

Form follows Love

Contribution from the webinar “Spirituality, Sustainability and Style” to the design phase of the New European Bauhaus Initiative

On 15 April 2020 the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) and the Pontifical Council for Culture organized a webinar¹ on the *New European Bauhaus* in the light of the Encyclical letter *Laudato Si*. The following synthesis of the webinar is a contribution to the design phase of the *New European Bauhaus* launched by the European Commission.

In 2015, Pope Francis addressed his Encyclical letter *Laudato Si*’ not only to Catholics, but “to every person living on this planet”. It was an invitation for an inclusive dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. In the spirit of *Laudato Si*’, the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) have responded to the appeal of the President of the European Commission Ursula van der Leyen to set up a *New European Bauhaus* for the social and ecological transition proposed in the European Green Deal. On 15 April 2021, the webinar “*Spirituality, Sustainability and Style*” brought together architects, urbanists, historians and theologians from three continents.

As understood from the main messages of the webinar “*Spirituality, Sustainability and Style*” and in the light of the Encyclical letter *Laudato Si*’, the initiative of the *New European Bauhaus*, with its dimensions of inclusion, sustainability and aesthetics, should strive for an integrated approach to housing and living spaces. One should also bear in mind the need for an **active involvement and participation of all citizens**, their inclusion in decision-making and co-creation of spaces. The various phases of the initiative should pay attention to **best practices and existing examples** from the whole society and consider the **contribution that the Catholic Church and religious communities can offer** for the design of spaces that are more inclusive and sustainable.

The following messages are drawn from the presentations and exchanges during the online event. They address the main **interpretative issues** arising from the ideas of the Bauhaus movement in relation to the Commission’s initiative and they **focus on practices** to be privileged when rethinking and building living spaces in a European context and from a global perspective. Most importantly, they highlight the **valuable contribution that the Encyclical letter *Laudato Si*’ and Churches can provide** to the discussion around inclusion, sustainability and aesthetics, pinpointing the practices of Churches in the **reuse and adaptation of religious buildings**.

1. The Bauhaus movement and the New European Bauhaus: the need for differentiation

Contrary to the original Bauhaus movement in the early 20th century, the *New European Bauhaus* should advance the idea that the **success of a building will not depend solely on its functionality**. According to Researcher and Professor Anna Minta² in fact, the historical

¹ The full video of the webinar can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJ8EkKoGqc0>

² Dr Anna Minta is professor of History and Theory of Architecture at the Catholic Private University of Linz.

Bauhaus of the 1920s did not take into account environment and spirituality, since “it developed a rather normative and hegemonic concept of design and, with its unbroken belief in functionalism and technology, it had only little interest in environmental concerns and spiritual values”. Moreover, it is important to **distinguish between different phases of the highly dynamic Bauhaus movement**, which tended to call for a return to the spirit of architecture and the ultimate unification of all disciplines [architecture, sculpture and painting] through the action of craftsmen, while, in a second phase, it ended up exalting the unity between technology and art. It is the latter Bauhaus concept that stands for “an unquestionable belief in technology and progress without references to natural resources and human concerns”.

Although the link between the Bauhaus and Catholicism is explicitly absent, in the same years of the Bauhaus, Christian reform movements tried to **combine ambitions in social reforms together with architecture**, both in the civic and the religious spheres. Prof. Anna Minta states that such ambitious reforms, if not directly included in the authentic Bauhaus movement, started to be increasingly present at least in modernist architecture.

In light of such particularities of the Bauhaus movement, it is worth, however, pointing out that the aesthetical purity following this approach has informed and inspired contemporary taste. The original Bauhaus movement was most influential in its teachings around the **need for abstraction and minimalization, equality and neutrality**, forward-looking measures and the concept of wholeness of people, life and the designed environment.

According to Prof. Minta, the Bauhaus movement can teach us to **question critically existing normative categories and conventions** and explore the fundamentals, as well as the essential transformative (and healing) aspects of architecture. It is necessary, however, in light of the current challenges of globalisation and sustainability, to **analyse the built environment in its social potential**, not only to address ecology and the climate crisis, but to ensure respect, justice, equity and therefore create spaces, which integrate and share identity and appreciate cultural and social diversity. Social and ecological process should always go hand in hand with discussions on architecture and urban design.

