

Minx, Eckhard

Conference Paper

Building bridges: How to cope with the gap between today and tomorrow

38th Congress of the European Regional Science Association: "Europe Quo Vadis? - Regional Questions at the Turn of the Century", 28 August - 1 September 1998, Vienna, Austria

Provided in Cooperation with:

European Regional Science Association (ERSA)

Suggested Citation: Minx, Eckhard (1998) : Building bridges: How to cope with the gap between today and tomorrow, 38th Congress of the European Regional Science Association: "Europe Quo Vadis? - Regional Questions at the Turn of the Century", 28 August - 1 September 1998, Vienna, Austria, European Regional Science Association (ERSA), Louvain-la-Neuve

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<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/113378>

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European Regional Sciences Association
38th European Congress
Vienna, August 1998

Motto: Europe Quo Vadis? Regional Questions at the Turn of the Century

Eckard Minx:

Building Bridges: How to Cope with the Gap between Today and Tomorrow

Ladies and Gentlemen,

please allow me to begin with a few preliminary remarks.

I am neither a town nor a regional planner, never mind a specialist in the field of planning theory. I am a future researcher in a global company which, under the huge umbrella of "Issue Management", is occupied on the one hand with anticipating the expected consequences of today's doings and which, on the other hand, tries to play through alternative possibilities for future developments.

Therefore, I ask you to bear with me if my contribution examines the topic of this event from an outsider's point of view, a perhaps undisciplined view.

Furthermore, I come from Berlin and many of my examples will be related to this city and its surrounding area. I hope you will forgive me for this also.

We are living in a time of great upheaval. Vast changes, the consequences of which are hard to assess, play a decisive role in political, economic and social relationships. New centres of power have developed or are coming into being with the dissolution of former power blocs. New technologies are accelerating economic and social change.

Our room to act has expanded in a number of ways. This, however, means that one is often forced to act without being fully acquainted with the context and usually without any knowledge of the consequences to be expected. This challenge requires more than traditional forecasting approaches, because today and in the future we will have to navigate much more in unknown waters.

Even though we all experience how conditions are rapidly changing, the need to hold on to the old and familiar appears to be greater than ever. However, if we fail to adjust to the new conditions with their new approaches and unconventional ideas, we will not be able to make use of the opportunity to shape the future.

From my already mentioned position as an outsider, I would hence like to formulate some questions for town and regional planning in my presentation and hence attempt to create a stimulus for a new or different way of viewing certain problems. At the same time, I would also like to attempt to form a bridge between yesterday and tomorrow.

What did Robert Musil write about this very city (Vienna) where we are just now on a beautiful day in August 1913:?

"Cars shot out of narrow, deep streets into the shallowness of bright squares. Pedestrian darkness formed cloudy strings. Where thick lines of speed transgressed their loose haste, they thickened, then trickled faster and after just a few vibrations assumed their former even pulse. Hundreds of sounds were joined together in one wire-like noise from which single points protruded along which sharp edges ran and once again evened out, from which clear sounds splintered off and faded. This noise, the peculiarity of which cannot be described, is all one needs, even after years of absence and with closed eyes, to recognise that one is in the royal capital city of Vienna ..."¹

I have given my paper the title "Building Bridges". Building bridges is considered to be a fine art, at least since Roman times; not for nothing was the member of the highest clerical order, responsible for supervising all religious laws, titled "pontifex", and even today, "pontifex maximus" is one of the Pope's titles. In my presentation, I will endeavour to adopt this art and construct seven bridges, differing in style and span.

These bridges, I hope, will connect that which is often divided, will open paths where they have been broken off. In short: they should enable communication and exchange between a vast variety of different elements without eliminating these differences. I will hence begin with bridges between different areas, then attempt to form economic, ethnic and cultural, aesthetic, ecological and political bridges before finally returning to my initial questions by contemplating bridges between the past, present and future.

Main section

I. Area bridges

Europe is currently undergoing dramatic change in the topographic structure. The reasons for this change can be found in:

- the globalization processes,

¹ Musil, R.: Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften, 2 volumes , Reinbeck near Hamburg 1994. Here: Vol. 1, page 9.

- in the formation of a unified Europe which is redefining both its inner and its outer borders - for example to eastern Europe,
- the expansion of cities,
- and finally in modern information and communication technologies.

