

Too many people worldwide subsist in undeserving living conditions, and their ranks are growing by the day. As representatives of the professions collectively shaping the built environment, it is our responsibility to resist this intolerable situation. We are speaking out to define an alternative position. We must produce spaces that counter exploitation, control and alienation, whether in urban or rural landscapes. With all our expertise, creativity and power, we need to contribute more dynamically and consequentially to the global quest for equality.

Across a range of pilot projects, we have begun to initiate a more humane design culture, working with a robust network of communities, craftsmen, planners, builders and organizations. These alternative practices demand not only further development, but also substantial scaling-up. Guided by a deeper understanding of individual needs and aspirations as our fundamental concern, we must urgently multiply our efforts to improve the ecological, social, and aesthetic quality of the built environment, while developing more effective design strategies to anticipate predicted future growth on a global scale.

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In Search of a Process

Laufen Manifesto for a Humane Design Culture

In Search of a Process

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1 Collaborating Eye to Eye

We must commit ourselves to respectful communication and cooperation with residents and communities as key partners in achieving positive, measurable change. The impact of a participatory process extends beyond actual design outcomes – it should empower individuals and cultivate a constructive atmosphere with lasting effects. The process should allow sufficient time to facilitate a dialogue striving for respect, curiosity, flexibility and care.

2 Designing Work

Projects must be conceived in a way that creates meaningful work. A thoughtful approach to designing buildings, places, landscapes and products can nurture small-scale enterprises like construction, farming and crafts. By opting for labor-based techniques and non-standardized materials, we can foster a decentralized form of construction and production. Creating an atmosphere of entrepreneurship and innovation is essential in forming value chains connecting local craftsmanship and global industries. New models of selfconstruction for low-income populations must be explored, combining education, training and long-term income generation. The creation of work is foundational for greater equality and peace.

3 Unfurling Beauty

We believe that beauty is an essential human need, linked strongly to dignity. We must strive for an authentic harmony that resonates with people, the genius loci and their territory. The longing for beauty can be stronger than fear and thus a crucial catalyst for humane development.

4 Identifying the Local

Modernization has levelled cultural differences globally and hampered context specific design. Individual projects must be based on careful observation of geophysical conditions, local building traditions and space hierarchies. Global knowledge on building techniques must be adapted to the local climate, available materials, skill base and energy sources. Site and culturally sensitive design contributes to self-sufficiency and more sustainable local economies.

5 Understanding the Territory

While designers and policy-makers devote significant attention to mega-cities and high density environments, larger agglomerations are deeply dependent on smaller living units and their landscapes. Truly humane design projects understand zones of impact and influence on many scales. They operate between the local, the regional, the continental, and the global, thereby revealing a rich network of dynamic social, economic, and ecological relations that must be respected, adjusted for, and improved as needed.

6 Educating Designers

Designers are not trained sufficiently to achieve positive change for people living in undeserving conditions. Design education has to evolve radically to ensure young designers have the capacity to bridge the gap between design and construction, understand the nuances of diverse sites and territories, and communicate more profoundly with local communities and stakeholders. In short, instil a greater social empathy. Manual skills must be developed on the same footing as digital and intellectual skills. Designing the right process must be equally important as the outcome.

7 Shaping Policy

Integrated infrastructure, new collaborations, and innovative approaches to project development and financing must be translated into a global policy strategy. A vast change is necessary in the way we conceive, distribute and construct human habitats. We must connect top-down and bottom-up processes, with a view to fostering more productive exchanges between residents, policy-makers, financial institutions, the design profession and executing bodies. This will require the mobilization of both human and financial resources. We need broader and better solutions, at a lower cost, for a larger number of people.

These principles provide necessary impetus for a radical reorientation of all professional design disciplines. It is critical to shift current self-perceptions from top-down planning to transparent cooperation throughout the cycle of planning, design, construction and usage. Design imagination is our primary instrument to define how we want our world to be.

Laufen, October 20th, 2013

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