2. Everything is interconnected

“It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected...Given the scale of change, it is no longer possible to find a specific, discrete answer for each part of the problem. It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions that consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.” (Laudato Si’ 138-139).

The *New European Bauhaus* ought to combine the social and ecological processes with architecture and design in order to respond to the unavoidable overlaying of all dimensions of our life today. **Interconnectedness**, as pointed out in *Laudato Si’* (see above), is not only a **guiding hermeneutical principle for the understanding of the deep ecological and social crisis**, it also provides an orientation for finding appropriate solutions. It is key to an innovative approach to architecture, design and urban planning. Thus, the *New European Bauhaus* should look at architecture and design not only from the end-product or the creative spark at the outset, but through the whole process. Because of the social and environmental interconnectedness, an

integrated perspective would consider land and property policies, focus on all aspects of the everyday environment (e.g. fashion, food, transport, etc.)³, reflect on historical and geographical data, refer to long-term trends like climate change, migration and digitalization. Above all, it should **involve people in such processes of integrated co-creation and cooperation**, overcoming borders and ensuring common responses and best practices exchanges to address impelling global challenges.

3. The need for participation and inclusion

“Given the interrelationship between living space and human behaviour, those who design buildings, neighbourhoods, public spaces and cities, ought to draw on the various disciplines which help us to understand people’s thought processes, symbolic language and ways of acting. It is not enough to seek the beauty of design. More precious still is the service we offer to another kind of beauty: people’s quality of life, their adaptation to the environment, encounter and mutual assistance. Here too, we see how important it is that urban planning always take into consideration the views of those who will live in these areas.” (*Laudato Si’* 150).

Today, buildings for public and private purpose and urban infrastructures are mostly planned and constructed without the contribution and involvement of the people for whom they are made. Following the idea of the interconnectedness of everything, planning and building needs to involve people, and especially the most disadvantaged. **Including communities and citizens in the shaping of buildings**, supposes methodologically the necessity of **looking at the most disadvantaged strands of society**. In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis addresses the housing issues that characterise both rural and urban areas, calling for support to the fight against “urban ghettos” and stressing the necessity to place human dignity at the forefront of our concerns.⁴

According to architect Anna Heringer, **architecture is a powerful tool for change and for improving lives**. To achieve this goal, one should always look at the already existing potential, without excessively relying on external resources. For instance, in one of her practice’s projects in Bangladesh⁵, a school was built from local materials and local labour sources, relying on bamboo and earth as raw elements for the construction of almost the whole of the building. Most importantly, the project was implemented with the participation of the whole community (children, elderly people, people with disability, men and women) – **an approach that both built confidence** in the capacities of the community members and **fostered social cohesion**.

In light of this example, the **process of building becomes as important as that of planning and designing**. The construction phase requires the involvement of local communities for whom a public building is conceived, offering work and the satisfaction to contribute to a meaningful collective endeavour. The story of a house becomes the story of the people who live in it and use it. **Collective building** helps a community to affirm itself and to share an identity.

³ Cf. Fr. Alberto Ambrosio op in his statement at the webinar: “There is in the Bauhaus movement what in theological and Christian terms we might call an incarnational principle, because its ideas don’t just focus on the architectural aesthetics but permeate all dimension of everyday life”

⁴ As stated by panellist Prof. Maryvonne Prévot, with reference to Pope Francis’ Encyclical letter *Laudato Si’*, pt. 152

⁵ For more information: <https://www.anna-heringer.com/projects/meti-school-bangladesh/>

Moreover, associating people throughout all construction phases is much easier with the use of easily applicable techniques and materials. **Age-old techniques and traditional materials** often respond to this requirement much better than new ones in developing countries where sources are scarce, though within the European Union using them is the most expensive way of building. Two further projects by Studio Anna Heringer - one for a Campus of St. Michael⁶ with the support of the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising, and the second one concerning the construction of an altar in Worms Cathedral⁷ - showed how construction with earth (a basic material to be found in nature, yet highly expensive in Europe) and the participation of the community are two of the most essential elements in making architecture meaningful and able to respond to the need for positive relationships in our societies. Furthermore, such best practices highlight the **role of Churches and religious communities as agents of change in the promotion of socially shared architecture and design**, while also bearing responsibility for the major part of Europe's religious heritage.

