Architectural Challenges and Opportunities
in Developing Concepts for a More Sustainable Built Environment

The term sustainability has been vastly used in recent years. While it is not clearly defined, its definition is quite different for many people. In Central Europe, especially in the German speaking countries, we have a tendency to approach the concepts for more sustainable built environment in a technical manner, on a purely quantitative level. While this is very important, it can not be all. We have to find a more holistic approach.

We have to consider the qualitative aspect of a more sustainable architecture. To develop buildings, that are more respectful with our natural resources, we have not only to enhance their technical performance, but also the usability, their lifespan, the healthiness of materials – in general, their quality.

To do so, we have to consider a building's cultural environment, climatic environment, topographic environment, geographic environment, in order for buildings to not only perform better, but also to increase their acceptance in society.

Developing the aspect of sustainability has enriched architecture. Technically, by providing us with new materials and with new technical approaches and formally, by enriching architecture with a new aspect.

In the past when a new aspect was discovered in architecture, it became very prominent. For instance, consider structure and the Eiffel tower. The structure made itself very visible. Other examples include the copula and the bow in Roman architecture.

Once a subject is mastered, it can be used in a more playful manner; for example, in Gothic architecture. Structurally the bow was mastered, so architects and engineers were able to play with it.

A similar development we are experiencing today with sustainability. Sustainable elements remain very prominent in architecture. Architects and clients tend to make it as visible as possible, giving them even more presence in the architecture than necessary. Once we will have mastered the subject, it will become another co-discipline in the development of architecture, like many aspects of engineering, and will be also controlled architecturally.

For my office, since the early nineties, the search for more sustainable approach in architecture has been an essential element. We have experienced, that this aspect has enriched our architecture.

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Stefan Behnisch

Stefan Behnisch, born 1957 in Stuttgart, studied philosophy, economics and architecture in Munich and Karlsruhe, Germany. He worked as an architect in Behnisch & Partner, the practice founded by his father Günter Behnisch, before founding his own practice in 1989. This practice, Behnisch Architekten, became mainly renowned for various innovative sustainable buildings, for example the Institute for Forestry and Nature Research in Wageningen, The Netherlands. As the firm expanded, further offices were founded in Los Angeles, CA (1999), in Boston, MA (2007), and in Munich (2008). Stefan Behnisch has been an advocate of sustainable design since he started working as an architect. Many of his buildings received prestigious awards, and the Genzyme Center in Cambridge, MA, was rated LEED Platinum. He has worked on Harvard's Allston Science Complex in Allston/Boston and residential buildings in the USA and Germany, as well as on office buildings, laboratories, health care buildings, museums, etc. in various countries. He is also responsible for the John and Frances Angelos Law Center for the University of Baltimore. In 2007 he received a Global Award for Sustainable Architecture (one of five) and in 2009 a Good Design Award in the category "People" presented by the Chicago Athenaeum and the European Centre for Architecture Art Design and Urban Studies. In 2008 he was named Honorary Fellow of the AIA - American Institute of Architects. Stefan Behnisch was the Eero Saarinen Chair visiting professor at Yale University School of Architecture in 2005, 2006, 2008 and 2009 and is Harry W. Porter Jr. Visiting Professor at the University of Virginia School of Architecture 2009/2010.