

“A High-Density, Vertically Oriented City of Short Distances”

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Urban Development. Heiko Achilles’s book, “Urban Development with a Developer Mindset,” is reminiscent of the famous “Ruck” (“Push”) speech by former German President Roman Herzog. According to the Frankfurt-based real estate developer, everything in urban development needs to be put under scrutiny. Achilles believes there is a lack of a positive attitude toward planning and construction and calls for a return to an “optimistic, constructive developer mindset.”

Immobilien Zeitung: As an urban planner and developer, what concerns you about Germany?

Heiko Achilles: The all-pervasive dominance of sustainability, particularly decarbonization. The transformations being called for in the name of these objectives are overshadowing every other issue in urban planning and real estate development. When I look at the way new development areas are communicated, I sometimes get the impression that the intention is to create nature reserves. I see a great deal of naïve wishful thinking and an anxiety-driven, simultaneously moralizing obsession with using European ESG prescriptions to save the world from climate catastrophe and social injustice.

IZ: What do you believe needs to happen?

Achilles: To overcome the stagnation that is currently putting Germany at a competitive disadvantage internationally, we need to restore an optimistic, constructive “developer mindset” and return to a committed, pragmatic, can-do culture on all sides, more pragmatism. Instead of naïve “degrowth” approaches and an increasingly welfare-oriented state, the focus should be on performance and competition. We need a radical reduction in regulation and bureaucracy, as well as tax cuts, to make investment in the real estate sector economically viable again and to generate more growth that benefits everyone.

IZ: How do you assess more recent urban expansion and regeneration projects such as Stuttgart 21, Europaviertel in Frankfurt, or Überseequartier in Hamburg?

Achilles: In principle, these are good examples, although there is always room for criticism. The planning for these projects dates back more than 20 years, and today we would probably approach some aspects differently. Parcel sizes could be reduced to enable a more fine-grained urban fabric and greater diversity in terms of uses and architectural design. Walking past 100 meters of identical, continuous façades does not create urbanity, offers little to discover. The pedestrian routes along and through the blocks could also be made more attractive, for example with pocket parks, public squares, atria, arcades, and passages - classic elements of European urban design. In addition, public transport connections should be provided before or at the same time as the buildings are completed, rather than only years later.

IZ: In your book, you subject several contemporary urban-planning paradigms to an ideological critique: the “Smart City,” the “green, climate-neutral city,” the “15-minute city,” and the “open city.” Which of these paradigms do you view most critically?

Achilles: It would be too broad a generalization to single out one. They are all appealing terms and attractive narratives that are too rarely subjected to critical scrutiny. They serve primarily as storytelling tools for building support for certain projects, but above all, also for preventing projects from going ahead. Too much is driven by ideology rather than by professional expertise and sound judgment.

IZ: Could you give a specific example?

Achilles: In discussions about the “green, climate-neutral city,” there are repeated calls to limit the density of urban development. Visualizations of urban-planning projects increasingly show buildings covered in greenery and open, extensively landscaped settlement patterns. This reflects the garden-city model, a popular urban-planning paradigm of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In my view, however, when we talk about a green, climate-resilient city, we should not be thinking in terms of the garden city. Instead, we should be moving toward a high-density, vertically oriented, mixed-use city of short distances.

IZ: Why?

Achilles: Extensive areas of green space within cities merely shift development pressure to the surrounding peripheries, resulting in significantly greater land consumption, more expensive infrastructure, and increased commuter traffic there. The green city does not end at municipal boundaries; it needs to be considered at a larger regional scale. More urban greenery can be created, particularly along streets, while on-street and surface parking can increasingly be consolidated in neighborhood parking garages.

IZ: Another popular buzzword is the “15-minute city.” What is your view of it?

Achilles: In my view, the 15-minute city is primarily a mobility concept. Buses and trains, cyclists, and pedestrians are supposed to be given priority, while private cars are pushed back as far as possible. In compact, mixed-use districts and neighborhoods where residents can reach all their daily destinations within a limited radius, it is indeed possible, in my opinion, to largely dispense with private motorized transport. For business and commercial traffic in large, fragmented metropolitan regions such as the Rhine-Main region, Munich, or Berlin, with their high levels of commuting, I consider such a mobility concept unsuitable.

“The main lesson we can learn from the GDR is what does not work.”

Heiko Achilles.

Source: Immobilien Zeitung,

Photographer: Christoph von Schwanenflug

IZ: Why?

Achilles: A radical shift from a car-oriented city to a car-free city would only create new problems. It would place a particular burden on retailers, urban manufacturing businesses, and older people. I am very much in favor of making cities more bicycle-friendly, but this transformation should be gradual and should only take place once better public transport alternatives to private motorized transport are available and more neighborhood parking garages can accommodate parked cars.

IZ: Another popular buzzword is the “Smart City.” What is your view of it?

Achilles: More and more technology, together with the delegation of human cognitive functions and simple tasks to machines, does not necessarily result in better building performance or user experience, let alone smarter residents. Put differently: adult users are perfectly capable of adjusting the temperature, windows, blinds, and lighting themselves from time to time.

IZ: Are you rejecting building automation altogether?

Achilles: No, but technical building services already account for more than 40% of construction and operating costs in high-quality commercial or mixed-use buildings. With the additional systems required for smart cities and intelligent buildings, this share will continue to increase. Moreover, smart building technology becomes obsolete after only a few years. Expensive upgrades, or even dismantling and replacement, then become necessary. In my view, “passive design strategies” are much more effective, requiring little or no smart technology.

IZ: What do you mean by that?

