

## Architectural policy programmes – European co-operation to ensure quality in the housing and living environments

Architecture policy supports the creation of and care for a high-quality built environment.

The incentive and objective of these initiatives is a built environment with rich temporal and intellectual layers that can be renewed intelligently and that raises the quality of life and self-esteem of its residents and attracts cultural and economic activity.

Architectural policy became an international phenomenon in Europe in the 1990s. One of the factors behind its emergence was civic action inspired by rapid internationalization and the opening-up of economies at the end of the century and the increased need of states and regions to strengthen their own competitiveness and identity.

**Finland's architectural policy programme** was adopted at the highest possible level, the Council of State (Government), in December 1998. Alongside that of the Netherlands, it is one of the first and most widely known architectural policy programmes. It was immediately translated into several languages (Swedish, English, German, French) and it has been used as a cultural policy example in a number of European countries. For some years ago it was translated even in Arabic.

**The European Forum for Architectural Policies (EFAP-FEPA)** network was set up as a joint initiative by Finland and France during the French EU Presidency in 2000. The aim of the forum is to influence the preconditions for architectural creation at the European level, to support national programme work through international networking and to gain information about other countries' experiences.

The network usually meets twice per year in the country which at that moment exercises the presidency of the European Union. Besides having enriched architectural policy work in member countries the EFAP has also acted under the umbrella of EU presidencies as a catalyst for vital milestone documents of the built environment, such as **Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities** by the informal ministerial meeting on urban development and territorial cohesion (24-25.5.2007), the **Council Conclusions on architecture: culture's contribution to sustainable development** by the European ministers of culture (Brussels 20.11.2008) and the official **Statement on the subject "The sustainable and cohesive city"** by the Ministers in charge of urban development (Marseille 25.10.2008).



## Finland as an architectural policy country

### The first local programmes

Jyväskylä and Oulu (2002), Province of Eastern Finland (2000)

### Seminars

organized by the Ministry of Education, the Finnish National Council for Architecture and the Ministry of the Environment

3 December 2004 for persons influencing and planners of the built environment: *Polyphonic planning – Architectural policy programmes as a tool for municipalities and public administration*

12 January 2006 a meeting point for municipalities and regions drawing up architectural policy programmes: *Future visions, everyday tools or binding directives*

24.9.2008 for stakeholders of the built environment: *Holistic and Sustainable! New Challenges of Localities and Regions*

19-21 October 2006 a combined invitational conference and meeting of the EFAP-FEPA network entitled *Celebrating the Everyday - Aspects of Architectural Policies* as part of the Finnish EU Presidency programme.

### Programmes completed in 2006-2009

The cities of Vantaa, Turku, Lappeenranta, Kuopio, Tampere and Helsinki as well as Varsinais-Suomi, Häme and Uusimaa regions

### Programmes due for completion

The towns of Lohja, Lahti, Rauma, Pori, Kankaanpää

### Programme work in progress

Espoo, Pietarsaari, Seinäjoki, Vaasa, Oulu (evaluation and updating of 1st progr.), Jyväskylä (2nd progr.), Nurmijärvi, Tyrnävä, Lumijoki, Inkoo, Hanko Hamina, Sipoo, Lempäälä, Raasepori, Satakunta and Kymenlaakso regions

## Architectural policy as a challenge and an opportunity

Voluntary local architectural policy programmes are an interesting illustration of a change in Finland's administrative culture. More and more localities consider that holistic development of the municipality is vital for the amenity and well-being of both inhabitants and companies. A quality-built environment is clearly emerging as a European welfare and competitive advantage. Given this trend, the traditional administrative approach, with a narrow sectoral focus, is not always an adequate recipe for success.

### The built environment as an appeal factor

In the wake of the government programme (1998), the first local architectural policy programmes in Finland were in Jyväskylä and Oulu (2002) and in the Province of Eastern Finland (2000). As of now, five further regions and more than 20 municipalities, including the five largest in Finland, have decided to improve their competitiveness and the quality of the living environment by drawing up an architectural policy programme. There has also recently been an upsurge of interest in the construction sector in devising corporate architectural strategies.

Why do localities make architectural policy programmes? Municipal programmes and preparatory documents provide us with the following answers and reasons: "In urban construction the lifecycle of solutions is measured in decades and centuries. The costs of planning are minimal compared to the costs of construction and maintenance." (Vantaa) / "The main aim of architectural policy in Tampere is to raise the level of Tampere's city planning, construction and maintenance of the urban environment. The programme will be compiled in close interaction with the city's residents and stakeholders in the construction sector." / "The programme makes a quality built environment and architecture a fundamental right and a factor for success in Varsinais-Suomi, the guiding principle being well-being and amenity in the living environment." / "Turku's architectural policy programme is about how to develop and manage our living environment so that the city remains attractive and retains its vitality for future generations. Turku cannot afford to waste the values that it has built up over its long history."

