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Building and living still place greater strain on environment than necessary

New Federal Environment Agency (UBA) brochure points the way to a solution

Construction, operation and use of buildings and roads is still taking too high a toll on natural resources, and it promotes global warming. Not only is the continuing high demand for fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas for heating and warm water responsible for the poor environmental balance in the building and housing sector, the great demand for building materials such as rocks and soil, metals or wood also plays a role. UBA President Prof. Dr. Andreas Troge said, "The way we build and live has a significant impact on the quality of our health and environment. Man is not only robbing nature of more than she can provide us with, we are also sprawling out and consuming too much land". As a result, retreats for plants and animals are lost. "We must return to city centres instead of forever building new structures on greenfield sites," continued Troge. The strain on the environment would be relieved considerably if more remediation of old buildings in city centres occurred instead of erecting new ones on semi-natural sites. New ways to sustainable building and human settlement policy are described in a new brochure, *Nachhaltiges Bauen und Wohnen [Sustainable Building and Living]*.

Savings potential is substantial, for over the next 25 years and at no cost to living comfort, the annual consumption of new land, consumption of minerals such as sand, clay, lime, gravel or slate, could be reduced by nearly 85 and 30 percent, respectively. Annual carbon dioxide emissions could be reduced by more than half. This requires remediation and modernisation of buildings, boosting the attractiveness of settlements' central areas, and avoiding unnecessary vacancy of housing stock. New settlements should be concentrated more within existing settlements on brownfields, e.g. on sites once used by industry, the armed forces, the railways, the post, or on empty lots.

"High-standard remediation of an existing building requires far less building materials than what is required for a completely new building", said UBA President Troge. He added that one should keep one's altered needs in old age in mind when deciding on home ownership, saying,

“Anyone moving to the countryside as a way to make provisions for old age would do well to ask whether his home will be appropriate in old age. The refurbished dwelling in a town centre is often better suited than a terraced house in a greenfield area, as the doctor’s surgery and grocer are just around the corner in city centre.”

How can building and living be designed more sustainably? The discontinuation of the grant scheme for first-time home buyers and the increase in funds for energy remediation in buildings have been a few critical initial steps in the right direction. UBA also recommends that consumption of new land space be taxed more heavily, which would support maintenance of settlement centres and counteract the rise of urban sprawl. Other items on its “wish list” include: simplification of tax regulations so that, in the first three years after acquisition of an existing residential dwelling, the costs incurred for maintenance and modernization done for sustainable energy-saving measures would amortise either immediately, or gradually over a period of two to five years. Furthermore, this would trigger sizeable investments in energy-saving measures in buildings as well as invigorate the economy. Inclusion of a building’s heating technology as a criterion in the rent index (German: *Mietspiegel*) would further strengthen this development.

The German-language brochure on sustainable building and living [*Nachhaltiges Bauen und Wohnen*] can be downloaded from <http://www.umweltdaten.de/publikationen/fpdf-l/3668.pdf>.

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