

ECOVAST



European Council for the Village and Small Town

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Report on the POTSDAM SEMINAR, held on 16 November 2010 at the University of Applied Sciences: Fachhochschule, Potsdam

On 16 November 2010 ECOVAST and ASSET organized a seminar in Potsdam, Germany on the topic of European Small Towns.

The day's event was held under the auspices of the ECOVAST Project 'Action to Strengthen Small European Towns (ASSET)'. The event had been organised by Angus Fowler of the German ECOVAST Section and Phil Turner of the UK ECOVAST Section.

The 3 purposes of the seminar:

- To report progress of the ASSET project of ECOVAST
- To discuss policies for small towns in Europe, member states and regions
- To arrive at recommendations for a major European Conference on Small Towns in 2011

There were poster displays on various reports by ECOVAST Sections from Austria, Germany and the United Kingdom, and others.

- Information on the work of **Professor John Shepherd** of Birkbeck College, University of London, on the development of a strategic database for small towns in England
- Information from **Steffen Maretzke** of the Federal Institute for research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development and the Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Development
- From the Brandenburg Ministry of Infrastructure
- **Dirk Michaelis** displayed information on the region of Altmark, Sachsen-Anhalt

- Activity on small towns by the ECOVAST Croatian Section.
- Copies of the ***New Wittstock Declaration*** 2008 by ECOVAST Germany, the Brandenburg Chamber of Architects and the Municipality of Wittstock/Dosse

The morning session was a series of presentations on research that has been carried out by ECOVAST and others.

THE FIRST SESSION - WHAT ARE SMALL TOWNS?

1. **Phil Turner** introduced the conference and the aims and objectives of the ASSET project and gave an overview of the progress of the work on small European towns in Germany, Croatia and the United Kingdom. He referred to the real policy gap in European policy concerning small towns as the current emphasis is on urban areas and rural area, peripheral areas, mountains and islands.

2. The first presentation was by **Valerie Carter**, the President of ECOVAST (newly elected in October 2010). Her presentation was about the research that had been carried out in 2010 on the number of people across the whole of Europe (not just the European Union). The research was based on towns with a population above 10,000 as research in the UK showed that it is towns above this level which provide a good range of functions for their surrounding hinterlands.

The study highlighted that more than 77 million people across Europe lived in small towns – between 10,000 and 30,000. This is more than live in any single country except Germany and this evidence should be a lever to persuade Europe to develop policies for smaller towns and small towns should be encouraged to work together to press these arguments.

3. **Andrea Weigert** (ECOVAST Treasurer) made an intervention on work that had been carried out in Schleswig-Holstein, in Germany

4. **Dr Gerhard Fasching** from ECOVAST Austria reported on the work that he and Silvia Mayer had undertaken. They have now completed a database of all small towns in Austria and a Small Towns Register has been set up. It lists what assets each town has. This Register can now be used by towns in Austria for a wide range of purposes.

5. **Pam Moore** (Secretary General of ECOVAST)

As part of the research aspect of the ASSET project, in 2006 a questionnaire was devised to gather a wide range of information about Europe's small towns. It addressed such topics as governance, population definitions and the levels of support operative in different states, and also sought to ascertain the principal challenges faced. Further

questions included towns' links to their hinterland, and whether other sources of information existed – good practice examples, research papers and websites.

Questionnaire 2 was completed by contacts from more than a dozen countries, and analysis of both questionnaires' results have provided a wealth of information for ASSET. There is now a proposal for a third phase of research, which will commence by early 2011, and which will seek more in depth information on governance, on involvement in community led planning and the role played by local businesses in helping to encourage the vitality of small towns, and the stimulate their role as “hubs”.

6. Professor Dr Ralf Bokermann, from ECOVAST Germany, described his published work on German small towns (up to 7000 inhabitants) in different types of rural areas, **9. Phil Turner**, Past President ECOVAST and Convenor of ECOVAST's ASSET Project introduced the topic of urban and rural integration and co-operation - What are the policies for small towns in Europe, member states and regions?

Phil pointed to some recent examples, at European, national and sub-national levels, of attempts to address the policy gap which has been obvious for some years. Small towns are rarely featured in policies. Larger cities have policies to support them because they have the strongest economic opportunities, larger numbers of voters within their boundaries and more concentrated social problems.

10. Jörg Gehrmann, Mayor of Wittstock an der Dosse, Brandenburg spoke of the German National Programme for Small and Medium Sized Towns: an appreciation of that programme and its benefits from the point of view of the mayor of a participating town (i.e. bottom-up)

A sound economic structure, with business tax income, is essential for the future of the town and its surrounding settlements. In the global financial crisis the way forward is to keep the companies Wittstock has, rather than attract new ones and to plan for the longer term.

