

The IBO is 25 years old now

On the occasion of the last Christmas party, we could welcome many old and new members. Walter Pistulka, the first president of the IBO, Helmut Deubner, the former president of the IBO who had held this post for the longest time to date, and Karl Torghele, the president of IBO today, reminisced about the history of the IBO. Many things have changed since then – as you can gather from the interview of DI Walter Pistulka alone (see page 28).

The IBO has grown with the confrontation with manufacturers, with the further development of measurement technology, research projects, the development of passive houses that originated in Germany at the beginning of the eighties. In the course of the years, one thing followed the other, we gained experience, prepared reports, did advisory work, provided support for very many people on the phone and locally as well over the years.

Then in 1991, the “O” in the acronym “IBO” got a new meaning. Since its establishment in 1980, the society had been called “Österreichisches Institut für Baubiologie” (acronym I B O, Austrian Institute for Building Biology), and the name was changed to “Österreichisches Institut für Baubiologie und – Ökologie” (Austrian Institute for Building Biology and Ecology) in 1991.

Ecology became one of the core competencies of the IBO and is still one today.

The society alone was not the end of it, and an Austrian limited company was founded in 1997 in order to establish a framework for the (not non-profit) work for customers.

Today the IBO stands for scientific and practical work in healthy and ecological building with an abundant wealth of experience. Over all these years, the IBO has been independent as a society and as a limited company and does not accept any subsidies today either.

With the introduction of special product lines such as the “House of the Future” from the umbrella programme “Sustainable Development” of the bmvit, which has been on for eight years now, the call for action for the initiation of pilot projects was also recognised by the public authorities. The IBO took part in many of these research projects. The latest developments such as the integration of tested products in subsidised housing construction in Lower Austria are very promising. While the ground was prepared by passive house pioneers several years ago, there are standard solutions for many details today, which can be implemented in a suitable quality by companies. Many activities, events, interest groups and interdisciplinary workgroups were organised in the course of these years all around the topics of ecological and sustainable building, such as the Austrian Passive House Information Community, the Ecological Construction Cluster Lower Austria, GrAT, the Centre for Building and Environment of the Danube University Krems, the Austrian Institute of Ecology, the Work Group for Renewable Energies etc. The IBO is in a fertile exchange with a larger number of these protagonists.

These groups that are partly active on a highly scientific level made a substantial contribution to the development of awareness on a practical level. When building owners discuss the advantages and disadvantages of their passive houses in the chat room, this shows proof of the growing sensitisation that could be observed here over the course of the past years. It is a water-tight sign of the fact that this standard gains acceptance on the market step by step.

What will the future of the “House of the Future” be like? An architect who works as a development aid worker in South Africa once said to me: “A good development aid worker makes himself redundant after a while. He makes himself and his work superfluous.” So should we hope that the IBO will no longer be necessary one day?

At the moment, however, we are right in the middle of exciting developments and opportunities for an active participation in our architectural environment. There is still enough research work to be done. And so we regard our 25th anniversary as a mid-term review. The IBO was and still is part of an important development from which broad masses will profit in the distant future too. This is something we should think of when we set to work every morning. At the beginning, there was an idea. 25 years later, we are in the middle of our job: sustainable and healthy building is our job.

Ulla Unzeitig, IBO GmbH

As an independent scientific society, the IBO has been investigating the interactions between people, buildings and the environment for 25 years. In this period of time, they developed many scientific instruments and tools. The IBO provides advisory services regarding handicraft and technical questions, provides assistance for the planning of environmentally friendly, energy-saving buildings, or prepares building physics certificates for submission. In addition to the building physics certificates for thermal insulation, sound insulation, damp proofing and fire prevention, the IBO also carries out dynamic computer simulations. This enables, for example, the concurrent optimisation of overheating characteristics, high-temperature characteristics in winter and moisture characteristics. Environmentally compatible and health-friendly building materials are awarded the IBO test mark or the natureplus quality seal after a strict test has been performed. An increasing number of development programmes support the use of "green" building materials and rely on these tried-and-tested test marks. Harmful substances in indoor spaces are identified and refurbishment plans are prepared with state-of-the-art methods. For property developers, the IBO offers the building passes IBO ÖKOPASS, TQ Building, passive house certification according to Dr. Feist and certification according to klima:aktiv Haus criteria. The programme ECOSOFT WBF, a programme for the ecological assessment of building constructions and buildings and for the calculation of the eco-indicator OI3, also originates from the workshop of the IBO.

The beginnings of the IBO

An interview of DI Walter Pistulka, the first president of the IBO, recorded by Dr. Tobias Waltjen

When you enter the newly built multi-purpose building on a busy street in Mödling, nothing points to the fact that it is the founding president of the IBO who has his office for building statics here. The elevator at the end of the long access hall, only with artificial lighting, in the second staircase takes visitors to the converted attic. After a warm welcome in the office, you do not enter a completely different world, but the impression of discreet correctness grows stronger. The furniture is not "organic", but conservative in an unobtrusive way. One thing that is left is an old IBO poster that shows a draft of the sectional elevation of a model one-family home, completely in conformity with the principle of south orientation, as the only memory of old times.

