Standards

Some European countries are more committed to standards than others. With the DIN Norms Germany was one of the first countries to establish an internationally accepted set of technical norms, but Urban Renewal has to do with people which by definition cannot be classified by a norm. On the other hand certain standards can help to guarantee equal rights to all individuals which may become an issue where developers try to enforce urban renewal projects without the consent of the resident population. In the following we will comment only on a small selection of norms to illustrate the spectrum of issues which can benefit from regulation.

1. Standards for the selection of renewal areas and beneficiaries

Standards for the selection become necessary in cases where different neighbourhoods or municipalities are competing for public funds and criteria are needed to decide for the allocation of the – always limited – subsidies. Dependent on the political preferences either structural deficits (like physical decay or prevailing sanitary equipment standards) or social indicators (level of unemployment, income or educational levels) are taken into consideration, or a combination of both.

In other cases, the professional quality or expected effectiveness of proposed measures are taken as a base for allocating funds to competing applicants (districts or municipalities). In some cases funding for each case is limited to very few years which allows to reach more and other beneficiaries in a subsequent call.
2. Standards for the protection of cultural heritage

In the case of conservation of cultural heritage, the historical importance or architectural values are guiding rules, and the main criteria may be the legal recognition as a cultural monument through the respective agency – i.e. as a ‘listed building’. However, sometimes the guiding policy intention behind a conservation program is ‘place branding’ to promote tourism which often contratches authentic conservation and authenticity. Poorer residents in ancient industrial or inner city zones may fear for gentrification as a consequence of protecting the cultural heritage (concentrating on physical qualities rather than social) may not be very amazed about the idea to reconstruct an authentic early capitalist slum.

In the context of preserving architectural heritage a general trend can be observed on a global scale: Whereas initially only individual buildings (churches, castles, birthplaces of famous personalities) enjoyed legal protection and recognition, nowadays such buildings are seen its special context and the preservation of cohesive conservation areas has almost become a rule. A good place to look for standards is UNESCO in Paris.

3. Standards for energy conservation

In Europe space heating is the most important energy consumer in the built environment and therefore standards have been introduced first to measure the insulation quality of the building skin and their components. This not only applies for new construction, but also for urban renewal. Of course, in existing buildings it is more difficult to achieve the high modern standards, but for example for the renovation of historic buildings special subsities are available.
The most common standard has been established through the Energy passport, which allows a comparison between different buildings in respect to energy consumption. It takes into account the entire energy demand for a building, including for example also the size and shape of a building, or the efficiency and energy source of a heating system among other criteria. At least in theory, as the energy demand boils down to operation costs of the dwelling, it is assumed that the higher demand for energy efficient buildings induces the house builders to increase the energy standards of their product.

4. Standards for ecological buildings

In many countries the environmental qualities – which in fact should be larger than just the energy demand and can include the expected lifetime of a building, the ecological qualities etc. – are of interest for the construction industry as a selling argument. They have been pushing for a certification system (‘labelling’) in many countries referring to the British “BREEAM” (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method) or the German Council of Sustainable Construction (DGNB) for Retrofitting of Urban Quarters, or the “MINERGIE-ECO” label for public buildings and multi-family buildings in Switzerland. Germany, which is known for certain perfectionist tendencies, has developed a set of more demanding standards with about 65 different measurable criteria including for example also ecological, economic, socio-cultural, location, technical and process oriented criteria.  

Credencials:

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