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### **The Village as a Living Space — Between a Disappearing Past and Village Revival**

Grube J., (2006), *Lebensraum Dorf. Methoden, Inhalte und Ergebnisse der Dorferneuerung*, Bauwerk Verlag GmbH, Berlin.

Village transformation as a living space together with the problems of village economic and social development take up very little room in academic considerations in Germany. An exception is a publication devoted to these problems and impressive as far as wealth of materials is concerned, by Joachim Grube (a retired lecturer at the Department of Architecture in Hannover Nienburg/Weser) which came into being in connection with numerous village revival projects taking place over the past two decades. In a short review it is difficult to convey the entire wealth of impressions after reading this book, which is impressive not only in dimension but above all in its wealth of fine detail. It is essential to get to know this book or at least Joachim Grube's article on the same topic, published in *Berichte über Landwirtschaft* (Volume 85, Pamphlet 1, May 2007, pp. 122–147).

The empirical basis of the publication are 40 case studies on village revival, carried out in small and medium-sized villages (generally without local government status) in the poorly developed regions of Lower Saxony (80%) and Anhalt Saxony (20%). The revival process was analysed from the planning phase through their realisation and evaluation of the first effects until the current phase. Approximately 1300 people took part in numerous research questionnaires accompanying these activities. Those responses were confronted with the author's professional views which were the basis for evaluating revival activities and the current quality of life in the villages which are the topic of interest. However, the picture acquired as a result of comparative analyses, going beyond the presented studies, synthesising the consequences of revival for

the modern village as a living space are of particular value. They include issues concerning agricultural economy as well as shaping rural space; designing traffic, supply and service routes as well as architecture and the social environment. The book, apart from analyses on the basic characteristics of planning village revival, specific ways of realizing rural areas and their consequences for social development, is supplemented by numerous architectural sketches, diagrams, tables, photographs, questionnaires and evaluations.

The final feature is an attempt at specifying both the positive and negative effects of village revival and creating a quality of life ranking in the villages being researched. We can only briefly mention some of the consequences.

The shrinking of the agricultural economy has pushed it aside to the margins of rural settlements but the majority of the inhabitants do not see anything which could have a negative influence on their village life. As there is a lack of employment outside agriculture, the majority (in 9 out of 10 villages) are migrant workers travelling to work in town.

The basic aim of renewal was giving a new architectural shape to the central parts of the village which was positively received by most of the inhabitants. Meanwhile, the problem arose of a lack of new practical function for unused historical manor houses and other such buildings as well as inadequate action for protecting the environment and caring for green areas.

While it seems that in larger villages (over 2000 inhabitants) the technical and council infrastructure has improved, in smaller settlements it is disappearing. The same can be said about demographic development, in half of the researched villages negative phenomena were recorded (depopulation), whereas that varies and seems rather positive (an increase in number of inhabitants) in larger villages.

There are various ways of interpreting the level of integration between the local and the immigrant population whereas the possibility of participating in decisions concerning directions of development of the local communities is criticized as being insufficient. Whereas social relations between village inhabitants were very positively evaluated, particularly in the context of belonging to neighbourly help associations and organizations.

Whereas the overall evaluation of the effects of village renewal projects provides a very diversified picture – positive phenomena are mainly noticed in the sphere of architectural revitalisation of city centres, water purification, development of footpaths and cycle routes – the ranking produced by the author, including both quantity criteria and engagement and integration of the inhabitants, has largely been confirmed by the success of village renewal movements. He formulates activities for the future, pointing among others to

the needs: closer cooperation within regional projects of village renewal; the preservation and reinforcement of village cultural heritage within new housing estates, old manor buildings and communication routes linking various parts of the village; promoting neighbourhood and voluntary activity as well as providing essential services in small villages.

Joachim Grube feels that planning and supporting village renewal should not be restricted to the improvement of architectural constructions but should also include village culture and social fabric. In his opinion despite the ongoing changes, living in the countryside continues to be different to living and working in the city and rural resources should also in the future have regional, cultural and social significance, providing a certain level of self-sufficiency and specific area of life, work and spending leisure time, protected from external influence.

Whether such a specificity and self-sufficiency, which were formerly possible, can be functionally connected with current forms of farming, existence and social communication remains an open question.