into a new cultural project, beyond its technological or economic dimensions. While it goes beyond traditional ideas about the built environment, the NEB (along with several other initiatives mentioned below) has a considerable amount of overlap with the conclusions of this report, as it calls for architectural quality and design thinking as key contributors to the transformational movement it wants to inspire. The NEB initiative aims to create a design movement that simultaneously integrates three dimensions: sustainability, quality of experience (aesthetics) and inclusion (which also covers affordability and accessibility). This report feeds into the design and implementation of the NEB, and thus the Green Deal, since the built environment requires a comprehensive, culture-centred approach on how to design the places in which we live. Given the significant momentum the NEB has gathered, it will play a key role in helping to implement the principles and visions laid out in this report.

Architects and designers as part of the response to global challenges

Over time, many different people will have shaped the built environment, including decision-makers, architects, designers and planners. Much of the responsibility lies with architects, as they often play a central role in all spatial development phases, often leading the process. Architects and designers are well-placed brokers between different lines of work and of expertise, such as engineering, technology, material sciences and social studies. Architects have a solid track record in interrogating the quality of the built environment, and are therefore well equipped to use their knowledge, experience and capacity to spark discussions about quality goals for the built environment. Beyond a clear vision and the leading role of architects, all stakeholders – especially the public sector, but also the private sector – have the responsibility to ensure that quality goals are met to their best available knowledge.

European developments in policymaking for high-quality architecture

The European architectural policy was initiated about 20 years ago. The foundation of this policy rests on two pillars. It exists, on the one hand, thanks to the political documents adopted by the Council. As early as 2001, the Council resolution on architectural quality in urban and rural environments had already flagged new architecture as 'the heritage of tomorrow'. It encouraged Member States to 'promote architectural quality by means of exemplary public building policies', including through Structural Funds. In addition, the Council conclusions on architecture from December 2008 highlighted culture's contribution to sustainable development, including architecture's capacity to help raise awareness and mainstream a 'high-quality living environment'.

On the other hand, the launch of the EU Prize for Contemporary Architecture – Mies van der Rohe Award in 2001 played a key role in highlighting outstanding works of architecture and best practices in Europe. The recommendations in this report build on recent cross-European developments, such as the Davos Process, the New Leipzig Charter, the urban agenda for the EU, the Green Deal and, as mentioned above, the NEB. In global terms, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets out a goal on inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities (No 11) [1]. All of these developments and initiatives build momentum, as there is now a sense of urgency to shift our thinking from people to the planet and to act on climate change. This development should not take its toll on citizens' quality of life, however. The world is also becoming increasingly urbanised. Since 2007, more than half the world's population has been living in cities, and that share is projected to rise to 60 % by 2030 [2]. When talking about urban life, we undoubtedly need to consider a very multilayered picture, as the city has become the most common living environment. A better understanding of the urban environment and its cultural layers over time will help to make better use of its potential and, in turn, help its inhabitants lead a better, more fulfilled life.

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[1]   https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/cities/
See also *An architecture guide to the UN 17 sustainable development goals*: https://issuu.com/kadk/docs/aechitecture_guide_un17_vol.2_web_single_pages

[2]   Further information: https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/goal-11.

CONCEPTS AND CRITERIA OF QUALITY

In line with the 2018 Davos Declaration, the Davos Baukultur Quality System (DBQS) was developed recently to deliver a comprehensive definition of high-quality *Baukultur*. This system enables its assessment, reviewing existing systems, research and observations. The DBQS offers eight fundamental quality criteria, each of which describes an aspect of high-quality *Baukultur*: governance, functionality, environment, economy, diversity, context, sense of place and beauty ([3]). Each criterion is linked to a quality principle, while a set of key questions allows the assessment of a place to establish its future quality. The quality principles relate to different aspects of the built environment, whereby appropriate weight is attributed to each quality criterion depending on the nature and level of the spatial intervention. All quality criteria should be applied to all spatial interventions. However, each criterion is taken into account differently, for example at the landscape, building or interior scale.

