European Architecture Forum

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Keynote Speech

Identity – sustainability - quality of life

Mrs Anne-Marie Sigmund
President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Ministers,
Presidents,

It is indeed an honour for me to address you today. There are several reasons why I was particularly happy to be invited here today: firstly, because I, in my work programme as EESC president, have chosen culture, together with all related issues such as identity, as the guiding theme of my term of office, and secondly, because for more than 25 years I was Secretary-General of the Austrian Federal Committee of Liberal Professions. I am therefore very familiar with the issue of the political, social and cultural status of architecture in the national and supranational context. I also see this as a challenge, and an opportunity to speak about the subject chosen by you, in the aftermath of the two referenda in France and the Netherlands, and against the backdrop of the impasse in which the EU, for many reasons, now finds itself in. I must confess that I had to put aside and rewrite the text which I had prepared for today. Although my basic message is unchanged, I feel that in view of the difficulties experienced by the EU we should not approach the subject from a purely theoretical perspective. We need to get our message across to the public, because identity and sustainability concern everybody – not least because this is an area where emotions also come into play. Public feelings about the EU are currently dominated by anxiety and misgivings; in most cases, these arise from a lack of information, or worse, misinformation. However, the European Union of the future needs to win not only the minds, but also the hearts of its citizens. After all, culture in its broadest sense - I will come back to this later - is part of our daily lives. Culture is not just the mirror of our past; it also determines the present and influences our future.

I would be delighted if any of you were prompted by this little speech of mine to discuss these issues with a wider audience from an area in which you have influence.

For many years, Europe, our common home, has been searching for an identity. Paradoxically, even its successes have swelled the ranks of the sceptics. I do not wish to point the finger at anyone, but one thing is sure: all key players, whether political decision makers, consultative institutions, or representatives of professional and other interests, must rethink the way the public is informed about Europe. We need to start by coming up with clearer ideas and answers to these questions: "what kind of Europe do we want?", "what do we want to become?" and "what keeps Europe together?". We need to make it clear to our fellow citizens that, besides paying for Europe, they also get something in return. I am not just thinking about the money that comes back in various forms of financial support, but also about intangible things like relative prosperity, security, shared values and enforceable rights - benefits whose durability, in my view, makes them by far the most important part of what Europe has to offer. The advantages which European citizenship confers are accessible to all, from Dublin to Warsaw or Budapest, and from Helsinki to Lisbon.

However, European identity is still a theoretical construct, which for various reasons has yet to be fully translated into reality.
Ladies and gentlemen, the organisers have, quite rightly, added the words "quality of life" to the title of my presentation, "sustainability and identity". I will now endeavour to give you a summary of my thoughts.

Let me begin by looking at "identity". Having been invoked over and over again for many years, this term has become clichéd. Far from representing anything meaningful or evoking visions, it tends to arouse scepticism. This may have to do with the fact that many people are concerned about a transfer of power depriving individual Member States of any real influence, with everything being decided in faraway Brussels. I believe this is why the prospect of becoming European citizens makes them worried about losing their own ethnic, regional and national identities. This also reflects a misunderstanding of what identity in the European context is about. If we see identity as being something exclusive which distinguishes and separates us, by defining what we are and therefore what we are not, this anxiety is understandable. Teilhard de Chardin defined identity as “constancy in change”. We can get even closer to the essence of European identity by referring to the Greek concept of "telos" and defining such identity as self-understanding or consciousness. Seen in this way, European identity can encompass various levels and degrees of identity. Acknowledging oneself as a European does not mean losing any of the things which make people what they are; European identity complements other identities rather than superseding them. It seems likely that the nature of individual criteria for identity vary depending on state of mind, physical location or activity. Umberto Eco put this in a simplified way: “in Naples I see myself as Milanese, in London people call me an Italian and in New York I'm a European". Identity can be founded on tangible factors: a person, a building, a city, a country or anything else. However, it can also be derived from intangible things: an idea, an image, a philosophy, a political belief, etc. It would seem that European identity is always a mix of tangible and intangible elements, and that it is experienced and expressed in subtly different ways by each individual. Each person identifies himself with whatever Europe represents for him or with his perception of Europe. To put it briefly, European identity, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder!

