

# Protecting the historical city

## Urban regeneration in Eastern Germany during the 1990s as a starting point for a sustainable urban development

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### Abstract

Since the 1970s, the existing historical building stock gained more value. Monument protection was gradually introduced in the urban planning process as were its methods and instruments. Approaches for an urban development based on the existing building stock were made in both former German countries, GDR (German Democratic Republic) and FRG (Federal Republic of Germany), even if the extent was different. Especially with the regeneration of the historical old towns in the GDR beginning in late 1989, early 1990, the preservation of urban architectural heritage formally became an integrated part of urban development strategies in united Germany. The adaptation and development of instruments to protect and develop historical city centres is part of the research project 'StadtWende'. Surveys based on the results of qualitative expert interviews and archive research show that the 'turn' (Wende) in 1989 had an impact on the development of a planning practice that took the existing building stock into account. With regard to recent trends the paper shows the historical genesis of the preservation of urban heritage in urban planning and asks to what extent it could support a resource-saving urban development today.

### Keywords

urban architectural heritage, urban monument protection, urban regeneration, funding programme, transformation of historical city centres, East Germany

### How to cite

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years the crucial role of sustainable and resilient urban development has been highlighted in various places at the European level.<sup>1</sup> Recently, for example, the Partnership for Culture and Heritage in the EU Urban Agenda discussed built architectural heritage as a 'renewable resource'<sup>2</sup> for sustainable and resilient urban development. International agreements and documents have repeatedly highlighted the importance of urban cultural heritage in recent decades, as it supports aspects of sustainable urban development. These include the use of regional building materials and the strengthening of local urban culture and identity.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of the historical heritage of European cities for socially, economically and environmentally sustainable urban development was highlighted as early as 1990 in the Commission of the European Communities' Green Paper on the Urban Environment: 'A characteristic feature of Europe is its dense network of cities, with their wealth of history and tradition and their extensive range of activities and businesses.'<sup>4</sup> The concept was written with the 'problems of the urban environment'<sup>5</sup> in mind and aimed to improve the environment by preserving the characteristic features of European cities, in particular their compact urban structure.<sup>6</sup>

Since the 1960s, the preservation and conservation of cultural heritage has been discussed as part of urban development and regeneration both in European countries and in other countries around the world. In the 1970s and 1980s, the existing historic building fabric gained value, and monument protection and preservation were gradually incorporated into the planning process.<sup>7</sup> This development is also reflected by the Year of European Architectural Heritage 1975, an initiative of the Council of Europe. Approaches for an urban development based on the existing building stock were made in both former German countries, GDR (German Democratic Republic) and FRG (Federal Republic of Germany), even if the extent was different. They exemplify that this paradigm shift took place partly independently of the political system. The professional discourse on urban planning and architecture played a significant role in this. It took place between planners in eastern and western Europe before and after 1990, sometimes despite political restrictions. GDR and FRG were founded in 1949 as a result of the Second World War. The territory of the Soviet occupation zone became the territory of the GDR. Unlike in the FRG, urban planning in the GDR was highly centralised and urban development focused on industrialised prefabricated housing, which led to the neglect of historical city quarters.

The article explores the question of how the guiding principle of urban regeneration in keeping with the preservation of historical monuments was able to establish itself in the context of resource-saving urban development since the 1970s. Furthermore, it focuses on the development of urban regeneration in Germany, beginning with the political change in the GDR in 1989 and its effects on urban regeneration in reunified Germany. With the revival of historic old towns in the former GDR from 1989/1990 onwards, the preservation of urban heritage formally became an integrated part of urban development strategies in unified Germany.

The adaptation and development of instruments for the protection and development of historic city centres is part of the research project 'Stadtwende' (Urban renewal at the turning point - the significance of civic initiatives against urban decay for the political transformation in

the GDR), funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research.<sup>8</sup> The research project examines the role of local protest groups against urban decay in the GDR and their significance for the Peaceful Revolution in November 1989.

