

711 Centre for Architectural Studies

Introduction

The Centre for Architectural Studies, founded in 1949, studies the history and theory of architecture and urbanism in Bulgaria from antiquity to the present. It also addresses social, economic and legislative questions as regards urban planning and the preservation of architectural heritage in Bulgaria.

The Centre conducts fundamental and applied research and is currently host to 22 employees, of whom 19 are scientific staff. It includes three research sections:

- history and protection of heritage,
- architecture,
- urbanism

The institute also houses a museum, archive and library, and an administrative unit.

A centre for post-graduate studies and an experimental studio are currently being established. In 2008, the Centre was reformed and thus shifted its focus from Theory and History towards applied science, including sustainable development of urban spaces. It is as yet too early to determine whether these changes have improved substantially the research quality of the centre, or indeed its function within Bulgarian society.

Evaluation Summary

The Centre has started a process of reform by which it intends to shift from history and theory towards applied science. Most of these ideas still wait for realization so that history of architecture is still very dominant. The Centre suffers particularly from over-aging and lack of international connections. This relative isolation translates into an urgent need to re-launch its work under a different constellation, based upon up-to-date theoretical foundations and inspired by methodological innovation. A substantial restructuring would be needed in order to make it more efficient and to enable it to catch up internationally – in terms of both methods and networking.

This panel was disappointed by the lack of quality and conceptual rigour in the current scientific work or, indeed, the planning for a more ambitious future. It may not be advisable that at the current level of research the advice function of the institute be expanded; this may be different or individual members of staff who may be good professionals in their own right. Consequences for PhD training may also need to be drawn.

The overall score in terms of **quality and productivity**, compared in an international context, is “D”: *much of the centre’s work is repetitive, or flawed in approaches and methodology*. In terms of **relevance**, the work of the centre is given an overall score of “B” (*moderate*), which refers more to the need of Bulgaria of an institute in this field than to the performance of the current centre itself. The **prospects** of the centre are *low* (overall score: “C”), in terms of its current intellectual and institutional leadership, as well as in terms of realistic planning of a sustainable future for the institute.

The panel could not see the added value of such an institute for the Academy, and, despite claims to the contrary, even less the use made of the BAS system, with its expertise in many fields, by the researchers in the institute.

Evaluation Report

a) Quality and Productivity

Quality (international recognition and innovative potential)

The areas of research practised at the centre cover, in principle, a very wide range of topics, including sustainable development of urban environments, historic and modern Bulgarian architecture, and theoretical issues. In fact, the range of subjects addressed and activities is too broad for the limited resources and academic expertise available.

The thematic profile of the centre urgently requires focus and streamlining. The links to neighbouring areas (and potential for cooperation) must be better exploited and articulated (including, natural resources, urban history, theories from cultural studies reading the built environment through language and literature, archaeology etc.).

As it stands – and as also witnessed during the site visit - a strong focus of the centre has been, and still is, on traditional issues of the historical study of architecture. The most solid and, at the same, methodologically most interesting work is probably what is being conducted in close cooperation with the BAS Institute for Archaeology.

Otherwise – to judge especially by the insights gained during the site visit - , much of the research seems to be conducted in single-scholar enterprises, often over a lifetime, and without much efforts to either create “followers” (i.e. inspire young scholars, who might help in large research enterprises) or to involve colleagues. This peculiar structure of the practice of scientific work is worth mentioning here only in so far as it seems to contribute to the surprising isolation in which the scientific staff of the institute operates – and hence to the disconnectedness of the

resulting products from the rest of the academic discourse in the wider area of the study of built objects and environments.

A small part of the institute's activities is embedded in regional or European or international frameworks. The Centre cooperates with some European research institutions, typically by operating as the Bulgarian bridgehead, providing access to or copies of archival material and documentation. The Centre does not seem to be recognised as an equal partner by the leading institutes elsewhere on the continent.

The documentation also indicates support obtained through cooperation with UNESCO and in the context of European Commission sponsored projects, and also lists other actors. There seems to be practically no income that would be generated by these participations in international projects.

The poor level of international cooperation overall is best expressed by two figures: only five foreign visitors from three countries have visited the institute in the five years under review; scientific staff from the institute report a total of six participations in international conferences throughout the five years.

