These days hardly anyone would question whether historic towns are worthy of preservation; this much has been established by shelves upon shelves of professional and subject literature, is repeatedly evidenced in citizen’s initiatives, and equally so in the press, on the radio and on television. There are three main points that have emerged as being instrumental in our appreciation of the old-town phenomenon: the diversity of individual design, the old town considered as a whole, i.e., as a monument in itself, and finally its historical quality.

Any avowal of the historic town was and generally still is characterized at first by a spontaneous experience imparted via the incomparable wealth of individual design: the distinctiveness of the faces of buildings, the human scale and the finely articulated detail of the facades, the apparently unplanned elements and the spatial seclusion of intimate squares and manageable street spaces, or elsewhere the representative spaces of order in the new urban layouts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and not least the world of visual information in the buildings of the Gründerzeit, which have just recently started to take on new importance. And behind all this one also gets a sense of the content and the life of this unique world of form: the diversity of preindustrial craft occupations, of individual dwellings that are nevertheless open to the neighborhood, and of a life that is consistently both personal
and conscious of civic responsibilities. What becomes more or less consciously effective here is the sum total of a diverse, but in itself coordinated and comprehensible picture of social order, which ultimately affects the appearance of our old towns whether large or small.

Much of it is often only perceived and evaluated sensually – the *milieu* and the *atmosphere* of old-town areas, for example. Nowadays both of these terms are frequently cited as factors contributing to the quality of life in historic town centers, but they cannot be concretized in enough detail to be introduced as a value in the jargon of rehabilitation planning. They do have their causes though, and these—alongside age value—lie squarely in the vivid variety and diversity of humane concerns for which such urban areas have served as secure habitats down through the centuries.

An old town is more than just the quantitative sum total of interesting housing forms, individual street spaces and fragments of architectural culture. Its real value lies in the singularity of the particular urban form or the quality of the whole, which has led to the concept of the *town as monument*. Historic towns were laid out, designed and molded according to their princely founders’ will to order and form, and in many cases they were also expanded with the whole in mind. The ordering qualities that were built into most historic towns from the very beginning remained the dominant factor throughout centuries of interventions and changes. They are legible in the clarity of the ground plans, which never cease to amaze. They start to become effective in the evocative formation of silhouettes through the topographical disposition of urban accents, which also gave the overall structure—churches, public buildings, fortifications, patrician houses—a clear semantic expression of hierarchical order.

The differing architectural scale and status of high ranking architectural monuments and the more modest forms of housing alongside them, with their workshops, apartments and stores, are only derived from the overall context of the town. The significance of the old town
as a context for socio-cultural landscapes was recognized before the turn of the last century. But until recent decades it was only the outstanding monuments that received any conscious general attention and specific care from preservationists. It was only the destructive attacks on the world of anonymous housing that made it clear how incredibly sensitive even secluded old-town areas and narrow side streets are to any form of intervention. Even a minor deviation from the building line or the height zoning of a row of facades can disturb the spatial balance of an entire street. In many cases even the often necessary, if also often excessive, thinning out (‘coring’) of built-up apartment-block courtyards largely eliminates places with an anchored sense of home, along with the parceled framework so typical of historic town structures. The ‘preservation value’ that town conservationists ascribe to this sort of subsidiary old-town area is difficult to explain to a broader audience and needs to be disassociated from charges of museification. But it remains a fact all the same.

The ensemble idea, as professional shorthand for the conservation of groups of urban buildings and the whole complex of historic and urbanistic issues that an old town involves, still fails to provide much clarification of these questions for the broader public. But its concerns are absolutely clear: the preservation of ensembles is primarily a consequence of the bitter realization that even the disruption of simple historic buildings and urban structures can destroy the character of whole streets, force significant individual monuments into museum-like isolation and even make the form of an entire town seem unfamiliar.

The fundamental value of every historic town, and indeed every monument, is its historical quality – the fact that it makes history visible. This is the actual reason for the desire to preserve as much as possible, as well as being the central problem of any old-town renovation. These should set out to preserve design values, individual houses and—in the street lines and layouts—the town’s ground plan, but also in practice the ‘speaking’ substance of old buildings.
As with any monument, the historical element of an old town is always twofold. Firstly there is the historical appearance; the particular architectural form of the houses as typical of a certain period, and also the characteristic urban form, which is so often discussed at the moment. Secondly, though, it also refers to originality, that is, the fact of the extant historical substance, which is actually the only thing that permits us to speak of an ‘old town’ at all. Narrow facades, sunken bay windows, half-timbered gables, pointed-arch doorways and the plaster articulation of baroque patrician houses – these are all historical forms, but they can be perfectly imitated at any time, like aesthetic stimuli for a prescribed course of environmental therapy. The history itself is only to be found in the originality of the built substance with its legible signature craftsmanship and its more or less apparent traces of age. It is only when confronted directly with the original—the old and aged built fabric—that we are made aware of time itself and the period of time the buildings have traversed in arriving at the present; that they were once a habitat and are therefore capable of conveying the effects of history as a dimension of existence. […]

The undeniable achievements of the reconstruction campaigns of the postwar years and the current practice of building new copies have demonstrated that the designs and the specific stylistic forms of historic buildings can be duplicated with a certain degree of dexterity. The reconstruction of completely destroyed architectural monuments and the general desire to rehabilitate familiar environments and townscapes was necessary and understandable because it was primarily a means of overcoming the deep caesura that had been opened up by the inevitably catastrophic Second World War.

Our old towns are now confronting a destructive process on a similar scale. The two grave differences between then and now: it is planned on a broad scale and no longer affects the art-historical landmarks quite so much. Instead it ‘only’ affects the houses whose architectural and stylistic value cannot be determined because this value ‘only’ exists in the
atmospheric aura of hand-crafted substance that has become old and historic. Certain old buildings—and this has always been the case—have to be demolished and replaced due to obsolescence and dilapidation. In the large majority of cases, though, the demolition request comes in the wake of purely economic factors: new buildings with underground parking, apartments standardized for profit, businesses, offices, higher rents, more floors, etc. And in many cases—in order to expedite demolition—they now promise new, historically sensitive and ‘design friendly’ buildings on an appropriate scale. […]

In real emergency situations and exceptional cases historic preservation is sometimes obliged to fill in the gaps and the damaged parts of buildings, or to restore a unified conception of urban order with copies and reconstructions (e.g. Maximilianstraße in Munich). But this necessity is now in danger of becoming a virtue. The radical removal of every last block of historic substance deprives historicizing replacements of their essential anchor in history. The value of historicizing townscape reconstructions begins to approach that of the facsimile edition. And alongside traffic incisions and over-scaled buildings, this is perhaps the worst thing that can happen to the historical, visual and experiential value of an old town. Where the quality of our built environment is at stake, a credible identity of form and material will always have to be on the agenda.