This in turn leads to further polarisation within urban and regional hierarchies². There is a continuously growing gap between cities and regions which (can) participate in the globalization and Europeanising processes and those excluded from this; competition for participation in future trends is becoming greater. "Global and, one might add, European cities, or those wishing to become so, are becoming densely networked, more so than with their direct environment; modern technologies and equipment also play a decisive role here, be it information and communication technology, airlines or routes for high-speed trains. One key word in this context is "availability": those who are not located near the ICE high-speed train or an airfield lose out.

Conclusion:

Space/time dimensions are shifting on the effective, i.e. the living, map of Europe. The space/time relationships formed by the new processes are moving further and further away from natural, geographic formations. Here, it is necessary to build bridges between regions which have reached different levels in order to prevent a perpetuation of regional imbalances.

II. Economic bridges

Similar dramatic changes are taking place in Europe's economic structures.

The formation of a unified financial and economic area in Europe equally strengthens the centripetal and centrifugal forces. Whilst economic exchange accelerates and becomes more intense, competition in investment, production and labour markets is increasing at the same time. Against a background of high unemployment, the changes linked with these processes will not only be regarded by many Europeans as an opportunity, but will also be perceived by a growing number of people as a threat to their own living situation.

Regions, cities and communities are being confronted by growing de-industrialisation processes which represent an unprecedented challenge for their municipal finances, and hence their ability to act. In Germany, this trend is further aggravated by the situation in east Germany where now even traditional industrial regions can, at best, compete only with the west German peripheral industries.

At the same time society is moving towards a tertiarization. Company-oriented, household and person-related and public services are gaining in importance. The 'white-collar worker and public

² Cf. Mäding, H.: Entwicklungsperspektiven für die Stadt - Trends und Chance. To be found in: Aktuelle Information. Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik. December 1997, page 4.

official gate' of AEG in the Wedding district no longer symbolises Berlin's future, instead this is embodied by the new tower recently erected by the service provider debis at Potsdamer Platz.

Regions, cities and communities are facing two alternatives; to use the opportunities inherent in tertiarization, to redefine and present themselves as potential locations for services and expert activities, or to be pushed into oblivion in urban hierarchy. My impression is that municipal politics are still often focused solely on attracting industry and the loss of entire industrial regions is lamented. The new possibilities to be found in the symbiosis between modern industry and services are not being fully recognised and exhausted. Although it has been statistically proven that modern, expert services especially develop where industry also develops well - and vice versa³.

The question is: do the new structures created here by economics and politics really bring about improvements in the living situation of the people in these regions? If the answer to this question is no: then, why not? And: how can changes still be achieved?

Conclusion:

Bridges must be built between economic interests and the interests of the people. More than ever, the economic and social aspects of regional development must be simultaneously integrated into considerations. This is the only way to ensure that regional development decisions are accepted by the people affected by them.

III. Bridges between people and cultures or: Weidendammer Bridge

Weidendammer Bridge is located in the centre of Berlin, within the near vicinity of Friedrichstrasse Station and the Berliner Ensemble Theatre founded by Bertolt Brecht. It crosses the River Spree. Of an evening, strollers have been able listen here for some years now to the excellent accordionist from Moscow who - even when it's freezing - sits and plays on the middle of the bridge beside the Prussian eagle.

Europe is currently witnessing a worsening of social, ethnic and cultural conflicts. We must notice that the difference between poor and rich, native and foreign, the established and outsiders, is increasing rather than decreasing.

After the concept of compensating social conflicts and integrating immigrants predominated in western democracies in the 70s and 80s, it has become more and more apparent, since the beginning

³ Cf. Henckel, D. et al.; Entscheidungsfelder städtischer Zukunft. Stuttgart, Berlin, Köln, 1997, page 151 and following.

of the 90s, that differences between social groups and strata are increasing⁴, and approaches towards the integration of foreigners are failing even in the third generation.

This is seen particularly clearly in large cities: the trenches are deepening between the different social and ethnic groups which are also separating more and more in terms of area. For example, the Kreuzberg district of Berlin, a traditional worker and immigrant district, is becoming a ghetto where Turkish people are being isolated and isolate themselves, where their culture and also their social problems (such as extremely high unemployment) dominate and where outsiders, and here this means the German population, are seen less and less. In other cities, such as Brussels, walls are being built around districts primarily populated by foreigners. So-called problem groups, the socially weak and foreigners are being pushed into the suburbs where they are sentenced to permanent disintegration. The results are currently visible in cities such as Paris and Strasbourg⁵.