One focus of the project is the analysis of the exchange of experts on urban renewal between the GDR and the FRG before, during and after the fall of communism in 1989: What impact and significance did the exchange of experts between the GDR and the FRG have on urban regeneration? Was the adaptation and development of instruments for the protection and development of historic city centres influenced by the exchange? To what extent? To answer these questions, innovations in urban planning practice and developed instruments for the protection and development of historic city centres are analysed. Surveys based on qualitative expert interviews and archival research show that the 'turn' (Wende) of 1989 influenced the development of planning practices that took the building stock into account and thus supported sustainable urban development to this day.

## EXPERT EXCHANGES ON URBAN REGENERATION BEFORE AND AFTER 1989- METHODS AND RESEARCH

The project's research was based on 18 expert interviews conducted between 2019 and 2021. Urban planners, heritage managers, former employees of urban regeneration offices and administrative staff of city councils were interviewed. In general, the interviews asked about the most important effects of the political 'turn' in 1989 in the field of urban regeneration. Furthermore, the interviews aimed to analyse the networks between East and West Germany. Expert exchanges across the Iron Curtain before 1990 were examined, including planning tools and how these changed as a result of the 'turn'(Wende) and the transformation in the former GDR. The role of networks and the idea of knowledge flows across countries and borders in terms of planning knowledge, ideas and concepts have already been highlighted by Stephen V. Ward in 2018.<sup>9</sup> With regard to the above questions, processes such as knowledge diffusion can also be demonstrated between experts from the GDR and the FRG. Contacts and professional exchange with colleagues from non-socialist countries were not possible for most urban planners before 1989. Only those planners who belonged to a travelling cadre were able to participate in international conferences abroad. Professional exchange took place mainly through informal or private contacts and networks. Those planners who had access to international literature or international conferences were in turn able to participate in international discourses.

The expert interviews were preceded by an archive and literature research. Relevant literature was evaluated e.g. the evaluation of the 1992-1994 Federal Competition on Urban Design and Urban Conservation and the 2012 evaluation of the programme 'Protection of Urban Architectural Heritage'.<sup>10</sup> The development of urban monument preservation in urban design during the 1970s and 1980s is covered by a publication about the Year of European Architectural Heritage in 1975, compiled by ICOMOS in 2015.<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 1. Street view of the historical old town of Meissen in 1990. The city became a model project for the urban regeneration in 1990. Mostly, urban planning offices based in FGR were assigned with the urban regeneration of East Germany.

## Expertise

zur kulturhistorisch wertvollen Bausubstanz in der Reproduktionsstrategie der Stadt bis zum Jahr 2000



Bauakademie der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik  
Institut für Städtebau und Architektur, Abt. Stadtzentren  
Bund der Architekten der DDR, Zentrale Fachgruppe  
Städtebau, Arbeitsgruppe Stadtzentren  
Berlin, Mai 1989

Dienstsache

Fig. 2. Cover of an internal expertise written by the Institute on Urban Design and Architecture (Institut für Städtebau und Architektur) of the Bauakademie. Published in Mai 1989, it focused on the development and regeneration measures for the historic and cultural valuable building stock in the GDR. It shows that the focus was on new construction, even if professional discourses demanded a rethinking of redevelopment strategies.

## INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS AND APPROACHES OF URBAN HERITAGE PRESERVATION IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Urban regeneration has been practised for many centuries and has usually been triggered by economic growth or social upheaval.<sup>12</sup> However, urban regeneration has not always been understood as a 'soft' and preserving regeneration of historic city centres and neighbourhoods. Instead, demolition and reconstruction were crucial in the early stages of urban renewal. Due to population and economic growth in the post-war period, the focus shifted to existing historic buildings and neighbourhoods. Since the 1950s and 1960s, heritage conservation has been discussed as part of urban regeneration in eastern and western Europe, including the GDR and the FRG.

The Year of European Architectural Heritage in 1975 marked the high point of this development - away from the post-war idea of growth and towards a preservation-oriented urban regeneration that also focused on further development of the historical building stock. As a result, heritage conservation and urban regeneration worked more closely together in the 1980s. New strategies for the protection, development and conversion of existing historic

building fabric emerged. This development was shaped and made visible by international conventions, agreements and projects at international and European level.

