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**The Hammam – the Islamic bath as an example  
of urban “glocal” socio-economy**

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**Market vs Society?**

**Human principles and economic rationale in changing times**

## **Abstract**

In the socio cultural and economic changes in the Mediterranean medina, the traditional Hammam- the Turkish bath – takes new functions concerning the urban life quality. The trend in the demographic patterns in the medina is characterized by the fact that the middle and upper classes tend to move from the old city to the modern neighborhoods; the medina, thereby, becomes more and more a place for the poor dwellers and for migrants from rural areas. In this situation, the hammam, this cultural heritage with a living socio-cultural and economic tradition and an example of good practice for social coherence gets new functions.

The institution of the public bath is spread over a geographically wide area – from the Mediterranean area to oriental countries and even China –, yet refers to a common understanding about its role and function within the settlement. It appears on the one hand as a “global” traditional institution and on the other hand a very well adapted organization, taking up numerous local social functions in the urban neighborhood (Kolb, Dumreicher, 2008). There is a common understanding, even between city dwellers and rural newcomers, of how to use and what to do in the hammam: clients and users as well as people who do not use hammams, describe similar habits, traditional rituals and experiences for themselves, their relatives or their families, based on a shared collective memory. It is a place providing time, space and opportunities for individuals to share social activities on a weekly or monthly basis within the community, thereby contributing to the local social welfare system: it is open for rich and poor residents, and traditionally has a modest entrance fee, which is available for everyone, and assures individual as well as collective health. It helps balancing social disparity within the community, yet maintaining a place of relaxation, social security and local money exchange within the urban context.

## **Keywords: 3-5 keywords**

Hammam, cultural heritage, socio-economic ties, urban space

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### **1. Introduction**

The hammam is a traditional Islamic bath with a specific architectural building design (Sibley 2008) and a special cultural socio-economic tradition. Although this bathing institution and tradition is still alive, the conflict between traditional and modern life is a heavy load on the maintaining of the existing hammams in the Mediterranean Countries. The hammam is not only a specific architectural cultural heritage from the historical, restoration and architectural points of view, but it is also a cultural heritage for its socio-cultural traditions a meeting point for tangible and intangible values. The contemporary hammams in the Mediterranean Countries, explored by the authors in the HAMMAM and Hammamed studies<sup>1</sup>, appear as lively socio-cultural institutions, but our work also showed how they are in danger to lose their function within a further demand of a contemporary modern life.

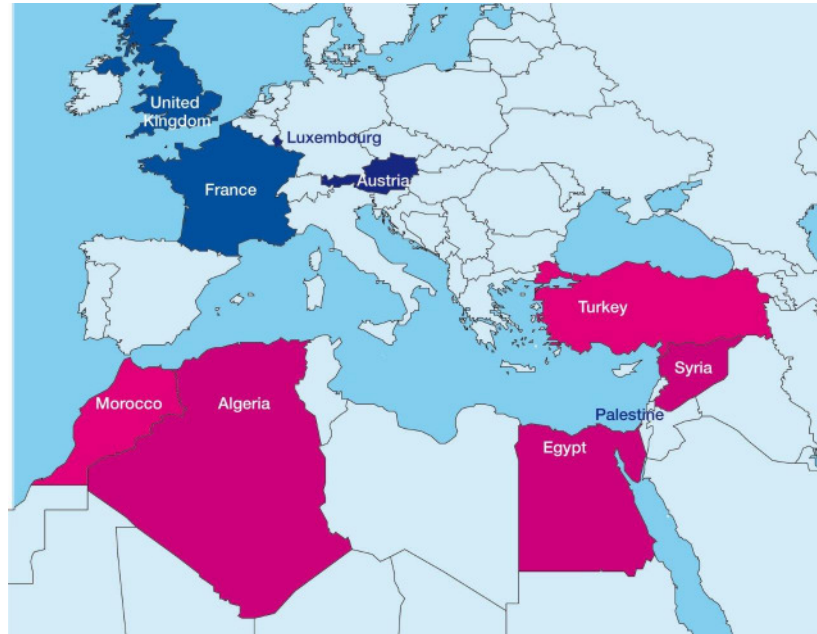
This paper is based on studies in six Islamic Mediterranean countries, carried out in an interdisciplinary effort of 18 institutions - partly with scientific, partly town planning,

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<sup>1</sup> HAMMAM - Hammam, Aspects and Multidisciplinary Methods of Analysis for the Mediterranean Region, FP 6: 517704, 2005 – 2008, Scientific Coordinator: Oikodrom – The Vienna Institute for Urban Sustainability.

