

Introduction

The cards are currently being reshuffled - the opportunities, power and influence of the players for the next phases of our future are being redefined. We can no longer rely on old structures and certainties. The simultaneous and complex interactions of new global challenges, disruptive technological innovations, demographic changes, and geopolitical shifts are rapidly transforming our familiar world, leaving no one unaffected. This brings both new, unpredictable risks and a wide range of new, unlimited opportunities.

Our response to these challenges will determine whether we emerge as shapers and leaders of this new future or remain followers, possibly even victims. The world is being reorganized, new centers of power are emerging rapidly, and many old ones are falling behind. Some countries and cities are seizing opportunities with ambition, strategic thinking, courage, and diligence. They succeed in mobilizing entrepreneurial energy, attracting capital, and invest confidently in their future. Others remain mired in doubt and fear, remain in comfortable passivity or are overly preoccupied with planning and regulating, lose crucial time and momentum, ultimately lose their best talents and companies.

To shape the future, we must first define our own long-term interests, then promote optimistic growth dynamics, remove obstacles and blockages. It requires vision, confidence, and decisive action. Every day that is used constructively by some and passes unused by others widens the gap between them, accelerates and solidifies a new global distribution of economic power and wealth. Francis Fukuyama's predicted "end of history" in 1992 (Fukuyama 1992) has not occurred. Instead, we are entering a multipolar world with rivaling systems, increasing geopolitical tensions, crises, and shocks. The world is changing differently than expected - and at a much faster pace.

In this context, urban development is both, a physical manifestation of ambitions and achievements and itself a central driver for economic progress in the increasing competition of cities. Technological, economic, and cultural developments are concentrated in urban centers where people live, work, and interact closely, shaping their societies. How cities are planned and built as economic and cultural spaces, the people they attract, and the energies they unfold are crucial for their competitiveness and future viability, especially in times of major global upheaval. Locations which offer attractive visions, good conditions, and rewarding prospects for personal commitment, innovation and growth excel more than those with cultures skeptical of change, where people slow down and discourage each other. More than anything else, the mindset of the decision-makers in politics and business determines the dynamics and success of the development efforts.

While new, state-of-the-art cities are rapidly emerging, particularly in Asian growth economies, the infrastructure in the old, formerly leading West is decaying. Germany has not been very successful with larger projects for a long time, big thinking and ambitious planning are scarce, construction has stagnated. Everything has become too complicated and unprofitable. The mentality and structures are no longer globally competitive. The ever faster developments in the digital economy, life sciences and energy technologies are accelerating this competition. Positions can shift dramatically within just a few years as a result. How can the old West, particularly Europe and Germany, grow again in these critical times, compete more successfully, and develop better future prospects? What guiding principles, strategies, and efforts are required?

The global competition between locations should not be limited to a competition to outdo each other with the omnipresent "transformation agendas", to uncritically follow the changes of course and recipes

that are currently being called for and defined by politicians as particularly “sustainable”, “smart” and “socially just”, but should above all strive for the flourishing of a culture of open-ended research, experimentation and committed entrepreneurial activity - a competition for ever better solutions, for continuous progress and qualitative growth. A constructively critical attitude towards transformations is needed, not because their justifications and key objectives are in doubt, but because the appropriateness and effectiveness of current solutions and overregulations are questionable. Given the significant challenges as well as the potential opportunities, more diverse and better alternatives are needed. Ideological self-restrictions and naïve wishful thinking must be overcome. Scientific, artistic, and entrepreneurial energies must be unleashed and better utilized, cooperation and synergies explored. The tasks require a more differentiated approach and an honest assessment of tested solutions. For that, education is the most important resource, and a competition-oriented liberal market economy is the most effective system, the best "discovery process for new knowledge" (von Hayek 1968).

Cities are the spaces of opportunity and laboratories for these civilizational developments. Strategic economic and urban development planning can set a decisive course for their direction and success. Urban development is about looking forward as well as looking back, learning from historical models that have provided ideal conditions for centuries and proven to be truly sustainable. Not everything needs reinvention or transformation. Basic individual and communal needs have not significantly changed, despite all new technological possibilities. Many European cities can draw on their long, rich history, combine the best ideas of earlier eras with the latest innovations. Cities are spaces of remembrance, provide stability and reference points for shaping the future, offer distinct identity, a home and sense of belonging.

The chapters in this book are based on texts written in 2019 and updated in 2023. They were written after over 25 years abroad as a real estate developer and urban planner in Europe, North and South America, the Middle East, and after returning to a Germany bogged down in a largely self-inflicted economic crisis and depressive paralysis—a country whose special potential is underutilized and increasingly eroding. Germany has achieved impressive growth in the past and can do more today, make better progress in these critical times, and position itself more strongly for the future. The current crisis offers opportunities for overdue reforms, for a liberation from paralyzing structures and decisive shifts in economic policy and urban planning paradigms.

The first part of this book offers general principles, orientation and critical commentary on the most important topics and current debates on economic and urban development, comparing Europe's and especially Germany's current approaches with international case studies. What can be learnt from other countries, which initiatives are successful there and could be transferable, what particular challenges do others face, what potential threats do we all need to prepare for? The currently most popular narratives on sustainable urban development and European ESG regulatory policy are described and critically scrutinised with regard to their effects.

The second part of the book describes opportunities in concrete solutions, both promising new trends in urban development, planning and construction as well as proposals for reforms and for freeing ourselves from current obstructive, sometimes counterproductive over-regulation. Examples of reconstructions and urban repairs open up a historical dimension. Successful implementation of development ideas requires effective management strategies, both in terms of cooperation between the various stakeholders and within multidisciplinary project development companies and at project level. How this can be aligned and organised is described here.

In a third section, a selection of our own urban development project ideas for the city of Frankfurt am Main will be presented. They concretize and illustrate some of the previously described development and planning principles as well as innovative urban building blocks in an exemplary manner.

This book is aimed at professionals of all disciplines in the real estate industry and urban planning, as well as students and all those interested in the current economic and urban development debates. The macro and micro perspectives taken, the wide variety of cross-references, and international comparisons are intended to challenge current patterns of thought in Germany and stimulate critical reflection. This book is not a theoretical treatise or textbook but a practice-oriented, constructive contribution to the debate, presenting concrete, alternative solutions and examples. Above all, however, the book aims to inspire and encourage a return to a more optimistic developer mindset and a more ambitious growth culture, particularly in Germany.