The *New European Bauhaus* should tell, above all, the story of people and the communities they form. As stated by architect Anna Heringer, “earth construction, carbon neutral production and socially fair implementation have a vital impact on climate change mitigation and social injustices. [...] We need more meaningful and beautiful architecture. Beauty is a formal expression of love and building out of love for the planet and every human being - this means we do it sustainably. The new mantra for new architecture globally is not form follows function, but **form follows love**”.

4. The role of the Catholic Church and the reconversion of religious buildings

“This patrimony is a part of the shared identity of each place and a foundation upon which to build a habitable city. It is not a matter of tearing down and building new cities, supposedly more respectful of the environment yet not always more attractive to live in. Rather, there is a need to incorporate the history, culture and architecture of each place, thus preserving its original identity.” (Laudato Si’ 143)

This quote from Pope Francis’ encyclical letter highlights the **need for reshaping and adapting our existing communities and living spaces**, so as they can maintain their original identity and can foster sustainable inclusion of all. In his concluding remarks to the webinar Mgr. Paul Tighe, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Culture, stressed that *Laudato Si’* points out **how dependent we are upon the built environment we live in**. It is for this reason that we need the contribution of all (architects, economists, politicians, etc.) to shape an inclusive and sustainable environment. However, some considerations have to be made: firstly, we should look at inequalities at all levels and strive to make co-creation a possible principle of action; secondly, we ought to address the question of aging in cities, since in the future they will struggle to provide basic services to each person.

In light of such considerations, Pope Francis speaks of the **creativity needed to make cities more liveable, welcoming and true places of encounter**: “How beautiful those cities which overcome paralyzing mistrust, integrate those who are different and make this very integration a new factor of development! How attractive are those cities which, even in their architectural design, are full of spaces which connect, relate and favour the recognition of others!”.⁸ When

⁶ For more information: <https://www.anna-heringer.com/projects/campus-stmichael/>

⁷ For more information: <https://www.anna-heringer.com/projects/wormser-doms-sanctuary-interiors/>

⁸ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, pt. 152

cities become places of encounter, inequalities and social marginalisation can be tackled more effectively. Churches can respond to the need of encounter, if we keep them alive and if they become sanctuaries of peace, recollection and welcome for those in need, for the homeless, the forgotten and the poor.

Church buildings are a hallmark of Europe's urban culture. Usually, they stand in the centre of each town and village. More importantly they are very often local hallmarks. As a building, they largely contribute to the uniqueness of a place. Today, however, their size often does not match their actual function, because of changes in religious practice in Europe. Attendance to religious services has changed, diminished or even ceased. During the webinar, COMECE President, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich also addressed the question of **welcoming homeless and vulnerable people in churches**, mentioning that, if a church is deconsecrated and not destined to cult, then it can still take on its role of house of God by welcoming people into its sanctuary. **Repurposing of churches and church building**, therefore, becomes one of the solutions to make living spaces more inclusive, sustainable and strengthen communities by providing meaningful support to marginalised sectors of society.

Examples of such practices are numerous: in Cologne, the Convent of the Poor Clares⁹ was converted by the archdiocese of the city in an integrative housing project, with 43 flats for refugees and local residents, as well as offices and meeting rooms. The building maintained its religious function, since it kept the church, mainly used for Masses and educational activities. The former convent is connected to a square linking the residential complex with the popular district of Cologne, so that new residents can better integrate in the city. Another example can be found in the rehabilitation and renovation of the former Saint-Yves Seminary¹⁰ in the Diocese of Saint-Brieuc in France. The building respects the latest energy standards and hosts now offices and meeting rooms. It also raises awareness about the cultural heritage value of the place, with guided tours, cultural activities and religious exhibition. A facility in the complex is also dedicated to families in precarious situations.