“HAMMAM – Hammam, Aspects and Multidisciplinary Methods of Analysis for the Mediterranean Region”, FP6-2003-INCO-MPC-2, Contract Number: 517704 and the project "Hammamed Raising awareness for the Hammam as cultural heritage for the Mediterranean area and beyond, EuropeAid/126266/C/ACT/RMD, 2009 – 2011 Funded by: European Union within the Euromed Heritage IV programme

partly artistic, partly architectural background. The teams started their work in 2005 and continue their studies and activities for one more year.



Countries of the Hammam and Hammamed studies

The hammam is a protective space for several societal groups, and it has a special value for women, who have limited access to the public space in the study countries. The semi-public space of the hammam supports the social life of women in general. It is a rare example for publicly available space in the Islamic cities: social construction finds its physical and publicly available spatial forms in the built environment. Such a space reflects power relations and when the dwellers find ways to use it, this usage creates meaning (Dumreicher, Kolb 2003). A town has a functional necessity for physical arenas for democratic action: the hammam is an informal public space, where the civil society creates its own place and can express a variety of societal roles. It is a place where individuals and groups can enjoy public space to the fullest possible extent.

The “*living cultural heritage*” of the existing hammam still provides the traditions, rituals and habits, which are practiced in the building of a hammam and which are aligned to the building through historical experience (Kolb, Dumreicher 2008). But the “living” cultural

heritage should also provide time, space and opportunities for particular individual and common social activities embedded in the every daily life of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The hammam studies' results add the socio-cultural and socio economic values to the well known architectural and restoration tasks, developing scenarios for a good practice example of a running hammam: How can a hammam operate within a contemporary social context – the hammam as *a living cultural heritage*.

The Hammam is often an architectural jewel, with its typical architectural elements serving the specific traditional bathing and cleaning practices. It preserves traditional rituals, embedded into the religious and daily life practices- best known is its role as the contact and meeting point for societal groups when preparing for marriage. The Hammam is a living experience and comprehensive cultural and architectural system, which is worth to transforming in order to support new societal requirements.

## **2. What is a Hammam?**

The hammam, this vulnerable space, offers a place for the individual person, but is also an important space for the community. It provides a unique spatial experience and body feeling, based in the combination of procedures and architecture. The hammam is a place for the human body, and the architectural settings serve this specific body experience with correspondent architectural features: this building offers the space and the support for bathing experience, embedded in rituals and architectural forms. Its clients are male and female; and ideally they belong to a mix of generations and social background.

Sometimes the bath organizes separate gender time sharing; sometimes the building has two separate room sequences – the so called twin hammam. The Hammam as a traditional institution never offers mixed times, apart from special offers for Western tourists. The bath is providing warm and cold water and a warm and dark place for washing, healing and supporting the body functions by sweating and massage through the hammam staff. The bath is a place for the individual body; but it also stands for a health care approach embedded in collective social interactions, traditions and rituals. With its traditional body treatments – washing, peeling and massage - the functions of the hammam consider the personal wellbeing but also is a contribution to preventive health. Results from the HAMMAM study show, that clients claim that the hammam should be a

clean and safe place. The cleanliness of the bath is a challenge for a contemporary hammam, which has to ensure a convenient safety and hygiene standard to be accepted in a modern and postmodern society. The personal safety is an important issue in the treatments and also the personal integrity must be guaranteed. The hammam should be a societal well accepted place and supporting health – equally for men and women.

The Hammam is also a place, where traditional rituals are still practiced: Traditional washing ceremonies can take place in daily use with their peeling and massage services, but also specific cleaning procedures, for example the religious purification for the Friday prayer or for family ceremonies or beautification for a wedding.