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([3]) Davos Baukultur Quality System, May 2021:
http://www.davosdeclaration2018.ch/quality-system. The quality system includes an assessment form with a questionnaire for each of the eight criteria. This questionnaire can be adapted to the specific situation of a place or project, and can be expanded if necessary. The completed questionnaire is used to determine the *Baukultur* quality of a place, along with its strengths and weaknesses from a *Baukultur* perspective. If a more detailed analysis is needed, the quality system proposes a comprehensive (but not definitive) list of indicators to choose from. These can be used with self-defined benchmark values to help with the analysis of a specific place.

The report highlights case studies that embody all or some of the eight quality criteria that are part of the DBQS. The OMC group sought out positive examples of high quality in architecture and the built environment from the respective countries of its members. The following eight categories were defined in response to recently emerging EU topics, themes, activities and the impact of the recent pandemic:

- awards,

- laws and policies,

- education and awareness raising,

- regeneration, revitalisation and adaptive reuse,

- tools, processes and research,

- funding and investment,

- grassroots initiatives,

- technical innovation
  (reused materials, new technologies).
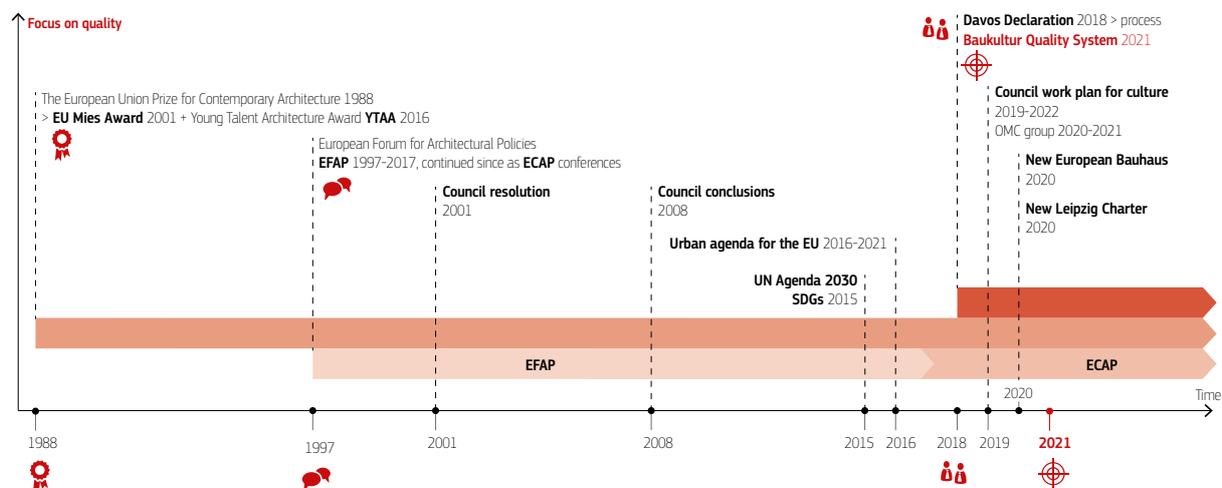
From 2015 onwards the European policy framework has started to pay more and more attention to quality aspects.

Overall, 76 case studies were collected and presented in a matrix, demonstrating a broad range of existing best practices across Europe. Subsequently, 33 case studies stood out as being the most distinctive and representative within the eight categories mentioned above, and are highlighted in this report.

The driving role of the public sector

Bearing in mind that the built environment is a reflection of a community and that the responsibility for its overall quality rests largely in the hands of the public sector, public authorities should champion the value of spatial design as an integral part of public policy to foster a culture of quality and placemaking. Europe has witnessed the widespread use of national architectural or urban policies to address the quality of architecture and the built environment. Since the 1990s the number of administrations that have adopted official documents on architectural policy has grown remarkably. This number is expected to continue to grow. Regardless of their typology, architectural policies across Member States advance the legal framework at all administrative and political levels to ensure they are quality driven. They are also leading examples of how to embed quality principles into a multilevel governance system. The European Forum for Architectural Policies (EFAP) allowed for policy exchange among Member States and led to the publication of a *Survey on Architectural Policies in Europe* in 2012 ([4]).