The Venice Charter (1964), the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, is one of the most important documents in the history of heritage conservation. For the first time, the Charter included 'not only single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting'<sup>13</sup> which also included 'more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time'<sup>14</sup> and therefore could also include buildings dating from early 20th century. The Charter also formed the basis for the establishment of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in 1965. More than 20 years later, the Washington Charter (1987), the Charter for the Preservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas, finally brought historic districts and town centres into the focus of historic preservation and urban planning.<sup>15</sup>

The Washington Charter emphasised the importance of 'historic urban areas, large and small, including cities, towns and historic centres or quarters, together with their natural and man-made environments'.<sup>16</sup> It calls for the the preservation of these areas to be 'an integral part of coherent policies of economic and social development and of urban and regional planning' and to take into account the 'participation and the involvement of the residents'.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the Charter recommends conservation plans that are preceded by multidisciplinary studies and that take different planning areas such as financial and legal measures into account.

At least since the 1970s, these agreements have initiated a change in the way the historic city is treated throughout Europe. A change that was also followed by urban planners in the FRG and the GDR.

## EFFECTS OF THE POLITICAL 'TURN' IN THE GDR ON URBAN REGENERATION IN UNIFIED GERMANY

In the GDR, monument preservation had been discussed the concept of historic ensembles since the mid-1950s. As early as 1951 and 1962, monument preservation in the GDR was enshrined in law with two ordinances on the preservation and maintenance of cultural monuments. In 1962, parts of the old towns of Stralsund, Görlitz and Quedlinburg were placed under legal protection as 'monuments of urban architecture' for the first time.<sup>18</sup> In 1975, the GDR's Monument Protection Act also introduced the statutory ensemble protection. At the end of the 1980s, however, it became apparent that, among other things, entry in the lists of monuments had only 'a very insignificant influence on the actual preservation measures.'<sup>19</sup>

In the FRG, the cities of Regensburg and Bamberg, for example, had stipulated the 'preservation of the historic building structure as an independent, essential goal of renovation'<sup>20</sup> already at the end of the 1950s. Urban monument preservation established itself as a topic of urban development from the 1970s onwards, following planning law innovations such as the introduction of the Urban Development Promotion Act in 1971 and the amendment of the Federal Building Act (BBauG). With the act of 1971, the federal government provided a fund for urban regeneration, as a 'joint task' of the federal and state governments. In the early

years, urban development funding concentrated on the deconstruction of building fabric and new construction. In the 1970s and 1980s, land rehabilitation was gradually replaced by an approach of a 'careful' and 'soft' urban regeneration. The International Building Exhibition in Berlin in 1984/1987 and other pilot projects influenced this development. In addition, the possibility of designating preservation areas was included in the Building Code in 1976.<sup>21</sup> These statutes were enacted by the municipalities themselves. They could prevent the demolition, conversion or alteration of buildings that were essential to the historic townscape because of their urban planning, historical or artistic significance. The model for this legal regulation was the 'conservation areas' from the British 'Town and Country Planning Act' of 1972.<sup>22</sup>

The developments, instruments and theories from the 1970s and 1980s became the foundation of the expert exchanges between German urban planners in late 1989 and early 1990, following the fall of the Berlin wall and the opening of the border in November 1989. The exchange between experts from the GDR and the FRG influenced urban regeneration, especially around 1990. Due to the long-time neglect of the historic urban centres in former GDR many historical buildings were threatened with decay. The poor condition of the old towns in the GDR also became a topic of the protests that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall in autumn 1989. Pictures from Meissen's old town in 1990 show the condition of the historic buildings, some of which were uninhabited or no longer habitable. (Figure 1)

Since the building fabric and infrastructure of the old towns in the GDR were increasingly dilapidated, responsible experts from the GDR and the FRG, as well as the political and administrative leaders, quickly agreed on an urban regeneration funds: financial and technical assistance for the preservation of the historic city centres should be made available quickly and without complications. Since there was great civic commitment against the decay of the old towns, visible signs against the decay of the old towns were to be set quickly. Especially the importance of the urban regeneration for the city's society was stressed by official documents from the ministries: 'The implementation of the redevelopment measures is about visible signs for the citizens to motivate them to stay in the GDR, whereby the identification is significantly influenced by the condition of the city centres.'<sup>23</sup>