Many findings of the HAMMAM study teams show that the hammam is a place where the ties to the spiritual and religious values and the connection to the Islamic history are still present and practiced. The Hammam is a place for female rituals, for instance when they go to the hammam 40 days after giving birth to a child. Besides the traditional rituals for the wedding ceremony that are linked to the Hammam, there are other contemporary occasions when people choose the hammam as their place, celebrating a special event and adding a festive meal. Beside the function as a bath for washing the hammam is also a place where family, relatives and friends meet and come together. Women can go to the hammam without being controlled by the family, like their parents and husband, and other societal, religious or governmental representative's arte less present than in other public occasions. Either for having a weekly breakfast together, or to wash the children, the hammam is one of the few women's places, a semi public arena outside the private Islamic house. It is used for preparing for the wedding in the women's case; but also young men can choose this place for celebrating the festivity with friends during the days prior to the wedding,

Even if the hammam is still a place where tradition can be experienced, the actual interpretation of the body can make this place to a forbidden place in present times. The visit of the Hammam is connected with the current interpretation and exegesis of religion: in times of the forbiddance to show the body in a semi public space, the hammam can become a shunned place. The hammam has a continuous presence in the negotiation of lifestyles between individuals and societal groups: Turning from a religious towards a secular institution, it gets in multidimensional pressure and contradiction: In a rather

fundamentalist context, the hammam visit stands – in principle - for ablution and purification before the prayer, especially for the Friday prayer. But in a period where society undergoes growing fundamentalist religious interpretations, the hammam may also turn into an immoral place (“haram”), because its ways of presenting (nearly) nudity is conceived to become a forbidden mode. In addition to this religious and moral context, the context of a modern and contemporary lifestyle takes the hammam as source of inspiration for organizing a relaxing and wellbeing activity in your leisure time.

### **3. Global hammam within the city**

The institution of the public bath, the Hammam, is spread over a geographically wide area – from the Mediterranean area to oriental countries and even China –, yet refers to a common understanding about its role and function within the settlement. In Islamic cities, the hammam is an important and traditional element and is part of the specific city pattern of a medina: beside the public bakery, the mosque, the library, the medressa - the Koran school - , and the sabil – the public fountain - the hammam is the special place where washing for the Friday prayer can be done in a public, controllable way. When used as a guest house, the Hammam is also one of the important services for the old travellers’ routes.

The specific architectural design, which is adapted in several different climatic areas, still respect a basic structure that allows for the traditional bathing and washing habits within the building: from the outer space to the centre, from the cold and dry rooms to the hot and wet rooms. It appears on the one hand as a “global” traditional institution and on the other hand as a very well adapted organization, taking up numerous local social functions in the urban neighborhood (Kolb, Dumreicher, 2008).

There is a common understanding, even between city dwellers and rural newcomers, of how to use and what to do in the hammam: clients and users as well as people who do not use hammams, describe similar habits, traditional rituals and experiences for themselves, their relatives or their families, based on a shared collective memory. The hammam is a place providing time, space and opportunities for individuals to share social activities on a weekly or monthly basis within the community, thereby contributing to the local social welfare system: it is open for rich and poor residents, and traditionally has a modest

entrance fee, which is available for everyone, and assures individual as well as collective health. It helps balancing social disparity within the community, yet maintaining a place of relaxation, social security and local money exchange within the urban context.

As observed in the HAMMAM study, the hammam is a central building in the neighbourhood and supports the social and economic activities in many ways. There are several social functions that the hammam takes over for the neighbourhood on individual level but also in a collective responsibility: it is a meeting point for neighbours, a specific meeting place for women with their children, family members and friends and supports networking between women and also intra-generational exchange between different peer groups. It is a place of personal hygiene e.g. for the craftsman and workers of the neighbourhood like the Fez Medina. In Fez craftsmen tradition and production is strongly connected with the urban shape: *"I never go home after my coppersmith work without a visit to the hammam where I get rid of dust and sweat. When I get home I am clean."*

In the social study that we carried out during the Hammam project we discovered that there are different urban situation of hammams, depending on their spatial connection with the surrounding city. Existing hammams can be part of the city, like the Saffarin Hammam<sup>2</sup> in Fez, Morocco in this traditional sense or the isolated Sengül Hammam<sup>3</sup> in Ankara, Turkey from the traditional building structure. The spatial connection is a different focus then observing the socio-economic connectivity, which sometimes shows more interconnectivity with the wider city e.g. Ankara. The "imbedded hammam" – like the example of hammam Saffarin in Fez shows, has a life based on the people in the neighbourhood, who are using the hammam for washing and who are supporting social activities carried out in the quarter. This hammam can serve as an acupuncture point for the development of the quarter and is part of the neighbourhood network. The example of Sengül hammam shows little connection to the immediate neighbourhood: although the staffs of the hammam are living in the neighbourhood, only few clients can not afford the

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<sup>2</sup> Saffarin, Qarawiyin neighborhood, Fez, Morocco; Marinid period – 14th century; Hammam Partner: Ader-Fez – Agence pour la Dedensification et la Rehabilitation de la medina de Fez.