Several countries/regions and organisations have appointed a state architect team (or similar, such as the *bouwmeester* in Belgium and the Netherlands, an architectural council or the Master Architect at the European Commission) within their administration. Their role is to provide design leadership and strategic advice to governments/institutions, to improve the design of public interventions, to promote spatial quality and to foster a culture of placemaking. Next to the success of state architect (and similar) teams, a quality assurance system of *Gestaltungsbeiräte* exists as a common practice in central Europe. These are independent advisory bodies for countries, cities or even villages (such as in Vorarlberg, Austria), consisting of experts from other geographical areas and without a personal interest in the place, rotating every 2 to 4 years. To give another example, in France there are regional advisers in place, representing another model that functions well.

The report provides a quality assessment checklist, which complies with both the DBQS and the *European quality principles for EU-funded interventions with potential impact upon cultural heritage* ([5]). Best practices can be improved by using a quality assessment tool to make balanced decisions on alternative design for spaces and their use. The public sector can demonstrate leadership by implementing a quality assessment system in investments as part of planning processes – in weighing up investment and location alternatives, in property development and management, in public procurement procedures, in the evaluation of funding proposals, in preparing briefs (e.g. for spatial planning or design), etc. Answering the quality assessment questions can improve sensitivity to and the recognition of places with high-quality *Baukultur* among all societal and functional groups (specialists and non-specialists) and build up knowledge and general awareness about quality issues relating to the built environment.

([4])   Available at: http://www.efap-fepa.org/docs/EFAP_Survey_Book_2012.pdf

([5])   International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) European Quality Principles, 2020: https://www.icomos.org/en/about-icomos/committees/regional-activities-europe/90984-quality-principles-new-version-available

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS IN BRIEF

These recommendations directly address the key tasks identified by the OMC expert group. Aiming for the following goals will help create a high-quality living environment for everyone.

High-quality procedures and solutions become best-practice models. As guidance on how to improve the built environment for everyone, the highly relevant quality principles mapped out in the Davos Declaration (6) and the DBQS should become best practices in both the public and the private sectors, alongside the eight quality criteria provided in this report. No governance decision should reduce the quality of a place. We have inherited the built environment we live in, with its already existing spatial context. Balancing (sometimes conflicting) interests in the decision-making process should always result in a compromise that improves the built environment for as many people as possible – for everyone, for as long as possible.

Everybody has access to knowledge about quality. It is essential to raise awareness of the topic early on. Good examples of how we can improve spatial knowledge and skills exist in formal and informal education to equip the next generation with a better understanding of the challenges and qualities of the built environment. There are many useful examples of how greater awareness of the topic among the general population has a positive impact on all built developments in the long run (see case studies presented under 'Awards' and 'Education and awareness raising' in the report).

Decision-makers subscribe to quality. The decision-making processes for the built environment become a success if as much knowledge and competence as possible is invested at all administrative levels. High-quality design solutions must be based on knowledge, and must have the currently available and, for every place, the most suitable knowledge built into them. In addition, they should ideally bring forward the development of new knowledge and skills. All decisions on the design and use of space have a long-term impact on the living environment. For decision-making and planning processes to be very well informed about the standards and expectations around quality, decision-makers should have the most relevant information at their disposal. Such spatial competence (subscribing to quality) will result in greater expertise and accountability when making and implementing decisions that influence the development of spaces (see case studies presented under 'Laws and policies' and 'Tools, processes and research' in the report).

Co-creation with quality in mind. The principles of participatory co-creation are at the heart of all decision-making processes concerning the built environment at all governance levels (including decisions on funding, location, design brief, construction drawings, etc.). Alternative plans are open to deliberation and discussion with all people and organisations whose legal rights and fields of action might be affected by the decision (see recommendations for participatory processes and co-creation).