However: city life and, in particular, life in big cities, has always been based on immigration by foreigners, on the exchange between different cultures⁶. Berlin, for example, is only conceivable in the east-west axis (Moscow/Berlin/Paris) and the north-south axis (Copenhagen/Berlin/Vienna). In its heyday, the city proved and understood itself as a hub between cultures - surges in development were usually linked with migration waves (for example, the Huguenot refugees from France in the 17th and 18th century, Russians in the 1920s, Turkish guest workers in the 1960s and 70s) each of which brought its own particular feature.

If language is understood to be one of the culture forms par excellence, then the peculiarity of Berlin's culture as a diverse conglomerate must also be heard in the language of the city in particular. Walter Benjamin defined the Berlin dialect as a mixture of diverse language cultures. In a radio program for children, he said: "Berlinish is a language of people who have no time, who often have to make themselves understood with a quick hint, a look, a word. People who only meet every so often in society are not capable of this, only those who meet regularly, every day, under certain, unchanging conditions are capable of this. Special languages always develop amongst such people, and you yourselves have the best example of this in your classroom. There is in fact a special school language. There are also particular expressions amongst workers, amongst sports people, amongst soldiers, amongst thieves and so on. All these languages contribute to Berlinish, because all these people in the various occupations and relationships live together in Berlin in a large mass and at an enormous pace. Berlinish is today the most beautiful and precise expression of this rapid pace of life."⁷

⁴ This was confirmed from various perspectives by the series "Die ungerechte Gesellschaft" which has been published in the "Die Zeit" magazine since last autumn. Cf. Die Zeit, 24 October 1997 and following.

⁵ The drama of this permanent disintegration and its consequences, in particular, for the behaviour of youths, was recently examined by V. Forrester in her book "Der Terror der Ökonomie", Vienna 1997.

⁶ Cf. Hoffmann-Axthelm, D.: Die dritte Stadt. Frankfurt/Main 1993, page 36 and following.

⁷ Benjamin, W.: Beroliniana. Berlin 1987, page 106.

Summa summarum: isolation would mean the end of big-city culture. And, under the conditions of increasing immigration pressure from the third world and the increase in inner European mobility, it would lead to extreme faults.

Although sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies rejected the modern city as a society 100 years ago - in contrast to a community -⁸, I take the view that the city must be regarded and developed as a society of different communities which communicate peacefully with one another without having to abandon their differences. Under today's conditions, there is no alternative.

American communitarists, such as Michael Walzer, refer in this context to the peaceful coexistence of different social, cultural, ethnic and religious groups⁹. Amitai Etzioni calls his concept "Community of different communities" and points to the problems during the implementation of his concept when he writes: "To create and maintain a community of communities is a particularly great challenge for communitarists, because there is a trend in communities where, the stronger their inner ties are, the less they see themselves and act accordingly as part of an association of several communities. The members of many communities would gladly draw in the drawbridges, post guards at the gates and feel morally attached to only the members of their own community".¹⁰

Conclusion:

Instead of the members of the different communities behaving like the Gothamites and pulling in the drawbridge at night, new bridges must be built which enable and support communication and exchange between the different social and ethnic-cultural groups. For urban and regional planning, this means preventing the segregation of social groups using suitable means and ensuring a sensible mixing of all city areas.

IV. Style bridges

The variety of styles, and their juxtaposition, lend vivacity to cities. Various styles must be accepted, permitted and placed in a sensible relationship to each other. Monotony has nothing to do with our societies, neither today nor tomorrow.

We are apparently moving constantly between two extremes:

The **one** extreme is the concept of the "city as a museum". This means the preservation of an era experienced as worth living and loving. These cities or city districts have in fact great charm: for example, the southern French towns of Cordes-sur-ciel and Sarlat or the picturesque wine-growing towns in the Elsass and Pfalz regions or in Tuscany where every possible effort is made to ban any form of modernism to the outer districts which then expand like huge cancerous ulcers around the

⁸ Tönnies, F.: *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* (1887). Berlin 1920, page 30 and following.