Walter Pistulka recounts: The beginnings of the IBO go back to a shocking occurrence. The landlord of a friend of his had painted the wooden structure of his poorly ventilated attic with a commercially approved wood preserver and had died a few days later. This case of an obvious lack of information of consumers regarding the toxicity of certain building materials was then the trigger for his dealing with questions regarding healthy building and living. Ideas from esotericism sharpened his awareness of the fact that there are subtle, but partly very powerful influences in the environment where people live that have an effect on their health. When searching for documents on these topics, he soon found a lot of material. He became more and more convinced of the fact that this knowledge had to be made known and investigated in more detail. The search for people with the same outlook began. In addition to DI Walter Pistulka, the circle of founders of the first hour comprised:

Arch. Ing. Anton Brenner

DI Dr. Manfred Bruck (technical physician)

Leonhard Danzer

Arch. Mag. arch. Ing Helmut Deubner

Arch. DI Gabor Fettig

Prof. Mag. art. Karl Fischer

Arch. Ernst Irsigler

Dr. Harald Koch (technical physician)

Arch. Univ.Do. DI Dr. Rupprecht Ottel

Ing. Walter Rzepa

Ing. Leo Schweitzer

These people called the "Austrian Institute for Building Biology" into being in Vienna in 1980. They found supporting members soon, and the number of extraordinary members also increased fast in the first two years already. New, very active members established branch societies in Linz, Salzburg and Graz.

The activities of the IBO followed one basic idea: the architectural environment is not neutral as far as our health is concerned, but it has effects on it:

- Verifiable influences that have a direct effect on the body, such as toxic effects of building materials and electromagnetic fields
- Verifiable influences that have an effect on people's psychological make-up, such as paints
- Effects that cannot be verified with physical means at present, but that have a verifiable effect on the regulatory system of people, such as geopathogenic zones.

The IBO set itself the goal of investigating these effects and making improvements by way of quick publication. The following were used for this purpose:

- Literature studies
- Where necessary: independent research work (one result was, for example, the study "On the effects of geopathogenic zones on human health" under the direction of Univ. Doz. Dr. Otto Bergsmann, financed by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Buildings and Technology)
- Publications [first as Austria pages of the German magazine "Wohnung und Gesundheit" and later on in their own magazine].
- Workshops and talks
- Symposiums for the information of the general public, the "annual conferences"
- Marking of safe and/or positive building products, the beginnings of what was later to become the IBO product testing.
- The establishment of an advisory centre.

Our independence from public agencies and associations was important.

In practice, the focus of attention was on fine matter influences that have an effect on the regulatory systems of people and so long-term effects on their health. "We were largely unassailable in this regard", so Pistulka adds. Important factors in connection with healthy building and living were electromagnetic fields and the shielding of them and naturally also the undisputed toxic effects of paints, wood preservers, but also of several building materials.

The institute was shaping up well, the number of members increased, public awareness of it was increased by the symposiums. This was also a merit of the architect Anton Brenner, who ensured the necessary good general set-up for the annual conferences (St. Wolfgang and Gmunden!) and the excellent handling including the conference publications, so Walter Pistulka reminisces.

As the young institute gained momentum, it had to start facing opposition. Firms started to worry about their sales and were afraid that they might be forced to change their production processes. Finally companies who were of the opinion that their products were brought into discredit filed multi-million suits. The disputes were settled by way of costly settlements, but it was to be expected that we would not be able to keep this institutional policy up in the long run.

The things that were regarded as trade libel by the respective industry had an unnerving and alarming effect on consumers. This also made the president Pistulka think, particularly since he experienced the effects of fear himself. "In the end, I did not know where to put my bed any more", so his recollections. The personal turning point for Walter Pistulka came about in 1985. He experienced a wonderful relief from the strain caused by geopathogenic zones by godly intervention. "Since then, I can put my bed anywhere and I sleep well no matter where." Two years later, so he recollects, and says quite drily and unpretentiously, he entered into a lively relationship with Jesus Christ. "Then I experienced miracles, recoveries and signs – in my job and in my family". So his slow retreat from the IBO began, first as the president and then as a member of the board too later because he was no longer able to fully support the ideas of the institute.

"I changed my priorities. Healthy building had been overly important in my life. Healthy building was top priority for me then. Then I realised that there are things that are much more important: a healthy physical, emotional and mental outlook."

"I did not want to be part of the frightening any more. Fear is a very problematic factor. Fear locks you up, it diminishes your potential, and you are defeated under your value, so to speak. The Bible tells us over 100 times: Thou shalt not fear! When I trust in God, I experience a strengthening effect in all areas of life: God helps me to jump over walls!"

"Building biology is the teaching of the effects of the architectural environment on people's health and the practical application of this knowledge in building. In this set-up, health is to be interpreted in a holistic manner, namely physical, emotional and mental."

PISTULKA, W.: Baubiologie - der heutige Weg zum gesunden Bauen und Wohnen. Conference publication of the Austrian Institute for Healthy Building, St. Wolfgang 1982.