Consistent planning to achieve quality. The Davos quality principles on *Baukultur* are used as a blueprint throughout strategic planning processes and are referenced in all relevant documents at all governance levels. They form the basis for informed choices and decisions on planning and design at all departmental and administrative levels. This is particularly relevant for considerations on high-quality architecture across the entire building life cycle: this involves adopting the quality principles during the planning, building and transformation or recycling process, as well as rethinking issues of revitalisation and reuse in terms of the quality goals (see case studies presented under 'Regeneration, revitalisation and adaptive reuse' in the report).
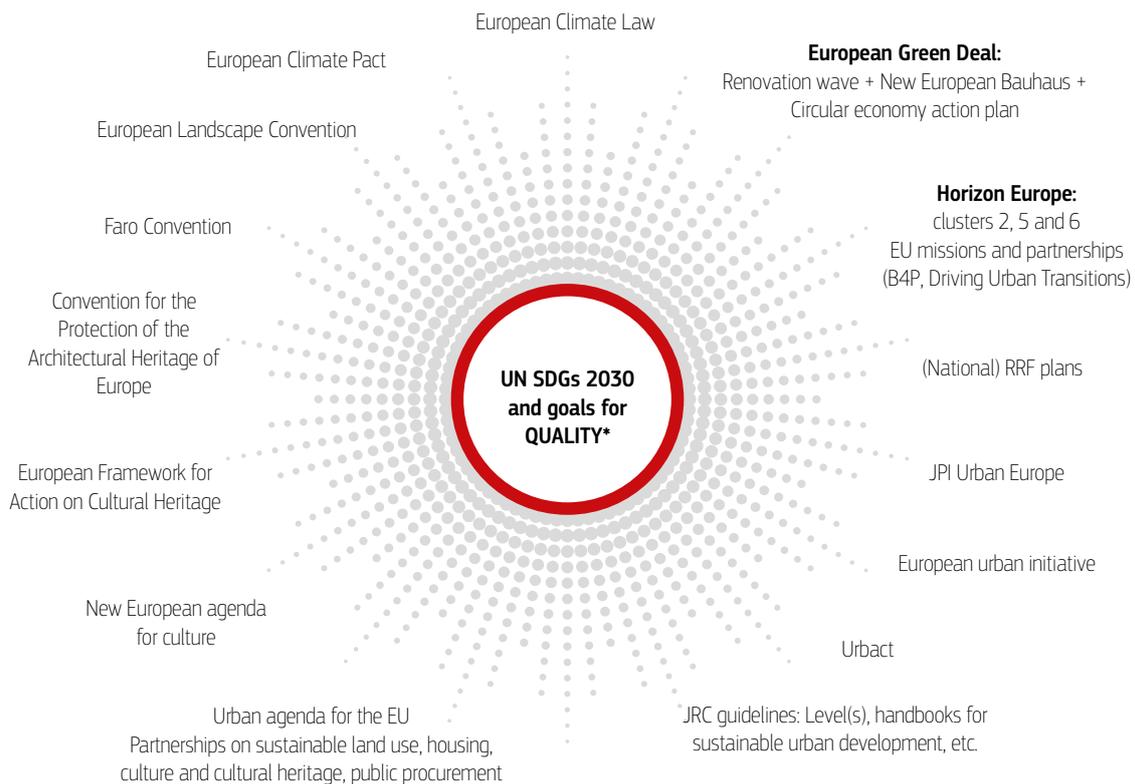
Regulations, standards and guidelines help to achieve quality. Legal acts, standards and guidelines support the implementation of *Baukultur* quality principles, complemented with quality principles where appropriate. The principles should be of relevance at the initial drafting stage of regulations, standards and guidelines. It is important to ensure that public procurement rules and procedures at the national, regional and local levels foster a quality-based approach over a solely cost-based one, that quality is the basis for procuring intellectual services (e.g. engineering, landscape or urban design) and that the best practices for conducting public architecture and urban planning competitions are followed. Funding measures and investment mechanisms need to target the quality of the built environment (see case studies presented under 'Laws and policies' and 'Funding and investment' in the report).