Therefore, a specific *kairós* arises from the **convergence between the initiative of the New European Bauhaus and the commitment of Churches** to accompany the ecological and social crises through designing, planning and construction of buildings and living spaces. The story of the cathedral in Salisbury (England) that was transformed into a temporary vaccination centre, where citizens awaiting their vaccination could listen to the music played on the church organ, can be meaningful for the role that Churches and religious communities can play in the current pandemic.

The **message of *Laudato Si'***, with its focus on integral ecology, is a **powerful contribution to the initiative of the New European Bauhaus**. Moreover, the role of Churches and religious communities in fostering practices of linking together sustainability, inclusion and aesthetics – the three objectives of the Commission's initiative – is essential, since it can represent and **bring into action positive practices of community building, inclusiveness, welcoming and valorisation of existing spaces** and environments. The *New European Bauhaus*, in its endeavour to become a bottom-up movement that is inclusive, sustainable and cultural, should take into account the current contribution of all. The use of traditional materials should be encouraged and projects of community participation be fostered. Finally, **rethinking the**

⁹ Klarissenkloster in Köln-Kalk. For more information, <https://www.caritas-koeln.de/hilfe-beratung/migration/klarissenkloster>

¹⁰ Maison Saint-Yves in the Diocese of Saint-Brieuc and Tréguier. For more information, <https://saintbrieuc-treguier.catholique.fr/maison-saint-yves/>

spiritual and social use of church buildings might become an important focus for the *New European Bauhaus*.

Spirituality, Sustainability and Style

A joint webinar event and dialogue session of the Pontifical Council for Culture and COMECE on the *New European Bauhaus* initiative

Thursday 15 April 2021, 17:00 – 19:10 CEST

The recent launch of the ***New European Bauhaus*** by the European Commission marks a step forward in how the European Union intends to connect the European Green Deal with living spaces. The initiative calls for contributions of all Europeans to **co-create a sustainable, inclusive and aesthetic future through innovation, creativity and interdisciplinarity** of approaches. The idea is to overcome a purely technical approach to the European Green Deal and transform it into a cultural and social movement. The webinar “*Spirituality, Sustainability and Style*”, organised by the **Pontifical Council for Culture** and **COMECE**, aims to contribute to the *New European Bauhaus* initiative and to create a platform for dialogue, by offering a key of interpretation in the light of Pope Francis’ Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’*. The webinar will gather architects, policymakers and theologians and allow all participants to **exchange on the links between beauty, social inclusion, sustainability and spirituality** in urban and living spaces.

What are links between the *New European Bauhaus* initiative and the message of Pope Francis’ Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’*? Where to find best practices to shape more inclusive and sustainable living spaces in Europe? How to ensure true innovative solutions for current and future challenges in our way of living and building? These and other questions will be at the centre of the webinar on **Thursday 15 April 2021, from 17:00 to 19:10 CEST**.

Zoom link:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89235304174?pwd=YnRlcmhUTVhCUGM2VEpOU0VN TIN2QT09>

Passcode: 868729

PROGRAMME

WELCOME AND OPENING REMARKS

17:00 – 17:10

H. Em. Card. Jean-Claude Hollerich SJ, President of COMECE and Member of the Pontifical Council for Culture

INITIAL REFLECTION

17:10 – 17:50

The New Bauhaus Initiative and the encyclical letter “Laudato Si” of Pope Francis

P. Alberto Fabio Ambrosio op, Professor of Theology and History of Religions at the Luxemburg School of Religion and Society

Anna Minta, Professor of History and Architecture at the Catholic Private University of Linz

Xavier Troussard, Head of Unit *New European Bauhaus* at the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission

BEST PRACTICES AND DISCUSSION

17.50 – 19.00

Function and Meaning - Caring for climate and nature, for people and community

Philip Bess, Professor and Architect at the University of Notre Dame, USA

Anna Heringer, Architect and winner of the 2020 OBEL AWARD, Germany

Demas Nwoko, Artist and Architect, Nigeria

Maryvonne Prévot, Professor of Urbanism at Lille University, France

CONCLUSIONS

19.00 – 19.10

H. E. Mgr. Paul Tighe, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Culture

Moderator

Dr. Ellen Rowley, Professor for History of Art and Architecture at University College Dublin