The preservation and improvement were also addressed by research institutes in the GDR before the political 'turn' in 1989 (Figure 2), but the expertises were not followed by actual activities and fundings for the historic preservation. A paper written by a team in the Federal Ministry for Regional Planning, Building and Urban Development in March 1990 stated that 'the cities and municipalities of the GDR now have the opportunity for cautious, historically conscious and ecological urban renewal.'<sup>24</sup> Prior to this, there were neither financial resources nor corresponding construction capacities for an area-wide urban regeneration. In particular, the political focus on industrial prefabricated housing reduced the possibilities for preservation. In addition, the fall of the Berlin Wall made democratically legitimised urban planning possible, among other things the cities regained their local planning sovereignty in the spring of 1990. Based on the preparatory work from the GDR, new funding programmes were launched specifically for the historic urban city centres. They can be understood as an expression of the Europe-wide turn towards the historic city.

## FROM EMERGENCY AID TO PERMANENT SUPPORT FOR URBAN HERITAGE PROTECTION

In early 1990, building ministries of the GDR and the FRG agreed on two funding programmes for the GDR based on a financial project funds. A funding programme for five separately selected towns (Brandenburg, Meissen, Weimar, Halberstadt, Stralsund), to promote ‘innovative models of urban redevelopment and renewal’<sup>25</sup>, and an emergency programme were agreed on. The map in Figure 3 shows the five cities in the GDR and their city partners in West Germany around 1989/1990, as well as the border between the GDR and the FRG until unification in October 1990.

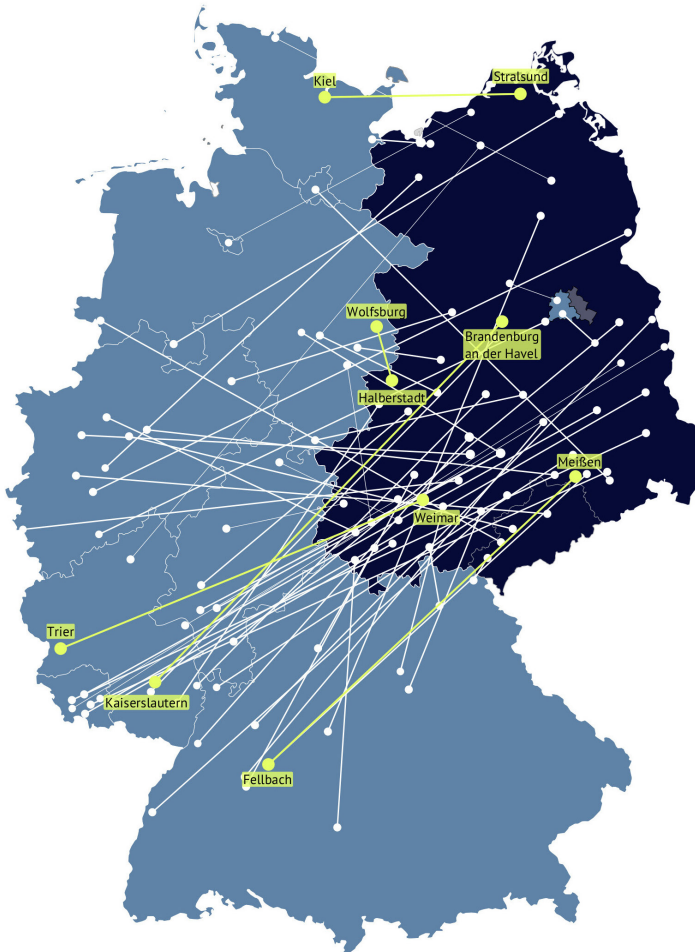


Fig. 3. Map of town twinnings between East and West Germany in 1989/1990. It also shows the border between the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany, united in 1990.

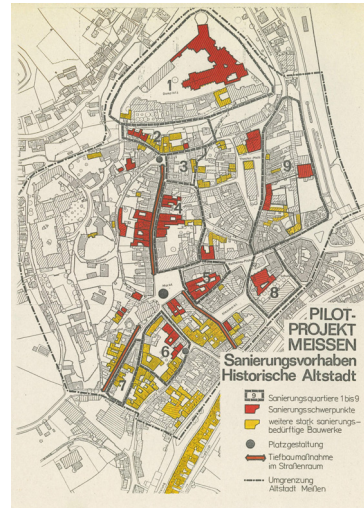


Fig. 4. The word cloud shows the focus of the renovation projects and regeneration measures in East Germany in 1990. It is based on an open list. East German cities could apply for financial funding, which was provided mainly to renew urban infrastructure and to rescue and secure historical buildings Fig. 5. Renovation project plan of the historical old town of Meißen in 1990. As a framework for the development and renovation of the old town of Meißen, the urban regeneration office marked focus areas of the renovation programme in the 1990s.