⁹ Walzer, M.: *On toleration*. New Haven, London 1997, page 2.

¹⁰ Etzioni, A.: *Die Verantwortungsgesellschaft*. Frankfurt/Main 1997, page 284 and following.

good medieval or early modern ages. Or, to use an Austrian example, Salzburg, Mozart city, which appears to live almost solely off the chocolate balls of the same name. The **other** extreme is identifying the modern with mirrored skyscrapers, such as in Manhattan, Hong Kong, Shanghai or La Défense.

It is essential that a centre, a balance, be maintained between the two extremes: between tradition and the modern, bridges must be built between different styles; it must be possible to try out, to test, to think in new directions. The concept of the "city of short paths" which should at least relativize today's divide between the various functions - working, living shopping, recreation... - is a possible reconciliation attempt.

After the so-called post-modern era, a return to new old simplicity or to pre-modern neo-classicism, respectively, can be observed in various fields. We have also experienced this type of phenomenon in Berlin. The whole debate about the Pariser Platz and its current development indicates a strong trend towards a return to the 19th century and its spirit. Is this, I would like to ask, the one and only suitable alternative to so-called post-modernism¹¹? Not to mention the fact that the latter term - post-modernism - hides more than it explains.

If it is essential that the spirit of a society also be expressed in its buildings, then openness for different styles is also a creative expression of a pluralist society differentiated in itself.

From the viewpoint of modern perception psychology also, the optimum for urban design is to be found between order and chaos; both excessive order, i.e. monotony, as well as excessive disorder, i.e. chaos, are stress factors which affect humans¹².

Let us once again read Musil, who lived in Berlin and Vienna, and see how he perceived the modern city. I quote: "Therefore, no special value should be placed on the name of a city. Like all other large cities, it consisted of irregularity, change, gliding ahead, not keeping up, collisions between things and matters, bottomless points of stillness in between, of paths and meanderings, of one huge rhythmic blow and the eternal lack of harmony and shifting of all rhythms against each other, and was similar to a boiling bubble resting in a vessel which is made up of the permanent materials of houses, law, order and historical tradition."¹³

¹¹ This question is also asked by Herterich, F.: Planung für eine multikulturelle Stadt? To be found in: Ullrich Schwarz (publ.): Risiko Stadt? Perspektiven der Urbanität. Hamburg 1994, page 197 and following.

¹² Forschungsverbund Lebensraum Stadt (publ.): Mobilität und Kommunikation in den Agglomeration von heute und morgen. 4 Volumes. Berlin 1994, here Vol. IV, page 22 and following.

¹³ Musil, R.: Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften. Cit. op., page 10.

This mobility, liveliness, explosiveness, even the chaotic nature, seen by Musil as a sign of the modern city, must be maintained. Elegant handling of heterogeneity is required, so that, using Musil's image, the bubble is kept at a constant boil without exploding.

A further aspect of this pluralist approach is multi-functional planning and development, so that various forms of use are later possible. Changes in the environment are permanently taking place and cannot be precisely foreseen. This requires the so-called "open framework" or "unfinished form", respectively, i.e. designs which permit a change in use of the shaped environment.

Apart from the functional aspect, this open design also has some surprise effects. Anyone visiting friends in the 1970s in the Hackesche Höfe in what was at that time East Berlin would have found it difficult to imagine that these dreary and dilapidated yards, dating back to the end of the 19th century, were to be home to one of the main attractions of the future Berlin. One could now ask, what is the current state of development of the city, in the centre of Berlin, London, Paris and Vienna: how much potential do the coming buildings have for coping with changes of use ?

Conclusion:

Town and regional planning must maintain options - draft style bridges - for a sensible juxtaposition and merging of traditional and modern approaches, for trying out different styles, for the variability of use requirements. Only then is it possible to consider plurality and the changeability of aesthetic needs and functional requirements.

V. Bridges between man and the environment

Viewed from an ecological point of view, humans in many parts of the world are currently in the process of undermining the preconditions for their own existence. This is also true in an elementary sense. The four elements, from which not only mythology but we ourselves also exist, i.e. fire, water, air and earth, are overburdened in many areas to such an extent that they permanently suffer from shortage and irreversible damage. Pollution of the air and groundwater, misuse of land, urban sprawl - all these are urgent problem constellations, not only in the mega cities of the so-called third world, but also in the large cities of western Europe and their surrounding areas. The city has quintessentially become the key ecological case¹⁴. The state of our cities also contributes to the widely complained about falling birth rate in our old, and ageing, world.¹⁵.

