



Alina-Stefania Ujupan: New European Bauhaus, towards a potential new Mission

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After 3 years, the EU initiative re-focuses the priorities. A 10-years-plan for regenerating neighbourhoods is proposed to the EU Member States

"It's a crucial and intense moment. The New European Bauhaus has grown rapidly. Now, we need to discuss what to do next. There is a great community, there are shared values. We have the opportunity to have a more intensive impact on territories and cities." Alina-Stefania Ujupan – 20 years of experiences in European policy and funding – is the Head of the "New European Bauhaus" Unit at the European Commission.



Ms. Ujupan, Il Giornale dell'Architettura has partnered with the New European Bauhaus (NEB) initiative since its launch in 2020. The ambition is to establish a stronger connection between the European Green Deal and our living spaces: a strategy oriented toward creating beautiful, sustainable and inclusive places. After 3 years, can we draft an evaluation?

Yes, the New European Bauhaus is a growing and dynamic movement of revitalising spaces with sustainability, people and design at the centre. The [New European Bauhaus Progress Report](#), published in January 2023, reflects the active involvement of the community in shaping the NEB from the very beginning, with numerous bottom-up projects that experiment and showcase ideas and investments based on NEB values. We also now have the [New European Bauhaus Compass](#), a benchmark tool to guide the design and development of New European Bauhaus-compliant projects at the crossroads between beauty, inclusion and sustainability.

Is NEB mainly a bureaucratic tool?

Definitely not. It is a community-driven result of rapid interdisciplinary learning. What we have achieved together, as a movement, in such a brief period is incredible. The NEB community – with more than 1.000 registered members, and growing – is the most important factor in doing the right thing. The community is broad, including non-profit organisations as well as companies and universities. And we continue to receive many applications to join the initiative and contribute with ideas, projects and events. Our path is within the economy and impacts on it.

Economy for EU means funding.

EU funding must be allocated to projects with real added value. Currently, 9 different EU funding

programmes (from the Horizon Europe R&I programme to Cohesion Policy) are supporting NEB related projects. This is of great importance to us because NEB is a creative concept which still needs to be better understood in the market. Projects that are perceived as not offering immediate or direct returns can sometimes be more challenging to finance, as they may appear riskier. We are now working with the European Investment Bank precisely for this purpose: to provide concrete Investment Guidelines that facilitate the comprehension of NEB core values and operational principles by emphasising their application to project investments in the *Built Environment* sector. The guidelines should be ready in spring 2024.

Is it possible to integrate a social approach with financial aspects?

We believe so. Reform and structural change, such as the twin transition, can happen and be long lasting only if people and businesses are part of it and support it. This is the reason why we apply 3 values in the NEB work: change must be sustainable, but also inclusive and beautiful, to be accepted and supported by the communities on the ground.

Let's talk about sustainability: is the sense of urgency growing, considering the climatic change?

The European Union is leading in ambition and efforts for the green transition. Europe has done and is doing a lot, in terms of both legislation and investment. However, we face strong pressure to change faster. The global warming curve is still threatening, the risk of disconnect between people and impact of the green ambition in their neighbourhoods is growing in many parts of Europe, and the industry must follow the pace of change. This can actually be an opportunity for Europe to lead in circularity solutions worldwide. In addition, NEB as a movement has grown out of a tiny niche bottom up phenomenon. So we need to adapt our work to support the movement in its new stage of maturity.

Is the proposed NEB Mission a NEB 2.0?

It is definitely a new chapter for the NEB. Given the background, the question for us was: what should we do next? We want to see the principles of the New European Bauhaus working and contributing to real changes. We want this movement to continue growing with its unique character, bolstering the strong interest it's generating. However, we also need to determine the appropriate policy tools to make it even stronger. During the spring and early summer, we

have reflected on a number of possibilities. Working on a potential a dedicated NEB Mission under Horizon Europe seems the most appropriate step forward. However, this idea needs still discussions and the agreement of the EU Member States.

Let's try to explain it to readers who are not experts in EU policies.

Horizon Europe Missions are an instrument legally anchored in Research and Innovation Policy. The proposed Mission is an investment plan for research and innovation in a chosen societal challenge, as well as for roll out and scaling up of results, for a period of 10 years: toward projects and actions for the built environment and neighbourhoods, aligned with the NEB principles.