The funds could be used to finance the securing and renewal of buildings, urban ecology measures, infrastructures, material or technical equipment. The spatial and content-related focal points of the redevelopment measures that were financed with the funding are shown in Figure 4. Demolitions were not funded, as the funding followed the principle of ‘protection and renewal before demolition and new building’.<sup>26</sup>

Renovation project plan of the historical old town of Meißen in 1990. As a framework for the development and renovation of the old town of Meißen, the urban regeneration office marked focus areas of the renovation programme in the 1990s. Since the planning system of the FRG was adopted and new municipal structures were still to be established in early 1990 after the political turn in autumn 1989, the regeneration processes in the cities of East Germany were mostly dominated by redevelopment agencies from the FRG. The first steps for the urban regeneration included the survey of the historical building fabric and urban structure, the enactment of preservation statutes and initial redevelopment and renovation activities. Since legally binding plans had to be drawn up first, informal planning gained importance, especially in the early 1990s.

With regard to the condition of the old towns and the associated tasks for the towns in East Germany, a new urban regeneration programme was finally introduced after the unification, specifically for the protection of historic city centres in East Germany. The programme was described as ‘Sonderförderprogramm’, a programme of an ‘exceptional character’<sup>27</sup> in the official documents. Starting in May 1991, 83 cities in East Germany were initially funded in the



first year.<sup>28</sup> Based on the planning know-how of the GDR and the FRG, the programme 'Protection of Urban Architectural Heritage' (Staedtebaulicher Denkmalschutz) became an urban regeneration strategy for the protection and development of historic urban centres. Key aspect of this programme was the combination of instruments for urban heritage protection and urban development. With the name of the programme, a planning strategy was implemented in the German funding system that takes monument protection into account.<sup>29</sup>

The basis for the selection of the first programme cities and the original goals of the programme were developed jointly by experts from eastern and western Germany. From the very beginning, the funding guidelines required that the cities draw up an integrated urban development and urban renewal concept containing the objectives of the funding. A practice that was common, but was given a new impetus by German reunification. The aim of the programme was to preserve and develop the historic city centres in their urban structure and to strengthen their urban functions.<sup>30</sup> With the help of redevelopment newspapers, the planned measures were introduced to the citizens. For example, the first redevelopment newspaper for the old town of Meissen contained the redevelopment priorities that the redevelopment agency 'Kommunalentwicklung Baden-Württemberg' had defined by autumn 1990. Figure 5 shows the boundaries of the redevelopment area and the priority areas.

In addition, the cities had to enact preservation statutes for the historic urban ensemble that took the legal framework into account. The programme 'Protection of Urban Architectural Heritage' focused not only on saving and preserving the heritage, but also on the social and economic development of the historic city centres. The new funding programme developed planning strategies specifically targeting built urban heritage. Heritage conservation was more integrated into the urban regeneration process. As a result, urban planners and heritage conservationists worked more closely together at the municipal level, especially in eastern Germany. In the implementation, action approaches of heritage conservation played an important role, based on plans and concepts for heritage conservation and integrated urban development concepts.

Thus, from 1991 onwards, the programme 'Protection of Architectural Urban Heritage' became an important funding instrument and 'a special protection system for the historical urban heritage.'<sup>31</sup> Accompanied since 1991 by a team of urban planning experts, monument conservators and other representatives, the programme was extended from East Germany to West Germany from 2009 until 2020. As Gottfried Kiesow has noted, urban heritage conservation 'does not have a specific condition to be defined, but is rather the control of a perpetual development process.'<sup>32</sup> He was a former state conservator and chairman of the expert team. With the programme, the preservation of historic districts and inner cities became a general component of urban regeneration and urban development funding in Germany. Under the influence of civic engagement, participatory elements were more strongly introduced into the planning and funding system.



Fig. 6. Street view of the town square in the old town of Weimar in 2020.