The municipality has a population 15,500, some 5,000 in the core town. A programme for urban development funding is important and there is a need for this to be linked to an integrated rural development strategy for the 25 villages and the urban settlements.

In 2005 the 'middle centre status' had been withdrawn from Wittstock and it now shares functions with other towns. This is having an impact on the services in his town and they are fighting hard to maintain them.

Governance is enhanced by joint working with neighbouring municipalities, notably Pritzwalk, pooling functions to improve delivery, without merging political entities or

staffing. Retaining the identity of places is essential. Villages are linked to the 'metropole' or 'mother town' - "decentralised concentration".

covering analysis of features and problems as well as implementation of local action areas. Since 1972 (in eastern Germany since 1992) there had been a focus on local government, public and private infrastructure in small towns and surrounding villages. This strengthened rural micro-regions as centre points. Since about 1990, there had been an increasing tendency of migration and massive job losses. Small towns had little in-migration.

7. **Dr Arthur Spiegler**, of ECOVAST Austria, gave a presentation on the characteristics of historic towns in Austria.

The characteristic elements of small towns were illustrated, as handed down from their long lasting history and their current role. They had a part to play in the future of regions and landscapes of Europe.

He pointed to the dangers in taking the population of the historic core as a criterion for defining a small town / historic town, giving the example of the historical town of St. Veit in Carinthia. The present municipality counts about 14,000 inhabitants and is as such a small town. But the municipality also includes some of the surrounding small settlements (cadastral). The city itself has about 7,500 inhabitants and in the "historical centre" now live about 1,400 inhabitants.

He called for further discussion on the question of how many of today's small towns are "historic small towns" (within the meaning of the above criteria). For Austria, he estimated that might be about 90%.

SECOND SESSION - WORKSHOP

This session was chaired, in turn, by Valerie Carter (President ECOVAST); Phil Turner (ECOVAST UK Section); and Angus Fowler (ECOVAST Germany). The purpose of this session was to look at the programmes and policies in Europe on small towns and what should be the next steps taken after the end of this seminar in Potsdam.

8. Valerie welcomed everyone to this second session. A message was then read out from **Prof. Dr.-Ing.Hagen Eyink**, Head of rural infrastructure, cultural landscapes at the Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Development, Berlin.

Afternoon session

11. **Ms. Kathleen Bierbaß**, from the Working Group “Towns with historic centres” of the State of Brandenburg, spoke about the quality of development in small towns in Brandenburg. Kathleen explained the Federal funding programme "Städtebaulicher Denkmalschutz" (Urban Monument Protection). This had involved inter-municipal co-operation in Brandenburg, covering the smallest town (Lenzen 2,381 population) to Potsdam (1.5 million population). Her presentation generated discussion on the quality of new building in historic areas.

Hubs and service centres – Discussion: Moderated by **Valerie Carter** / UK

12. Valerie opened the discussion with the notion that hubs must have a hinterland. **Angus Fowler** drew attention to the distinction between a hub and a core. **Gerhard L. Fasching**, as a geographer, perceived the town and surroundings, the town having a radial impact. Ribbon development was to be avoided, as had been successful in France and Switzerland. **Dirk Michaelis** considered that small towns had been ignored, but there had been a focus on villages.

Irmelin Küttner described her recent visit to a Baltic coast town, where there had been successful investment in the seaside promenade and street furniture. A woodland fringe had a cycle path. Large villas had been maintained without changes to their facades. Parking spaces for visitors had been inserted discretely. New hotels and a new colonnade for small retail premises had been created. There was a range of goods and services for people with different financial capacity.

Angus Fowler stressed the importance of a market in towns, and Valerie gave the example of Andover, Hampshire UK, where the priority to attract shoppers had been to make car parks easily accessible, without litter and with clean public lavatories.

There was discussion on the importance of job creation and the support of businesses. Valerie pointed to experience in South East England, where one third of all businesses were based in small towns and rural areas. It had been difficult for business people to find time to engage with other local people in forming a vision for an area.

Frau Menz considered that young companies sometimes found that older buildings in urban areas were limited in space, and a rural environment was favoured. For architects the dream was the right client in the right building in the right area. Clusters of enterprises, such as artists and other creative industries had potential for sharing of support services and joint marketing. Gerhard urged mutual help amongst neighbours. He saw church buildings as purveyors of culture, and castles and palaces as sub-regional centres – a magnet for identity. In the past the wealthy families had great influence. Who were to be the champions of today? Former Managing Directors? One from an agricultural company in Austria has a grasp of a whole region.