### Municipalities invest in the quality of the living environment

Architectural policy programmes offer a natural means to observe the built environment as holistic organic cultural-economic capital, an indicator of the quality of life and vitality of the locality, its visible sign being high-quality management of the environment (restoration – conservation – everyday maintenance) and culturally sustainable new construction, which are inseparably intertwined.

Finland's revised Land Use and Building Act places a very emphatic obligation and challenge on both the administration and citizens to promote cultural sustainability (Chapter 1, Section 1) and quality of construction in the built environment. The same intention is evident in the government architectural policy programme of 1998, which was drawn up at the same time as the revision of the Building Act. However, these do not provide explicit implementation tools for ensuring quality and cultural sustainability.

Local architectural policy programmes tailored for a single municipality or region provide one way to respond to these challenges. Oulu stands out as one example of a development model for good administration. In order to achieve the objectives of the architectural policy programme adopted by the city council in 2001, close links were forged between planning and building

inspection departments, a central innovation being long-term and anticipatory customer advice and training. This practice has been successful, especially with builders of single-family dwellings. The result is also reflected in the success of the Oulu Housing Fair and the SAFA award presented to the building inspection authority in 2004.

The most interesting development in the quality of planning, supervision and execution of the built environment seems to occur in those places where conscious efforts are made to promote co-ordination between branches of the administration. Some of the prime examples of this include the long-term development of central Pori, the emphasis on quality residential construction in Kuopio or the successful integration of town planning and implementation design in the Arabianranta area of Helsinki. Many of these municipalities are now building on the initiated development work by drawing up an architectural policy programme. (cf. table)

### Challenges for administration

More recent architectural policy programmes have been able to draw on experiences from the first three. Of the pioneers, Oulu has launched a follow-up and evaluation process as a basis for developing further measures. Jyväskylä has decided to go for a second round and is drawing up an all-new programme. This could be compared to the Dutch government, which draws up a new architectural policy action plan every four years. Development and implementation of the policy is the responsibility of a separate organization, with a staff comprising representatives of ministries and experts in various fields. The process is led by an independent expert, the state architect (rijksbouwmeester), appointed for a fixed term, who is also the main advisor for the government and ministries on the built environment. Seven ministries are committed to implementing the policy. When a new programme is adopted (the first was completed in 1991), the government also provides substantial funding to implement it.

In the Netherlands, the quality of architecture and the environment have been identified as a means of national development and competitiveness. Finland's municipalities, which have broad autonomy, have started to build similar cross-sectoral co-operation on a voluntary basis. In this process an architectural policy programme is proving to be a valuable and tangible resource.

### Ambitious integrated approach

The new architectural policy programmes aim to make the specific features of urban construction understandable to the inhabitants and decision-makers of municipalities and to develop specific means for new forms of co-operation and a culture of quality. They are intentionally different because they are specifically tailored to respond to local needs. Vantaa, for example, identifies the incompleteness of the environment as a challenge and an opportunity, with the forceful slogan "The 'outskirt quality' is not good enough". In its architectural strategy, the city stresses that architecture means the entire built environment and other settings shaped by man in the broadest sense. Helsinki's programme, which is being circulated for comment, starts with a delightful essay by Kjell Westö outlining the strengths and characteristics of the capital city. The programme contains an ambitious selection of proposed actions designed



to shake up and sharpen current practices and ways of thinking. The Turku and the parallel Varsinais-Suomi programmes, include a strong constructing of identity, with joint key projects e.g. a national city park on the landscape of the Aura River in Turku and the establishment of the Bryggman Institute for the advancement of architecture and construction. All the programmes see architectural competitions as an important means to promote quality projects. They also all seek better ways to understand the social significance of architectural heritage and to manage it in an holistic way.

Architectural policy programmes offer one useful way to describe, identify and valorize what factors constitute a quality environment, and their significance for the well-being of individuals and organizations. It will be interesting to see what specific results they will help to achieve. At worst, a voluntary programme of this type could just end up as a series of well-meaning statements. At best it can function as a catalyst and network for productive change and development initiatives. Often the process itself is more important than the actual final written document since it animates broad-based discussions in the locality on aspects of the built environment, creating tools to manage and develop it based on a shared vision.

The significance of architectural policy programmes at the local level and the genuine role they can play in promoting co-operation and the quality of the built environment is dependent on all participants in the process. Creating a shared vision requires the input of all the main actors in civil society. Experts in the sector have a particular responsibility to participate in the debate. The process has now got off to a good start and is being followed with great interest, also internationally. Finland has a good reputation for advancing education and democracy. Now the country has an opportunity to act as an example of a transparent and visionary administrative culture based on a voluntary approach.

Tiina Valpola

The writer is an architect and architectural policy expert to the Finnish National Council for Architecture.