## STILL A MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE AND RESOURCE-EFFICIENT URBAN DEVELOPMENT TODAY?

As A.D. Basiago already stated in 1996, since the 1990s ‘the sustainable city is a compact city’.<sup>33</sup> Until today, the compact European city is a main model for a sustainable and durable urban concept.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the protection and enhancement of the historical heritage of European cities was one of the main actions suggested by the European Commission in 1990 to improve the urban environment.<sup>35</sup> The mixed uses, ‘physical beauty and compactness of historic cities’<sup>36</sup> should be restored and architectural heritage protected.

The funding programme on the ‘Protection of Urban Architectural Heritage’ implemented these statements in its objectives: ‘the safeguarding of buildings, ensembles or other facilities worthy of preservation and of historical, artistic or urban development significance; the modernisation and repair as well as the expansion and conversion of these buildings or ensembles; the preservation and redesign of streets and squares of corresponding significance.’<sup>37</sup> It was developed for East Germany in 1991. Based on the programme objectives, the old urban structures were to be revitalised – for example, by improving housing conditions, safeguarding the traditional diversity of small and medium-sized enterprises, the stock-oriented closure of vacant buildings and the careful adaption of traffic routes.

In 1997, a publication on the urban regeneration in East Germany written by the ‘Institut für Regionalentwicklung und Strukturplanung’ (Institute for Regional Development and Structural Planning) emphasised that, especially for Germany, a dense and compact city with mixed functions and uses was essential for creating a sustainable living environment.<sup>38</sup> With regard to the old towns and historic urban centres the paper makes clear that a potential for a sustainable urban development is predominant here, as they have been proven to have stable urban structure lasting centuries-long, and are at the same time very adaptable. Already in this context, the historic city is designated as a resource for future generations: ‘The economical, careful use of this resource, its conservation and the modern use required for its preservation are therefore indispensable work for ‘sustainable development.’<sup>39</sup>

## CONCLUSION

To date, the programme ‘Protection of Urban Architectural Heritage’ has had a ‘dramatic impact not only on built heritage, but also on urban regeneration and improving the urban fabric for all’.<sup>40</sup> Following the approaches discussed at international and national level, the development of the funding programmes developed in 1990 for the former GDR reflects the transition to urban regeneration that incorporates the existing building stock.

The EU Green Paper on the Urban Environment described sustainable development as a ‘use of resources and the environment [that] should not reduce the potential of these resources for succeeding generations’<sup>41</sup>. The existing building stock provides an opportunity to use existing resources that are already in the environmental cycle, rather than developing new resources.

At the same time, urban heritage represents the history and character of a city and is therefore an important part of identification for urban society. The local protest groups and demonstrations against the demolition of historic buildings in East and West Germany before 1990 have confirmed this.

The expert team for the programme 'Protection of Urban Architectural Heritage' has emphasised the importance of urban heritage as a resource for sustainable urban development in its latest position paper.<sup>42</sup> Cities are built resources, infrastructure and buildings consist of material and energetic resources. In addition to the energy turnaround from fossil to renewable energies, a resource policy turnaround is also necessary. The intelligent and efficient use of the building stock and its expansion will be a crucial component of urban development and support a building policy based on the reuse of materials and the protection of urban spaces that convey identity and a specific urban culture. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), published in 2015 by the United Nations underline the importance of 'sustainable cities and communities' and aim to 'make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable'<sup>43</sup>. One target to implement this goal is to 'strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage'

The new funding programme in 1991 focused in particular on the conservation and development of historic urban heritage in East Germany. The most important aspect for the success of the programme in Germany was above all the combination of legal instruments and financial support. It has helped the municipalities to preserve and further develop the historic stock. Nevertheless, the implementation of the new programme followed the international approach that had emerged across Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. It is a specific German development towards a sustainable development of historic city centres. At the same time, it is a model for more sustainable urban development that focuses on built heritage. This special development was influenced by the political transformations and developments that followed the turn (Wende) in the former GDR and East Germany.

The programme 'Protection of Urban Architectural Heritage' came to an end in 2019. Its theme has been implemented in a new funding programme. However, the concept of urban heritage protection as part of sustainable and future-oriented urban development will continue in the planning system.

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#### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR(S)

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