Equipment and infrastructure are, it seems, still at incipient stages, and unable to serve as guarantors for the feasibility of plans for a brighter future. Questions about the concrete steps to upgrade the material infrastructure could not be answered satisfactorily. The report shows that in 2008 funds for infrastructural development were reduced to 280 (*sic*) BGN.

Productivity (scientific output and international standing)

The Centre is not an institute and should therefore not be compared to larger structures. However, for its a current number of scientific scientific staff (19) a mere seven scientific articles published abroad in the reporting period is not a satisfactory result. 100 scientific articles and some 20 articles of a more popular nature were published in Bulgaria. Altogether, there were 214 publications in the reviewed period, out of which perhaps 10% abroad. All books were published in Bulgaria. On average, every scholar has 2 publications per year, and this despite the existence of various channels of in-house publication. Productivity is low, in particular as regards book production.

Even when considering that much of the products fall in the broad field of architectural, and perhaps urban, history and therefore traditionally comprise a great deal of documentary evidence, such a "collectionist" approach seems to outweigh any willingness to apply analytical methods by far.

Between 2007 and 2008, the core funding from BAS had been increased by 25%. It remains to be seen whether this investment will result in an increased volume of

outputs. The impressions gathered during the site visit do not leave much room for optimism.

b) Relevance (socio-economic impact)

The Centre conducts fundamental research in the field of Bulgarian architectural history, at times illustrating its exploits with relevant 3D-computer reconstructions. The Centre is in a unique position to make important contributions to the field; it seems that it is in this potential function – i.e., as potential contributor, rather than by virtue of its actual scientific achievements – that it is sought out occasionally as a partner in international collaborations.

The Centre aims to address social, economic and legislative questions as regards urban planning in Bulgaria; however, this seems to be a recently acquired mission as there is very little concrete outcome so far.

Scholars based at the centre have been involved in giving policy advice as regards legal harmonization in the field of architecture and urban planning with the Acquis. The Centre is a consultant to the Parliament and different Ministries, for instance in the field of environmental studies and regional development. For example, there are joint activities with the National Centre for Territorial Development in the field of urban planning and territorial and regional planning and in building up the National Territorial Planning Scheme. The need for the parallel existence of these two centres has remained unexplained.

Across the country, staff based at the centre is involved in applied studies on the protection of cultural heritage, for example in the municipality of Kyustendil (joint work in the preservation of architectural monuments on the territory of the municipality, developing joint projects for adaptation and conservation, for studying monuments and disseminating knowledge about them).

The Centre also assumes an important role in collecting sources on the history of architecture and urban development; what could be seen of the archival activities does not correspond to the standards expected from a nationally leading institute. The Centre publicizes Bulgarian cultural heritage nationally and internationally, for instance with exhibitions.

Generally speaking, scientists from the institute deliver lectures at a number of universities and colleges; the Centre has notably joint training courses for PhD students with the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy and Varna Free University.

In terms of **relevance**, the work of the centre is given an overall score of “**B**” (*moderate*), which refers more to the need of Bulgaria of an institute in this field than to the performance of the current centre itself.

c) Prospects (vitality and feasibility, management & leadership; future potential and ability of the Institute to tackle new scientific challenges)

The Centre has embarked on – or was requested to launch - a fundamental reform process in 2008, the results of which have not yet become visible. The intention appears to be to move towards strengthening applied research, at the expense of the history and theory of architecture, and to give stronger emphasis to doctoral education. There are some doubts as to whether the current scientific staff and leadership is strong and determined enough to spearhead such an important transition which would radically change the face of the centre, indeed, perhaps restore the status of institute, and its position in Bulgarian society.

The Centre also aims to create more flexible groups of non-permanent researchers and guest professors.

Currently, the age structure is particularly unfavourable: 16 out of 20 staff members listed are over 56 years old, only four members are under forty. The current age distribution reflects, in all likelihood, the need for what would otherwise be mid-career academics to seek a living in other sectors of the economy; no institute examined by this panel shows this problem in quite as dramatic a fashion as this one. In a few years' time, the Centre will have lost the majority of its staff through retirement.

With the current staff, there seems to be no effective systems of quality control; even under the prevailing regime of HR management the transition the Centre is embarking on would require that the ability of currently available expertise to contribute to the new challenges be verified, irrespective of whether such testing has an influence on promotion.