Is it an urban dimension?

The main aim is to transform a significant number of neighbourhoods in Europe into sustainable, inclusive and beautiful spaces within a decade, with people actively involved in the process. This includes cities but also towns and rural areas.

Why neighbourhoods?

Neighbourhoods can serve as excellent testbeds for rapid change. A 10-year timeframe is relatively short for transformation, especially as this needs to also include fundamental research. And working at the neighbourhood level allows us to learn more quickly and experience tangible change. The NEB values could potentially become standard practices in certain planning areas. We aim to collaborate with communities to create lasting change. Our goal is to establish a new approach to doing things, a fresh way of planning, managing buildings and involving communities, as well as new or natural materials, new ideas and techniques.

How do you plan to select the neighbourhoods to be transformed?

It's still under discussion. We will certainly initiate calls for the best ideas to be disseminated, creating a pipeline of excellent projects. We can draw upon the experience of the [NEB Laboratories](#). Our primary objective is to have the greatest possible impact on the ground.

Which are the main areas you want to emphasise?

The first is circularity: design for sustainability and inclusion – and the construction techniques

that would be associated to it – could become domains in which the European Union leads globally. Currently, the construction sector is one of the most polluting industries, heavily reliant on non-renewable, carbon-intensive resources, which are costly and resistant to change. We need to explore a new integration of high-tech choices with low-tech solutions (meaning natural, adapted materials), maximising the use of materials that the EU does not need to import. This perspective aims to enhance competitiveness with a positive economic impact. This leads us to the second point: business. When you have interesting ideas, it is not easy to find financing. A potential NEB Mission can help develop new business models adapted to new supply chains, new dimensions of risks and new circular technologies and approaches.

Is there a third area?

It's about the people and their neighbourhoods. In Brussels we can make good decisions and create favourable laws regarding climate but people live in neighbourhoods with their own identities, their own experience of beauty and cultural heritage. It's at that local level that we can design transformations based on a sense of belonging. This is the way to bring true bottom-up change.

You are talking about EU states but the NEB is working also beyond the European borders.

That's right. We have, for example, initiated a collaboration with Ukrainian authorities. There is a lot of interest in post-bombing reconstruction efforts aligned with the NEB standards. It was quite rewarding for us to be contacted by members of the Ukrainian Government and see the high interest in the NEB, namely to apply the NEB Compass for reconstruction and seek support for municipalities to understand the NEB values. We can learn from this experience: a country, although at war, prioritises rebuilding for the people and for beauty. If NEB based reconstruction can happen in Ukraine in such hard times, it should also happen at large scale in the European Union, guiding the green transformation and the renovation wave.

To move on, the proposed Mission is an important step.

We believe so, of course. However, we need now to move from an idea to a concrete proposal of a mission, developed together with the community and the Member States. The evaluation and decision of whether or not to have a Mission is still to happen during the coming months.

While preparing this potential future Mission, can you share with us the main results of 3-years of NEB activities?

Through our community, the NEB has evolved into a dynamic movement, that can now count on more than 1.000 members between non-for profit organizations (680+), businesses and public authorities (150+), NEB Prize winners and finalists (175) and many other precious followers. In terms of concrete projects on the ground, after the first set of 6 lighthouse demonstrators launched in 2022, in June 2023, 14 additional demonstrators were selected under the first call of the European Urban Initiative, for a budget of EUR 65 million. These will serve as a new generation of NEB demonstrators in the areas of constructing and renovating in a spirit of circularity and sustainability, preserving and enhancing cultural heritage, adapting and transforming buildings for affordable housing solutions, and regenerating urban spaces. Although the NEB has so far no specific EU programme at its disposal, EUR 214 million have been mobilised for 2021-2024 by different MFF programmes most of all Horizon Europe and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

Do you feel a change of perspective in the field of architecture?

We understand that it is not solely about constructing physical walls or buildings; we've elevated architecture and design into a new, innovative dimension that we mustn't oversimplify. However, on the other hand, we have to convince authorities, who hold legislation and public funds, that our ideas are suitable for the future. We are translating our value system for those who are not part of the movement but are now essential in helping us exist and grow. It is a delicate balance: maintaining the movement's originality, ensuring we preserve the energy and social connections we foster, while also initiating new dialogues. But the positive feedback by our community shows that we are on the right path.

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