¹⁴ Cf. Hoffmann-Axthelm, D.: cit.op. page 11.

¹⁵ Cf. the documentation on the federal competition "Kinder- und familienfreundliche Gemeinde". Berlin 1997, page 15

Lakes and rivers in many cities are coloured grey-brown, the city air is a concoction of the most varied gases. The people fleeing from this revolt by the elements - and from inflationary, albeit, only temporary building sites - into the surrounding areas are contributing towards urban sprawl and the increase in urban transport.

An unhealthy cycle, which is becoming increasingly more dangerous to human health, has developed here. In their own interest, humans must hence build new bridges between themselves and the environment as, after all, they are themselves part of nature which they are threatening to destroy.

Rays of hope can be seen coming from different directions. More and more people are becoming aware of the constellations of problems and are in fact willing - out of, please note, self interest - to accept new offers. New information and communication technologies at least offer potential possibilities for changes in behaviour: in some respects, the Internet today already replaces traffic networks and we are only on the brink of many different changes. Concepts are already available regarding new methods of power utilisation, economical water consumption, emission control measures. The same can be said for family-friendly city and district design which supports the integration of different generations.

Conclusion:

City and regional planning must persistently face ecological challenges and offer solutions even then when the topic of ecology is not in great demand. In their often complicated battle for the implementation of ecological requirements, they can rely more and more on widespread acceptance within society. This can form a strong foundation, in particular, for the new bridges necessary between economics and ecology.

VI. Political bridges or: Glienicke Bridge

Glienicke Bridge links the two cities of Berlin and Potsdam. During the era of bloc logic, it divided West Berlin from the GDR. While the country was divided, this bridge was used to exchange spies. 1989 saw not only the falling of the wall and the curtain, but also the re-opening of bridges for normal traffic. Glienicke Bridge has since then been a symbol of political unity.

Such bridges are needed where the design of the future of cities, regions and Europe is concerned. With regard to the questions: How should the city/region look? What should take place there? and many others, various groups and generations have completely different views, ideas and answers.

All of these different subjects must be considered in the design process of the city/region of the future. The art of politics is to restore the required public space, the old market square, the agora. Because these public debates are not being held, there is no room for them and hence a Europe does not automatically come into being which presents Europeans as a whole with a high quality of life.

This, however, cannot and should not be the perspective, because the social tension arising from this can only be limited politically, if at all, at an extremely high cost. Clever politics, as even Montesquieu knew, mean the integration rather than exclusion of the different groups, their interests, needs, perspectives.

In this new Europe, this also includes a sensible forming of relationships with the central and eastern European neighbours. Cities, such as Berlin and Vienna, have a special function to fulfil in this field in particular. After the end of the bloc logic, these two cities have moved from an eastern border position to the centre of Europe. Both are capable, at least potentially, of carrying out the old bridge function between east and west: Berlin in the Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis and Vienna in the Prague-Vienna-Budapest axis.

Conclusion:

City and regional planning is faced with the task of developing, listening to, picking up, and sensibly integrating diverging ideas, dreams and wishes which the different social and political groups and generations have with regard to the city and region of the future. Suitable political forums/bridges must be formed for this purpose.

I have now come to my final point. Here, I would like to refer to some aspects of future research.

VII. Bridges between the past, present and future: "Stocking up ideas"

The future is produced and decided today. This means that man, acting today, is responsible for the future and future generations. Many of our decisions and, in particular, those with long-term time horizons and far-reaching consequences must be made - today and in the future - in a turbulent environment both consciously and with a view to the consequences of action.

People have been given the responsibility for the future. Their actions are always made in reference to the past, and the quality and depth of their understanding of the past expands or narrows the range of options for future actions.

