

1st International Sustainable Stone Conference
Carrara, 20 May 2016

A European Culture Using Natural Stone (Paper-ID: SOC82)

Heinecke Werner
Chairman of Fair Stone e.V.
Laubersberg 20
DE-73230 Kirchheim/Teck Germany

h.werner@win-win.agency

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Summary

Since beginning of last century a sharp decline of using natural stones in the building industry took place in Europe. Today concrete, steel and glass are preferred materials. In Germany cemeteries and the use of tombstones are no longer in fashion and compete with newer methods such as forest burials. Driven by globalization, the variety of natural stone available from all over the world is around 20,000. But emerging economies fail to follow global codes of conduct formulated by UN organisations. European NGOs have developed certification systems for sustainable international trade including “Fair Stone”. Global sustainability can only take place, when codes of conduct are respected by the industry. Also the natural stone industry should integrate the concept “Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)”. The renaissance of the use of natural stone use in Europe’s building industry offers outstanding options for sustainability.

Decline of Natural Stones in the European Building Economy

Max Pommer, born in 1847, was one of the great German architects during the second half of the 19th century in Germany. He built impressive villas and houses in the style of historicism in Saxony. They were built with natural stones and those which were not bombed during the second world war can still be seen today. In 1898 Max Pommer changed his business and switched over to build with ferroconcrete. He became the pioneer of this new type of buildings without natural stones in Germany¹. Apart from concrete and steel, glass became the most prominent building material at the beginning of the 20th century. The demand for natural stone in Europe dropped dramatically and persists until today. Architects combine modern building with homogenous surfaces and materials other than stone. This has had a severe impact on our whole European building culture.

In Germany a dramatic decline in the use of cemeteries had taken place during the last 50 years. Urn burial in “Friedwald Forests” is replacing them. Tombstones and stonemasons are no longer needed. The famous “Fachschule für Steinbearbeitung” of Laas, South Tirol, offers 3 years training, but the graduates have a hard time finding suitable employment. Helmut Stampfer, retired curator of historical monuments of South Tirol states “a whole artisanal culture is dying”.

The number of quarries in Germany declined from several thousands at the beginning of last century to about 250 in 2015². German stone is no longer needed. Other material is more attractive and imports are cheaper. Today globalisation offers a rich diversity of natural stone from all over the world³. You order them online and get them shipped within six weeks, wherever you want them.

Code of Conducts for Global Sustainability

Stone from China, India, Brasil or Vietnam is mined from quarries and factories where Environment, Health and Safety (EHS) is hardly cared for and misuse of labor as well as child work is possible. It is not only in the stone sector that black sheep of industry do not follow international principles of businesses. More or less all sectors face this challenge. Organisations such as the United Nations (UN)⁴, the International Labour Organisation (ILO)⁵ and the International Social Security Association (ISSA)⁶ have set up universal codes of conduct which should be respected by all governments and managers operating in emerging economies.

¹ Stefan W. Krieg, Dieter Pommer (Hrsg) Max Pommer Architekt und Betonpionier. Sax Verlag Beucha, Markleeberg 2015

² Estimates from Deutscher Naturwerkstein Verband, DNV

³ www.natural-stone-database.com of Abraxas Stone Experts list nearly 20,000 different types of natural stones.

⁴ United Nations (UN) www.unglobalcompact.org. “The UN Global Compact’s Ten Principles are derived from: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the international Labour Organization’s Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and the United Nations Convention Against Corruption”: Ten Principles: (1) Business should support and respect the protection of internationally proclaimed human rights, (2) make sure that they are not complicit in human rights abuses, (3) Businesses should uphold the freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining, (4) the elimination of all forms of forced and compulsory labour, (5) the effective abolition of child labour, (6) the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation, (7) Businesses should support a precautionary approach to environmental challenges, (8) undertake initiatives to promote greater environmental responsibility (9) encourage the development and diffusion of environmentally friendly technologies, (10) Businesses should work against corruption and all its forms, including extortion and bribery.”

⁵ International Labour Organisation (ILO): <http://www.ilo.org/global/standards/lang--en/index.htm>

⁶ International Social Security Association (ISSA), Geneva: <https://www.issa.int/web/prevention-mining/about>. The mining section for prevention is cared for by the German Berufsgenossenschaft BGRCI.

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Sustainability standards for the global trade have been created during the last years. The American standard SA 8000 is popular in Italy. Is it reliable and applicable to the stone industry as well? In Germany communal cemetery holders have tried to regulate the use of stones from India for graves. But they have lost all court cases. Parliaments of three German provinces will supplement their laws to allow regulations for cemeteries. Nordrhein Westfalen (NRW) even plans an accreditation scheme to decide which standards are most reliable and credible as well as feasible. When purchasing outside Europe the public sector increasingly insists on buying certified material only.

British and German NGOs have developed standards and certification systems accordingly and have succeeded in getting European importers to follow them. "Fair Stone"⁷ is one of them. This European standard for the international trade of stones demands minimum criteria for the production in quarries and factories grouped into four areas: occupational safety and health at work, labour and human rights, environmental criteria and management of the standard including traceability. Certification systems developed by NGOs are referred to as "Multistakeholder Initiatives (MSI)". Their interest is to positively influence globalisation. Their standards are defended by independant members of the civil society. "Business Initiatives" such as the European "Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI)" are initiatives which follow commercial interests.