<sup>3</sup> Sengül Hammam, Istiklal neighborhood, Ankara, Turkey: build in 16<sup>th</sup> century, rehabilitation in 19<sup>th</sup> century; Hammam Partner: METU- Dep. for Architecture



entrance fee. The Istiklal neighbourhood as a whole system suffers from the missing economic and social diversity: it is residential in decline, going towards converting into a slum area, with little economic activities.

#### **4. The hammam is part of the socio economic system of the city and region**

Focusing on the local process within its societal and spatial frame in several case studies, like Cairo and Damascus we used the theoretical frame of “*Seven fields of spatial encounter*” (Dumreicher, Kolb 2008). The daily life practice gives a strong impact to the usage of space. The public squares, the spaces in front of shops and other buildings, the streets, all of the spatial surroundings create the possibility for social and economical life practice. These relevancies of the local spaces are based on the local identity and emotional co-ownership. According to these concepts, the possibility to live and act in an existing spatial environment affects the individual feelings and relationship of dwellers to this specific place and influences social usages. “*Emotional Co-ownership – a strong attachment to a place that results in an interest from local citizens in the perpetuation of the valued qualities of the place. Most often this attribute is found in an empowered citizen who is involved in the decision making process of her or his locality.*” (Dumreicher, Kolb 2003: 246).

The Hammam is not only a spatial element of the urban shape but also part of the socio-economic system. The hammam is materially and immaterially part of the urban production system. The building is often built of the building material of the region and the sort of plaster, which is safeguarding the building, is challenging the restoration experts. The Hammam is also part of the cities infrastructure: water supply, electricity, gas or oil for heating (formerly wood). Today it is depending on the cities expertise by providing water and electricity, although in former times, the hammam was a self-dependent part of the city services: when the Hammam provided heating for the bath – often with wood from neighbouring carpentry<sup>4</sup> - the heat was also used for cooking, e.g. cooking “Foul - Egyptian Breakfast from Foulbeans” - on the hammams roof of the Al-

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<sup>4</sup> Ammuna Hammam, Al-Uqabyba neighbourhood, Damascus, Syria, build in Ayyubud period: Hammam Partner: IFPO, Institute Francais du Proche Orient

Tanbali Hammam<sup>5</sup> in Cairo, Egypt. The foul is still cooked in the Bab-al-Sharia neighbourhood, but not on the roof of the hammm anymore. Generally the hammam neighbourhood offers useful products bathing like soap, slippers or towels. The hammam buys bathing products from the shops in the neighbourhood and sells it for bathing clients too. Often the necessary bathing products are brought from the clients, but tea, food and special services like waxing or hair dressing is offered in the hammam.

But also cleanliness and some modest luxury are spreading from the hammam into the adjacent squares and streets of the medina, good and bad news find their ways from the hammam into the quarter: the good news - societal events, new job opportunities, the last marriage or the bad news: when something goes wrong, for instance pollution from the hammam heating system, the whole neighbourhood is informed. The hammam offers jobs – especially for women - in hammam related services like traditional body treatments peeling (“kese”, Agda and Sabunlana) or massage as well as traditional ceremonies like arrangements of cultural settings (food, music, dancing etc).

When planning a renovation of the building of the hammam, to a contemporary standard, the owner needs to adapt the concept for the management of human resources to contemporary requirements. Within these times of change the question of ownerships influences the process of renovation and change: the ownership of the hammam is a highly complex issue. For the dwellers in the neighborhood, the owner is the person they see at their regular hammam visits: the hammam manager- a female one for the women's part, a male one for the men's part. This ownership has often a history of many generations; and the managing family was traditionally chosen by the Mosque and/or the religious authority of the city. In this system, the workers in the hammam earned a decent revenue from the mosque; the hammam used to be very cheap and affordable, ye profitable institution and the profit went back to the waqf and its charitable activities. Today, the ownership of the hammam depends on the sociopolitical system: in Morocco, the waqf is the owner – nothing can be done without its consent. Even small rehabilitation actions like a new cover for the wall needs negotiations. In more laic political systems, the traditional strong relation with mosque, Koran school and ministry

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<sup>5</sup> Al Tanbali Hammam, Bab-al-Sharia neighborhood, Cairo, Egypt: build in 18<sup>th</sup> century, Ottomans Peroid: Hammam Partner: Mimar Engineering Consultancy

of culture/religion becomes part of the collective memory, but the hammam ownership goes towards a private enterprise. This is the case in Tunisia and in Syria: whereas in the traditional hammam, different aspects and functions were important, in such a situation, the functions get in the circuit of competition. In the HAMMAM and Hammamed project in Damascus, our efforts reached the interest of a private entrepreneur who is now assuring the revival and quality of the two hammams – one for women, one for men. In the context of postmodern search for identity, he has understood that his clients do not only want proper hygiene and high management qualities, but also an experience that is still showing its spiritual, historical, religious and philosophical back ground. He combines these service qualities with high standards in staff training, good hygiene measures and even ecological efforts – the hammam Ammouneh is now carrying solar panels on its roof.