According to Hannah Arendt, human thoughts and actions are always located in a gap between the past and the future: where man is standing, the continuum of time is interrupted¹⁶. This is the area of his thought, decision and action. Whilst man attempts to evaluate the experience of the past with the help of his memory, he searches for answers to the questions of his future conditions for action and existence by way of anticipation. By thinking, deciding and acting, he builds bridges in the present between the past and future. Re-viewing the past and pre-viewing the future - at least that would be the aim - he decides and acts in a responsible manner in the present.

¹⁶ Arendt, H.: Zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft. Munich 1994. Foreword: Die Lücke zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft, pages 7 - 19.

Apocalyptic visions of the future are currently in great demand: according to these statements, mankind will perish as a result of the social, political and ecological disasters produced by itself. A new type of fin-de-siècle atmosphere is spreading itself out at the threshold to the new millennium.

On the other hand, the time of dreams of a better future seems to have disappeared. When Louis-Sébastien Mercier dreamt his "Dream of dreams" in 1770 and imagined Paris in the year 2440 as a city free of all refuse, stench, traffic and other chaos and as an orderly city¹⁷, this was, what is now two centuries ago, an intellectual innovation. Meanwhile, the opinion has become widespread that in the realisation of precisely these types of dreams lies the birthplace for (totalitarian) evil - the dream of the future becomes a nightmare for many authors.

So how can we deal with this phenomenon of "future"?

Nobody can foresee or forecast the future, because it is currently in the making, and because this production process contains a vast variety of alternatives, or as evolution theorists say, bifurcations and branching, which ridicule all linear projections.

However, it is possible to play out possible futures - "les futuribles" as Bertrand de Jouenel called them¹⁸ - and compare them to each other in terms of their probability. For this purpose, we have developed scenario methods at our institute. With these methods, we try to track down the possibilities which exist in reality and to question these in terms of their more or less likely direction of development, hence creating a complex picture of possible consequences of our actions today. Our aim here is to expand and widen the range of options rather than narrow or isolate it.

Conclusion:

Future-orientation in organisations, as well as in planning processes, must be primarily understood as a process of structured communication. Thinking in alternatives forms a basis for this. With the aid of scenario methods, town and regional planning can once again focus more on the aspect of time and future. Not in the utopian sense of constructing the one good or best model, but in the sense of a vast variety of possible future areas. In this context, scenarios are of help in the preparation of decisions, they do not, however, replace them. Instead, they make it particularly clear what has been forgotten or suppressed and what no number of facts can ever change: **we** must decide - against a background of our normative aims - even and particularly when we cannot be completely sure.

Closing remarks

¹⁷ Mercier, L.: Paris Im Jahr 2440. Ein Traum aller Träume. Frankfurt/Main 1989.

¹⁸ Jouvenel B., de: Die Kunst der Vorausschau. Neuwied, Berlin 1967.

We are hence - at least I believe so - in agreement with Robert Musil. Was there ever anyone better able to describe this sense of contingency, of the possible, than the author of the "Mann ohne Eigenschaften"?

"If, however, there is a sense of reality....", Musil writes, "then there must also be something that can be called a sense of the possible. Anyone with this sense, for example, does not say: this or that happened here, will happen, must happen; instead he makes up: it could or should happen; and when told about something, that it is as it is, he then thinks: well, it could probably be another way too. Therefore, a sense of the possible could be almost directly defined as the ability to think of all that could also be and not to consider that what is as more important than that what is not..."¹⁹

Could this not be the model for a European regional policy at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century?

More than ever before, we need to discuss the long-term effective models and the consequences of our doings, both for the cities and regions within a Europe which is growing together. This is also a form of bridge building, beyond steel and cement, however, with just as many consequences for the integration of the icons of engineering technology where understanding and change would not be possible in the first place without the bridging of divides. However, these bridges must also be crossed. Not only the fear of what is new and unfamiliar hinders us here, but also the way in which we perceive, how we construct reality. We must create conditions which enable and support the crossing of bridges.

Particularly in view of the imminent turning point in time, we must ask ourselves how Europe, our lebensraum can develop, where and how we would like to live and work and what we are prepared to do for this, so that these aims become more than just a vision or even a phantom. In particular, for the bridge to the future - and what else are plans? - we must know what we want to do. It is essential that we face up to this task, because it can be solved.

The future is a production process of actions and omissions. Or as the German poet Erich Kästner put it: there is nothing good unless it is done.

¹⁹ Musil, R.: Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften. Cit.op., page 16.

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