Achilles: Compact, land-efficient development; building orientations adapted to their location and climate; efficient envelope-to-volume ratios; robust and attractive building envelopes with high thermal mass; use-neutral and adaptable structures; and simple, material-appropriate construction methods. In a word: durability.

IZ: On the subject of the “open city,” your book contains passages that I personally find quite problematic. At one point, you write that Germany has “insufficiently regulated mass immigration.” I explicitly reject the term “mass immigration” because, in my view, it suggests that immigration is essentially unregulated or lawless. I do not believe that is the case.

Achilles: The vision of the “open city” emerged from a legitimate critique of the lifeless planned cities of modern urbanism and their strict separation of land uses and, consequently, of different user groups. The open city seeks what we would today describe as vibrant mixed-use environments. I explicitly see that as positive. In urban-planning terms, I believe many of the ideas behind the open city are still relevant, but politically they are no longer appropriate.

IZ: Why?

Achilles: Over the past ten years, the number of people immigrating to Germany as asylum seekers and/or people seeking employment has accumulated to a considerable scale. This inevitably affects locally rooted cultures and changes the way people live together in cities. The integration of newcomers into established urban communities should be approached more rationally and with greater consideration of own interests, and less idealistically, in order to avoid what the Austrian philosopher Karl Popper called the “paradox of tolerance” and to prevent our liberal, cosmopolitan culture from being undermined. For example, the openly antisemitic demonstrations by Muslim immigrants concern me a lot. A change in approach is necessary, but it must not be left to radical forces to shape - otherwise, in the end, everyone stands to lose here as well.

“Too Much Ideology, Too Little Expertise and Sound Judgment”

IZ: What urban-planning vision would you propose for Germany?

Achilles: By global standards, Germany is a small country with an aging and shrinking population and few natural resources. Education and ingenuity are our most important resources. German cities should aim to become among the world’s leading centers of education and innovation. The objective should be to offer excellent schools, universities, and research institutions, while developing specialized clusters around fields such as medicine, pharmaceuticals, IT, or engineering and locating them in more concentrated spatial configurations.

IZ: Those are primarily political demands. What does that mean for urban planning and architecture?

Achilles: It means planning thematic “economic development clusters,” with greater collaboration between universities and businesses to create research, innovation, and start-up clusters. In terms of urban form and architectural culture, German cities should once again set more ambitious goals and make a greater effort to create cities that are durable, aesthetically distinguished, worthy of preservation, and therefore also highly livable and sustainable. Looking at photographs of Germany’s major cities from the first decades of the 20th century, before the destruction of the war, makes clear the richness of their architectural expression and the quality of their built environment at the time.

IZ: You also use rankings to support your arguments. Something caught my attention. Singapore ranks first in the IMD World Competitiveness Ranking, while Austria ranks 25th. In The Economist’s city ranking, which assesses urban livability, Vienna ranks first in the world, while Singapore ranks only 26th. Could it be that highly competitive economies do not necessarily produce cities in which people particularly enjoy living?

Achilles: I lived and studied in Vienna for several years. The quality of life is outstanding, and the city attracts many tourists. In my view, Vienna is an example of how strongly the beauty of the built environment can contribute to people’s well-being. The economic competitiveness rankings, however, primarily assess the future viability and growth potential of local economic structures. In this respect, Singapore is better positioned than Vienna or Austria. Moreover, the city-state is investing heavily in further enhancing quality of life.

IZ: You also advocate modular and serial construction. There is a historical precedent for this in Germany: the GDR. Is there anything we can learn from its approach to urban development?

Achilles: The main lessons we can learn from the GDR are what does not work. The socialist planned economy led to oppression and impoverishment everywhere - economically, culturally, and in terms of urban development. Modernism, as articulated in the Athens Charter, was implemented here rigorously and to low quality standards in an effort to impose a socialist social order. All citizens were supposed to live under equal conditions - unfortunately, equally poor and without prospects.

IZ: Where do you see opportunities for modular and serial construction?

Achilles: Modular design and serial construction are good ideas regardless of any ideological framework, particularly for affordable housing, industrial buildings, schools, and other building types with a high degree of repetition. Standardization and industrial prefabrication can generate economies of scale, resulting in shorter planning and construction periods, lower costs, and reduced material and energy consumption. Products and processes can also be designed to be more compatible with circular-economy principles. It is important, however, that unlike the prefabricated concrete housing of the GDR, these approaches should deliver solid, durable structures with higher architectural quality and greater variety in order to avoid monotony. Germany has a number of promising new systems for commercial and residential construction which, combined with the principles of “building simply,” could help address the housing shortage. Policymakers need to establish simpler, cross-state and EU-wide regulatory frameworks, including standardized type approvals.

IZ: Mr. Achilles, thank you for speaking with us.

Interview conducted by Christoph von Schwanenflug

Image captions

Master plan by Heiko Achilles for a riverside development in Frankfurt, primarily comprising residential uses. The blue buildings are multi-story urban farming plants and greenhouses for growing the herbs used in Frankfurt’s famous Green Sauce. Source: Achilles Real Estate Development

Residential towers, modular student apartments, neighborhood park: development proposal for a riverside site on the southern bank of the Main in eastern Frankfurt, adjacent to the Deutschherrnviertel district. Source: Achilles Real Estate Development

The Achilles Book

“Urban Development with a Developer Mindset - Innovation, Growth and Competitiveness in Challenging Times”

Heiko Achilles is the Founder and Managing Director of Achilles Real Estate. He studied architecture at TU Darmstadt and the University of Applied Arts Vienna, followed by studies in Urban Design and Real Estate Development at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He subsequently worked for Tishman Speyer, Hines, and Dubai Holding, embarking on a career in the real estate industry. He spent many years working in Brazil and the United Arab Emirates.