### **5. The HAMMAM is part of religious and welfare system**

Water can be considered as the binding element for two primordial aspects of the hammam: its religious value and its role in the city's welfare system. After enormous hermeneutic debates over centuries in medieval times about the hammam and its value between a place for the devil and the djins (the fire as the element of hell) on the one hand, the fire as the utmost purification for the soul on the other hand, whereby the hammam with its purifications qualities find its place near god.

Many religious rituals have a traditional, sometimes archaic link to the hammam: when you visit a hammam for the first time, you better hold a candle in your hand in order to chase the evil spirits. – (see also above, chapter 2)

The staff contributes to the quality of a hammam, even more than the hammams esthetical and architectural features and accepted costumes. Following the perceptions of the clients, the staff persons have an important role in the hammam ensuring the quality and the safety of the procedures. With its normative social role of control: they establish the codes of behaviour and are guarantees for the social integrity and the cleanliness of the hammam. This profession partly is communicated in an open way by publishing posters with rules for usage, but they also establish hidden parameters that provide a framework for a convenient behaviour, finding a balance between the need for control

and the fact that the hammam is a place of luxury and well being. Many members of the staff are aware of their place in society based on their work in the hammam. They take over responsibility for the actions of their clients, providing the context and rules for a well working hammam.

In these conditions, the traditional aspect of local endowment and charity represented by the religious representatives are in risk of neglecting, if not disappearing: the religious values of the hammam are less and less recognized by the religious representatives. In many hammams, the traditional space for ablutions is where you would carry out your Thursday and Friday – and others- rituals is neglected: today, this is often just used for storage of heating material and food.

This means a surprising policy to promote the retreat of religious rituals in the intimacy of the private bathroom; the place for collective social religious activity is only the religious Friday which continues to have a social dimension;

As a bath the hammam is open for rich and poor residents. It traditionally has a modest entrance fee, which is available for everyone, and assures individual as well as collective health. The hammam is liked mentioned before, also part of the local economy providing food from the enhancing shops or the bakery. It helps balancing social disparity within the community, supports underprivileged people of the neighbourhood and is contributing to the local social welfare system. The hammam has the potential for a public private partnership, where interests of the community could come together with an interest of private investment. The hammam is a valuable service for the travelers, like the streets are necessary infrastructure. The hammam is maintaining a place of relaxation, social security and local money exchange within the urban context. The hammam is part of the Islamic city and part of the city welfare system. The hammam provides space and opportunities for individuals to share social activities on a weekly or monthly basis within the community. Although several hammams are not running bathing places anymore, the building of the hammam is often still in use – as a museum, shop, café shop or restaurant (seen in Turkey or Greece: Crete, Saloniki or Syria: Damascus). The architectural specific situation of the building serves a special situation for this other economic functions, and with this change the hammam functions change also from community oriented to more economic and market oriented.

## **6. Conclusion and future for the Hammam**

Just as the whole fabric of the Medina in its architectural and societal fabric is affected by contemporary social change and changing living conditions, the hammam also needs to be considered a vulnerable space: the question is on stake how to integrate the historical institution of a hammam into a contemporary way of living in the town. Which elements of the architectural and cultural features should be maintained, which should be changed? The hammam, the traditional Islamic bath, is a cultural heritage not only from the historical, restoration and architectural points of view, but also for its socio-cultural aspects. The hammam seen as a *living cultural heritage* should be maintained in its bathing function; ideally the hammam is not a place to serve as a museum, shop, café shop or restaurant but a working bath. There is a strong connection between the socio-cultural practices, the building and the architectural features of the hammam. As well the different rooms, like the hot and the cold room, and the possibilities which the place offers should be maintained. As a celebration or marriage hammam it is as a place of events and stage for special occasions it could serve as a living cultural heritage traditional body treatments and ceremonies, and specific arrangements of cultural settings like food, music, singing and dancing. The old techniques of washing and body treatment and cultural ceremonies should be further researched and the hammam staff should be educated in these traditions so that clients have the possibility to experience these body treatments and cultural events in a convenient quality. From the religious hammam (halal) hammam, the institution could also develop to a young girl's hammam and or a design hammam. The hammam seen as a cultural institute should offer choices to a changing society. This means the hammam could develop also new contribution according to cultural and religious traditions between secular and religious societal context, for a contemporary use in a modern society. In most of the hammams it is necessary to adapting the hammam to a contemporary standard, that clients are invited to use it within a healthy setting. In this way, clients can experience the traditional body treatments and the cultural events within a contemporary setting. A more economic oriented development of the hammam is the focus on tourists and a possible "tourist hammam" which could serve the idea of health and wellness, the opposite would be to