The managers of the European natural stone industry regard these new MSI code of conducts for the international trade of natural stones often as an ineffective and not necessary burden for an already hard pressed sector. To comfort their clients, in particular the public sector, they prefer self declarations or present the labels of business initiatives. Are MSIs for the stone sector really necessary and should they be applied by all importers of stones from Asia?

Ethics to Regulate Global Economy

Since the end of cold war in 1989 it is the capitalism of Milton Friedman⁸ which dominates the world. Did we enter into a period of Catch as Catch can? Are the relevant decisions today taken by multinationals or individuals who are powered by their Dollars? During the accelerated globalization and digitalization society and politics have to hurry up to control the economy. The speed of modernization is not planned or even steered by governments. It is driven by business for profit. One of these consequences is likely to be: Millions of refugees knocking at our European borders today. They seem to urge us to do something and care for global justice and comparable working conditions in their home countries.

Rödder states an asymmetry between democracy and forces of the global markets⁹. He concludes, liberalization is not bad, but democracies fail in adopting their respective regulations in time. Today in our European society we can observe a "culture of inclusion"¹⁰. There is a strong spirit of empathy within all of us. We all desire a peaceful, healthy and promising world. Therefore we expect from the managers of our companies Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and we look for fair global solutions. Today civil society organisations (CSOs) pressure governments and firms to regulate production and trade in all sectors and countries worldwide, to ensure sustainability. The natural stone industry cannot be excluded. We have to learn to operate within these new developments.

A Concerted European Culture Based on Natural Stones

No country enjoys a history of culture manifested in natural stone as great as Italy does. The future needs to be based on the past and memories can be saved and perpetuated by using stone. But even in Italy the use of natural stone for places, buildings or monuments seems out of fashion. Beton, glass, steel are the preferred materials. When natural stones are favoured, cheap Asian stone is often preferred in Italy as well.

Europe, and with it Italy more than other countries, enjoy a unique wealth of cultural monuments created during the last 2000 years. Cathedrals and palaces have been built of natural stone from quarries next door. When we restore them, should we take standstone or granite from China because it is cheaper? Wherever possible and affordable local stones should be used for cultural reasons. Environmental arguments count for local stones as well. A sustainability study¹¹ of PE International calculated the total life cycle period of natural stone and compared it with other building materials. Stone show clear advantages. But where Asian imports of stones take their place reliable certification from a MSI is indispensable. In Europe the business of quarries is often regarded as an environmental contradiction. In Baden Württemberg several samples of abandoned quarries became unique biotopes where eagle owls, seldom lizards

⁷ www.fairstone.org

⁸ Friedman, Milton, Free to Choose, Middlesex, England, 1980

⁹ Rödder, Andreas, Eine kurze Geschichte der Gegenwart. München 2015, page 385

¹⁰ Rödder a.a.O. S.388ff

¹¹ DNV Ökobilanzen von Fassadenkonstruktionen mit Naturstein und Glas.

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and other creatures found new habitats. The leading German environmental initiative BUND is looking for partnerships with the quarry management. Thomas Beisswenger, a biologist, became general secretary of the Industrieverband Steine und Erden (ISTE) in Baden-Württemberg.

Is there a way to reactivate our rich and diversified European culture of using natural stones and their masons, an endangered artisan? To try to achieve this requires bringing all professionals in the stone sector together with historians, architects, scientists and ethno-sociologists. The development of a progressive, innovative culture of using stones for buildings and monuments is a gateway to sustainability for our European society.

Future needs to be based on the past. In the 18th century, when the European movement of civil society emerged the “Grand Tour” to Italy became popular¹². Hundreds of young British, French, Scandinavian and German nobles coached to Italy to meet the country, people, climate and culture and thus to enrich their conception of the world. It is not so much Italian lecturing and science. It is an exciting experience which makes Italian’s beauty so effective in our personal maturity. Needless to say that marble and Carrara was and is a key element of it. Was the Grand Tour the beginning of a modern European consciousness with Italy as our rich source of knowledge?

In conclusion, we can note that in Germany the discussion toward maintaining natural stone use in our society is on its way. Even an increase in the use of natural stone can be observed¹³. Several reasons for this progress are discussed in Germany. For important buildings the building industry now prefers higher grade building material. It seems modern architects start to be pleased by the beauty of natural stone. At the trade fair “Stone Tec” at Nuremberg the Bund Deutscher Architekten (BDA) and DNV award architects for new buildings of natural stone. The Deutsche Gesellschaft für nachhaltiges Bauen (DGNB), Stuttgart, founded in 2007 only, is a young but extremely successful and now powerful association of architects, builders and scientists with 1,200 members. The German committee of UNESCO has accepted the call of masons to register the culture of cemeteries in Germany as world heritage site.

It is evident that stone from local quarries, manufactured by local masons should be promoted for cultural and environmental reasons. Whenever this is not the case, MSI certified stones should be the rule. These initiatives are free of commercial interests in the stone business and intend to improve the health and working conditions of Asian workers. But a common European approach and perspective has not yet been achieved. This first conference of sustainability in Carrara and the European & International Federation of Natural Stone Industries (EUROROC) could pick up the motion. We need to develop a new European culture favouring natural stone to be embedded in our socio-economic environment, promoted by politics, associations and civil society organisations.

¹² Andrew Wilton, Ilaria Bignamini (ed) Grand Tour: The Lure of Italy in the Eighteenth Century 12/1996. There was also an exhibition on Grand Tour in the Tate Galery, London in 1996.

¹³ DNV, press release January 2015: Local processed marble and travertine have increased their production by 25% in 2014 compared to 2013. The total use of local stones increased by 6.7% between 2014 and 2015.