

# HERITAGE GOVERNANCE AND URBAN RENEWAL IN FRANCE AND GERMANY: DIVERGENT MODELS, SHARED TRANSITIONS

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Heritage governance and urban renewal in Europe are increasingly interlinked as cities confront challenges of climate transition, demographic change, and social fragmentation. France and Germany represent two contrasting yet converging models of territorial transformation. France's approach is marked by centralized state planning and cultural regulation (Choay, 1992; Garat et al., 2020), while Germany's framework rests on federal subsidiarity and municipal autonomy (Heinelt & Zimmermann, 2021). Comparing these systems highlights the distinct principles shaping how heritage is managed—not only as a repository of memory but as a strategic instrument for sustainable urban change (Colavitti, 2018).

## Institutional Frameworks and Governance Cultures

In France, heritage governance is strongly centralized. The *Ministère de la Culture*, through its *Directions Régionales des Affaires Culturelles* (DRAC), supervises the protection of historic monuments and urban ensembles, while the *Ministère de la Transition Écologique et de la Cohésion des territoires* oversees spatial planning and urban renewal. This division ensures vertical coherence through instruments such as the *Plans de sauvegarde et de mise en valeur* (PSMV) and *Sites patrimoniaux remarquables* (Choay, 1992). Such arrangements reinforce a state-led vision of cultural authority and architectural expertise that continues to shape the identity of French cities (Gravari-Barbas, 2018).

Germany, by contrast, operates through a federal and cooperative system. Competences for heritage protection (*Denkmalschutz*) and urban planning lie with the *Länder* and municipalities, which allows for considerable diversity in regulatory practice. Rather than a single national heritage law, each Land enacts its own legislation, while the Federal Ministry for Housing, Urban Development and Building coordinates through funding programs such as the *Städtebauförderung* and particularly the *Städtebaulicher Denkmalschutz* programme (Heinelt & Zimmermann, 2021). This model institutionalizes negotiated governance and encourages flexible, context-sensitive decision-making (Fürst, 2014).

## Conceptions of Heritage within Urban Renewal

The French model traditionally defines heritage as a regulated domain of state responsibility. Heritage protection zones impose strict rules on renewal projects, with architectural coherence and visual integrity as primary values. Since the early

2000s, however, national programs such as *Action Cœur de Ville* and the *Programme National de Rénovation Urbaine* (PNRU) have integrated heritage more explicitly into social and economic revitalisation. The *Agence Nationale pour la Rénovation Urbaine* (ANRU), created in 2003, has coordinated major transformations in large housing estates, seeking to combine physical renewal with social cohesion (Epstein, 2021). Nevertheless, the tension between centralised objectives and local realities persists, often producing uneven results and contestation from residents and local authorities.

Germany, conversely, views heritage as a living component of urban culture. The concept of *Baukultur*—an integrated understanding of design, identity, and participation—frames heritage as a resource for sustainable development. Federal-state programmes such as the *Städtebaulicher Denkmalschutz* (1991 →) support the protection of historic urban cores by treating them as integrated urban renewal districts rather than isolated monuments (*Städtebauförderung.info*, n.d.) Heritage here functions as a mediator between continuity and change, fostering resilient urban morphologies (Lähner, 2020).

### Participation and Policy Instruments

Public participation represents one of the sharpest distinctions between the two systems.

In France, despite legal mechanisms for consultation—such as *enquêtes publiques* and local debates introduced by the *Loi sur la démocratie de proximité* (2002)—decision-making remains largely technocratic. Heritage classification and renewal priorities are set by experts and inter-ministerial agencies. Citizens often engage reactively rather than proactively, reinforcing the image of a top-down governance culture (Gravari-Barbas, 2018; Epstein, 2021).

In Germany, participation is embedded as a procedural norm. Integrated urban development concepts (*Integrierte Stadtentwicklungskonzepte*, INSEK) are designed through partnerships between municipalities, civil society, and local business actors. The *Sanierungsgebiete* instrument (redevelopment areas) provides a legal and financial framework for these collaborative projects, with long-term monitoring and adaptive governance (Heinelt & Zimmermann, 2021). This participatory infrastructure fosters trust, continuity, and civic responsibility in heritage-oriented urban renewal.

### Comparative Analysis: Divergent Principles

The comparison reveals distinct governance principles underpinning each system:

Principle	France	Germany
Administrative structure	Centralised, hierarchical	Federal, decentralized
Legal basis	Unified national heritage code	Land-level legislation + integrated programmes (e.g., Städtebaulicher Denkmalschutz)
Decision-making	Expert-driven, top-down	Negotiated, participatory
Policy focus	Architectural quality, state authority	Local identity, adaptive reuse
Heritage conception	Cultural asset to protect	Resource for sustainable development

These differences are not merely institutional but cultural: France reflects the *État aménageur* tradition of planning as an expression of the public interest, whereas Germany exemplifies *kooperativer Föderalismus*—planning as negotiation among autonomous yet interdependent actors.

### Convergence and Potential for Collaboration

Despite structural contrasts, both systems are evolving toward hybrid models under European sustainability and climate frameworks. France has begun to territorialise its policies, encouraging inter-municipal cooperation through *Opérations de revitalisation du territoire* (ORT). Germany, meanwhile, is experimenting with stronger coordination and national strategies on housing and energy efficiency.

Collaboration between the two countries could yield mutual benefits:

- From France to Germany: Transferable models of strategic coherence, national visibility, and architectural regulation, which could enhance consistency across German Länder.
- From Germany to France: Participatory methodologies and flexible funding instruments that could deepen local ownership and reduce the social distance between policy and community (Garat et al., 2020).
- Jointly: Both countries could develop shared European frameworks for *heritage-led climate adaptation*, integrating cultural values into circular urbanism and energy transition (Colavitti, 2018).

## Conclusion

Heritage governance and urban renewal in France and Germany embody two complementary logics of transformation. France's **principle of coherence**—rooted in national expertise and public authority—ensures cultural continuity and architectural excellence but often struggles with procedural inclusivity (Choay, 1992). Germany's **principle of subsidiarity and participation** produces contextual sensitivity and social legitimacy, though sometimes at the cost of strategic integration (Heinelt & Zimmermann, 2021).

Future collaboration could align these strengths: a European model where France's structured planning capacity meets Germany's participatory culture. Such synthesis would promote *heritage as governance*—a shared framework for managing change through memory, sustainability, and collective responsibility (Colavitti, 2018).

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