make a hammam for migrants, living in Europe, to offer an cultural tradition and cultural heritage in a “foreign country”. In all this future scenarios the aspect of economical development seems to be an important one.

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## 8. Acknowledgment

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[www.hammamed.net](http://www.hammamed.net), [www.worldofhammam.wordpress.com](http://www.worldofhammam.wordpress.com).

Coordinator: Oikodrom, The Vienna Institute for Urban Sustainability.

**Thanks** to the local partners of HAMMAM in the case study teams for their hard work, dedication and supporting the process of the photo interview with selection, translation and

transcription. Field work was also facilitated by scientific coordination of OIKODROM team without whom the multidisciplinary process would not have taken place.

**Research methods and data:** The participatory approach of the photo interview generates the view of the local residents to their neighbourhood. The reliability of the data is high because of the relatively high involvement of the respondents. This process of photo interview produces an intense contact between researcher and interviewees. By taking photos, the interviewee presents his or her approach concerning the research issues to the researchers, including intuitive and emotional aspects, thereby opening unexpected issues and taking the lead in the interview procedure. The view of the local people gets a visual expression in the photos and is the basis for further dialogue; it is the provided material and the interpretation of local knowledge that gives the frame for the scientific interpretation, thereby becoming part of the emerging scientific knowledge. In each HAMMAM case study neighbourhood, we held five to eight photo interviews, supplemented with qualitative interviews and observations. The collected photo material includes 562 photos, photographed by the photo interviewees, showing people and buildings in the neighbourhoods. The text material is based on word by word transcripts of the interviews in English, Arabic, Turkish and/or French. The names of the interviewees were changed in order to guarantee their anonymity by using code-names, unless they expressed the wish to be named with their real names. A several number of synergistic scientific interpretations and objective hermeneutics according to visual sociological methods have been done by Heidi Dumreicher and Bettina Kolb.

### **The authors**

**Heidi Dumreicher and Bettina Kolb** have been working together as a scientific team for more than 15 years. Together, they aim at transgressing the linear approaches and to combine image and text. They concentrate on the social life and its expression in spatial form.

**Bettina Kolb** sociologist, senior researcher in “Oikodrom - The Vienna Institute for Urban Sustainability”, is a specialist in visual sociology. She worked out the highly innovative methodological combination of photo interview and objective hermeneutics, thereby assuring a high liability of the empirical data and their interpretation. Mrs. Kolb is lecturer at the Institute for Sociology, University of Vienna; and involved in documentation and evaluation of health promotion projects.

**Research fields:** social sustainability, photo interview as a sociological tool for inter- and transdisciplinary research, sociology of health, combining health aspects with sustainability.

## **Heidi Dumreicher**

Heidi Dumreicher is Oikodrom's founding director and a pioneer in integrated sustainability research. She contributed, together with Richard S. Levine, to formulating the Aalborg Charta European cities and towns towards sustainability, 1994.

With her linguistic background, she brings in her interview technique, her structuralist scientific formation and her systemic approach to interpretation of texts.

Mrs. DUMREICHER, was scientific initiator and co-ordinator of the projects SUCCESS– Sustainable Users Concepts for China Engaging Scientific Scenarios, (ICA4-CT-2002-10007) FP 5

HAMMAM – Hammam, Aspects and Multidisciplinary Methods of Analysis for the Mediterranean Region, (FP6-2003-INCO-MPC-2, Contract number: 517704)

Stadhügel Westbahnhof

Study "From Information to Knowledge"

Films "In the Beginning was the Eye" and Mappa Mundi

**Research fields:** theory of sustainability, Thesaurus of Sustainability, interdisciplinary generating of knowledge, scenario making.

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