Let us now turn to sustainability: in 2001, a sustainable development strategy was put forward in Gothenburg, with the objective of bringing about a change in public behaviour. The Constitutional Treaty enshrines sustainability as a value and an objective. Sustainability certainly plays an important role in the political life of the Union. Initially, sustainability was first and foremost of environmental relevance; now, it represents a kind of covenant between the generations, whereby we undertake to safeguard today’s resources for those who came after us. Sustainability means treating nature’s bounty with respect, so that it can also be enjoyed by future generations. However, it also means careful management of financial resources and other resources which are needed to organise a shared future in our complex societies. Today, proponents of sustainable social policies are faced with considerable challenges, posed by demographic trends in Europe. The same is also true of the Lisbon strategy: the key objectives of growth and employment cannot be achieved unless there is compliance with the sustainability principle as set out in the Lisbon declaration.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have not forgotten that I am addressing the European Architecture Forum, but I needed to start by interpreting the two concepts which you gave me as a title from my perspective, so that I can now go on to put them in the context of architecture.
Indeed, there is a close connection between architecture and the two concepts of identity and sustainability.

As I mentioned before, identity has both tangible and intangible aspects. In physical terms, architecture is the main influence on our identity: architectural works express and shape identity, and because they are built to last, the impact is a durable one. You might almost say that architecture embodies identity in bricks and mortar! A certain way of building is a conscious expression of common identity, which instils a feeling of belonging, of being at home, i.e. of social reality.

At the same time architectural works exploit and change the natural environment, transforming it into a built environment; thus, architecture has environmental, as well as social and cultural implications.

In view of this, a holistic approach to architects' work is fully justified: architecture impacts on the environment, on the quality of life, and on human societies in all their various forms.

Architecture is interconnected with areas such as:

- town planning,
- spatial planning,
- energy, and
- the environment.

As practitioners of a liberal profession, architects are bound by specific occupational standards: their first duty is to their clients, but they must also respect the interests of the community, and they have to comply with a code of conduct devised by the profession, usually on a self-regulatory basis. As in the case of other liberal professions, the architect’s task is determined by basic needs and rights of clients, including the right to an unpolluted environment, to housing and to social integration.

At this point, I should mention that the EESC first laid down a definition, or rather, a list of criteria for organised civil society, together with an outline of the basic characteristics of civil society action, in 1999.

Practically all of these criteria are of striking relevance to the work of architects:

- needs-oriented action,
- interactive dialogue with all stakeholders,
- commitment to the overriding objective of the common good, and
- the role of "culture" - in its broadest sense - in determining the scope of action.

I therefore consider architecture to be a quintessential example of civil society action.
Thus, architects can make an important contribution to "civil dialogue" by acting as mediators between the public and the State or government.

At the risk of trying your patience I would like to make two further points:

1. Building on the Berlin conference on cultural policy held last November, a European initiative by opinion leaders is emerging, which, in the words of Jacques Delors, aims to "give Europe a soul"; its objective is to make culture in its broadest sense the foundation of European policy, and above all to contribute to shaping European identity at various levels. In my view, the architects of Europe must not be left out from such an initiative!

2. The Austrian presidency will hold two major conferences on issues of key importance: the first, which will take place in Salzburg in January 2006, will look at the subject of European identity, while the second, which is planned for Vienna in June, will be on the sustainability principle.

I can well imagine that the subject of architecture will be of relevance to both conferences.

Now however, I do not wish to detain you any longer from your enjoyment of an equally important aspect of living European culture - the culinary arts!

Thank you for your attention.