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(6) Further information:
https://davosdeclaration2018.ch/davos-declaration-2018

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

Regarding the vision for the future, the European built environment and the architecture of tomorrow should be of high quality and to the benefit of everyone. The quality of our spaces and places is of vital importance to the recovery of Europe, as quality in architecture and our built environment contributes fundamentally to our well-being. Leaving no one behind, European multidisciplinary and participatory urban governance models and innovative actions need to foster social inclusion, adapt to climate change and promote the sustainable development of neighbourhoods in cities and rural areas through an integrated and culture-centred approach. The fields of architecture and spatial design continue to play a key role in driving quality standards. The knowledge and skills of professionals and experts in the field should therefore be integrated firmly into spatial development processes at all levels. Research and development, grassroots initiatives, (temporary) adaptive reuse, culture-led social innovation and co-creation can make significant contributions to the quality of our built environment. One major challenge is that of ensuring that citizens, organisations and authorities are well aware of their responsibilities and their ability to improve the future built environment for everyone. In line with the recently launched NEB, it is a joint effort to make the living spaces of tomorrow more beautiful, inclusive and sustainable.

European Climate Law

European Climate Pact

European Green Deal:
Renovation wave + New European Bauhaus +
Circular economy action plan

European Landscape Convention

Horizon Europe:
clusters 2, 5 and 6
EU missions and partnerships
(B4P, Driving Urban Transitions)

Faro Convention

Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe

(National) RRF plans

UN SDGs 2030 and goals for QUALITY*

European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage

JPI Urban Europe

European urban initiative

New European agenda for culture

Urbact

Urban agenda for the EU
Partnerships on sustainable land use, housing, culture and cultural heritage, public procurement

JRC guidelines: Level(s), handbooks for sustainable urban development, etc.

* set by Davos process, New Leipzig Charter, EU Mies Awards and national architecture policies

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Quality-driven approaches should inform various existing and future policy areas, initiatives and work programmes. Quality aspects in architecture are not yet included in all relevant policies, initiatives and programmes, although considerations relating to cultural heritage and *Baukultur* are already, to some extent, embedded in cohesion policy. It is crucial to include quality criteria when drafting relevant new work programmes and when updating policies, strategies, regulations and guidelines. It is also important to share best practices and implement quality-assessment systems in funding mechanisms.

The report shows how the culture of quality architecture and a quality living environment could be developed across Europe. Quality projects can only emerge from interdisciplinary discourse, innovative funding schemes and with the active participation of informed citizens. New and effective models of participation can help civil society to organise itself with the aim of influencing the design of the built environment. That is why spatial design and architecture should not be seen as separate services or areas of expertise, but part of the multidisciplinary response to social and policy demands. Beyond highlighting the driving role of the public sector in advancing placemaking culture, the recommendations turn society's attention towards raising spatial awareness and towards the education and skills of the next generation. Spatial awareness, spatial thinking and understanding of place and cultural heritage give us as a society the opportunity to imagine and shape a better living environment.

Since altering spaces is costly, the quality of the built environment is closely linked to its adaptability and future-proofing. Regarding the global shift in sustainability and climate goals, it is important to take into account how (at what cost) the spatial solutions can be adapted in future, contributing to the overall quality of our living environment. Thus, most importantly, it is recommended that all future investments, regulatory frameworks and relevant EU funding programmes (cohesion policy funds, the Euro-pean Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, Horizon Europe and its relevant missions, creative Europe and Erasmus+, among others), along with national, regional and local funding and investment opportunities, contribute to the quality of the built environment, notably by integrating the Davos quality criteria into their relevant programmes, guidelines and calls (as well as their revisions). It is vital to embed the quality criteria in all decision-making processes concerning and governing design at multiple levels, especially the national, regional and local levels.

Ultimately, as evidenced by the collected case studies and underlined by the recommendations in this report, high-quality design and well-considered interventions can sustain the life and authenticity of cultural assets and prevent the adverse loss of their cultural significance. Yet, beautiful, liveable and lovable towns, villages and landscapes with local identity can only be created if quality standards are met throughout the process of planning and building, from ideation to completion and reuse. As such, this report aims to pave the way towards a comprehensive culture-centred approach to the built environment, demonstrating how to improve the design processes of the places in which we live, and to ensure that the legacy that society leaves not only fulfils functional, technical and economic demands, but also connects people and promotes social interaction.

The full report with more resources (detailed presentation of the case studies and podcasts) will also be available at https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/high-quality-built-environment/en/ by the end of 2021.