On the other hand, the Centre is strongly committed to supporting and promoting young researchers. It has been accredited as an educational unit for doctoral degrees in the following disciplines: theory and history of architecture; preservation, restoration and adaptation of architectural monuments; synergy with other arts (*sic*); architecture of buildings; urban planning. The Centre is currently training 15 PhD students, of whom a number seem to be professionals wishing to complement their experience with a higher degree; this is, per se, a good phenomenon, and could even testify to the attractiveness of the institute as a centre of higher learning; for this hypothesis to be measured against reality, more information about alternatives would be necessary.

The institute upholds working relationships with other institutes within the BAS, national and international institutions, including universities. Most projects are individual ones, and very limited in scope and time. International visibility (or even

presence in international conference and expert meetings) is very low and no strategy seems to exist for changing this particular shortcoming.

The **prospects** of the centre are *low* (overall score: “C”), in terms of its current intellectual and institutional leadership, as well as in terms of realistic planning of a sustainable future for the centre in a leadership position in Bulgaria.

Overall Strengths and weaknesses

Strengths

- the process of shifting from theory and history to more practical and problem-solving tasks (such as the revitalization and reutilization of industrial sites) may be promising; it remains to be seen whether this transition is feasible and sustainable;
- role played in the preservation and protection of cultural heritage; good expertise in the field of history of architecture;
- Some contacts through European projects on developing natural resources management systems in Bulgaria and working relationships with Bulgarian and international institutions, incl. universities, UNESCO and other fora;
- emphasis on in vocational education and PhD training consistently attracts young researchers who may in a better future help renew the Centre.

Weaknesses

- productivity and international visibility and presence are very low;
- no effective systems of quality control;
- ambitious plans for the future are not grounded in a pragmatic strategy on how to turn the vision into reality; the realization of plans expounded would require very substantial new funding, which is not currently expected;
- particularly unfavourable age profile of scientific staff.

Recommendations

These recommendations below should be read against the background of an overall pessimistic assessment by the Panel as regards the future of the centre. The panel was disappointed by the lack of quality and conceptual rigour in the current scientific work and about the virtual absence of any realistic planning for a more ambitious or even just sustainable future. The Panel has doubts about the ability of the current management structure to lead the centre successfully through the transition period.

The overall score in terms of **quality and productivity**, compared in an international context, is therefore “D”: *much of the centre’s work is repetitive, or flawed in approaches and methodology*. In terms of **relevance**, the work of the centre is given an overall score of “B” (*moderate*), which refers more to the need of Bulgaria of an institute in this field than to the performance of the current centre itself. The **prospects** of the centre are *low* (overall score: “C”). The recommendations are therefore meant to guide a process of last resort, by which, through a substantial commitment and investment BAS indicates that it sees the need to have such a centre: a revision of the current management structure seems to be paramount for launching any such process. The *status quo* is not sustainable.

- The Centre urgently needs a realistic, yet strategic vision for its future. Instead of spreading its activities in all directions, it must define its desired profile and related priorities more clearly and focus on a limited number of core activities;
- the Centre must allocate project funding according to priorities set, and on the basis of excellence and relevance of projects, rather than based on tradition; for this, the Centre needs to create framework conditions that aim at increasing quality by introducing a clear system of quality control and, more importantly, incentives linked to the strategic plan;
- activities with vital national functions (e.g. in the fields of urban planning or environment, but also certain cultural heritage projects) must be developed in close cooperation with the relevant ministries;
- no research institute can function by commissioned work alone; non-permanent and flexible working groups, including scientists and, why not, practitioners from outside of the Academy, thereby transcending established structures and hierarchies, could be instrumental in reviving the intellectual vibrancy of a field sectors of which elsewhere are carriers of innovation and creativity (e.g.: urban studies);
- the Centre should make an effort to improve international exchanges, increase participation of its scientific staff at international conferences, and encourage more publications in internationally read publications and languages other than Bulgarian.
- Substantial investment in infrastructure (starting from e-mail and internet connections, via office equipment and library, all the way to professional material for the other ancillary services [archives; computing]) are urgent; without such substantial investment (or guaranteed access to such tools in partner organisations) no further steps should be undertaken towards increasing intake of doctoral candidates, as their training is at risk of not being conducted at a sufficient level.