

Joint Marsilius Bridging Seminar entitled “*Nachhaltige Stadt der Zukunft – in Fiktion, Gesetz und Planung*” (“The Sustainable City of the Future—in Fiction, Law and Planning”)
organized by Heidelberg University, the University of Bonn and the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, July 12-14, 2023



Forms of sustainable living? Discussing passive housing estates, solar panels and smart meters.

Three days, three universities, three different fields. Earlier in the semester, a Marsilius Bridging Seminar brought together not only different disciplines but also students and lecturers from different cities and universities. The name “bridging seminar” reflects how it serves to bridge the gap between the individual research cultures and, in this particular case, between different centers of research in Germany as well. All the contributors from Bonn, Eichstätt and Heidelberg shared a common aim, namely to gather a range of views on what forms sustainable cities might take in the future and discuss the opportunities and challenges that each presents.

The seminar began with an examination of the concept of sustainability at a fundamental level and from legal, geographical and literary studies angles before the participants split into panels to explore individual topic areas as they might at a symposium. The panels included “Climate and Environment,” “Mobility and Transport” and “Housing and Public Space” as well as “Poverty and Justice.” Short interdisciplinary papers were presented to explain basic concepts and case studies. These were then examined critically by the representatives of the various disciplines in a plenary session, incorporating additional points of view.

Besides the spatial and conceptual planning of a sustainable urban transformation, the papers and subsequent discussions also focused on questions about the relationship between informal and legal tools and possibilities of aesthetic representation and mediation. For example, poems about cities prompted an aesthetic reflection on the transformation of urban spaces, while a study of legal texts threw up questions about the limits and possibilities presented by local self-government from a legal perspective. The presentation of concepts such as “environmental zones” and “sponge cities” enabled insights to be gained into the scope available for tackling problems such as particulate pollution, water shortages and heat stress. Critical conceptual work was done on vague catch-all terms such as “smart city” that reference technological innovations.

Throughout the seminar, the discursive interface between urban geography, law and literary studies was enriched by other student viewpoints, such as from the life sciences, politics, mathematics and chemistry.

Two trips in the local area enabled the theoretical perspectives explored to be supplemented by tangible insights into urban design and development on the ground.

A visit to a large mural of an endangered butterfly by street artist Mantra provided an opportunity to debate forms of eco-critical art in public spaces and illustrate biodiversity loss in cities with the aid of a concrete example. Students could use an animation app to bring the butterfly to life. The visual experience was enhanced by the reading of a poem about a butterfly by contemporary poet Sabine Scho, which conveyed the threat posed to the various “habitat indicator species” in a poetic way.

The destination for the second field trip was “Bahnstadt,” a new district of Heidelberg, which was built on the site of a former freight yard and contains one of the world’s largest estates of passive houses. The advantages and disadvantages of passive design were discussed on site alongside other ways to achieve the climate transition such as solar panels. Local opportunities for and limitations to an urban mobility transition were also examined critically with reference to air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. During their trip, the students asked questions about densification and adding floors to create more housing as well as discussing conflicts between social, economic and ecological aspects based on what was being done locally.



Visiting Bahnstadt: checking out Heidelberg’s new district with a clear mission to embrace sustainability.

The seminar concluded with a lively panel discussion that contributed a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives to the question of what path leads to the sustainable city of the future.

*The **Marsilius Bridging Seminar in the 2023 summer semester** was led by Prof. Dr. Ulrike Gerhard (Heidelberg, Urban Geography), Asst. Prof. Dr. Jacqueline Lorenzen (Bonn, Law), Prof. Dr. Friederike Reents (Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Literature) and Annika Hammer (Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Literature).*