



AT HOME IN GERMANY?

The bittersweet immigration issue

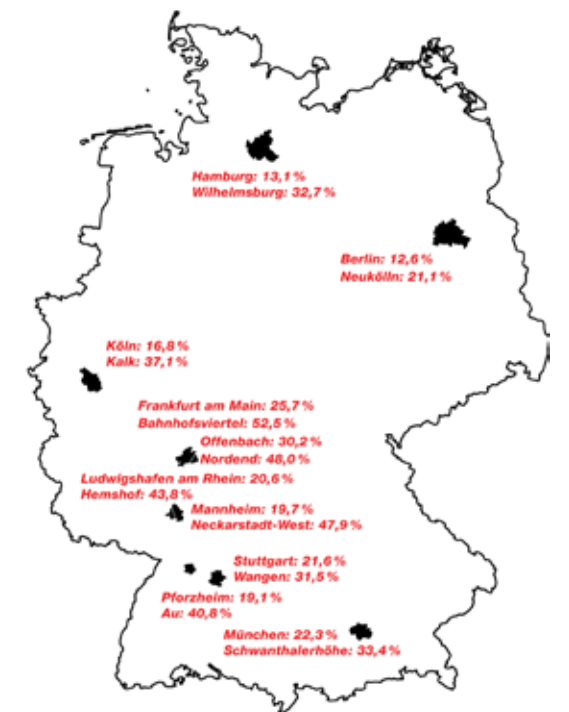
The German Pavilion at the 15th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice addresses the role of architecture in direct relation to the integration of immigrants. It does so not by indicating a formula for this challenge but through creating an audacious political signal, in the hope of generating a long-overdue discussion. Sandra Hofmeister relays her observations on *Making Heimat*, her home country's contribution to the Biennale, entwined with an assembly of European perspectives that have emerged since the marked move by Germany last year to open its borders to immigrants.

TEXT Sandra Hofmeister

When travelling in Europe last year, I was often spontaneously confronted with comments on Germany. Many people were full of respect towards the country's recent refugee policy, and some enthusiastically congratulated me personally for Chancellor Merkel's decision to open the German borders. Others, on the contrary, completely disagreed. After the gang assaults on women by Muslim men last new year's eve in Cologne, it was even said to me – not without schadenfreude – that this is what we Germans get for our misdirected solo political move, and that it brings great trouble into the whole of the EU. All in all, the remarks were bursting with emotion, and I have to admit it was a very new experience siding up and defending Angela Merkel's political orientation. Overnight, in the summer of 2015, Germany's image had changed, leaving behind the conventional cliché of a country of fast cars and strict financial politics. This was a new image, and one that actually matters. The Federal Republic of Germany was suddenly considered an open and welcoming coun-

try, something it had never been before. Intriguing media photos broadcast its full support for refugees. The images of the welcoming applause for the newly arrived Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans at Munich train station, are sure to remain unforgettable. As is the selfie of Shakir Kedida and Angela Merkel that was seen worldwide.

Today, this emotionally supercharged atmosphere has changed, as has German politics, and not really in a beneficial way. But it is time to pay attention to substantial facts and arguments, to look behind prejudices and the omnipresent diffuse angst that populist parties from the right in many European countries know how to profit from. It's time to think about opportunities and dangers and to look for the best strategies of integration. In fact it was easy to welcome refugees, but then you have to make it work, to build accommodation and provide environments where immigrants of different ethnicities can find a perspective for the future.



Map indicating the percentage of immigrants in German cities and their peak areas

< Peter Cachola Schmal, general commissioner of the German Pavilion and director of the German Architecture Museum in Frankfurt during the construction phase / The walls of the building, dating back to Nazi era, were opened up in 2015 in order to demonstrate that Germany is an open country for refugees. Photo: Felix Torkar



Concrete shelters in Ahrweiler for 300 residents
Photo: Opterra, Sven-Eric Tornow

The German Pavilion in the Giardini will be open continuously during the Venice Architecture Biennale.
Photo: Kirsten Bucher

The German Pavilion at the Architecture Biennale places those issues on an international stage and makes a clear and audacious political statement for Germany at the same time. Making Heimat. Germany, Arrival Country is curated by the team from Deutsches Architektur Museum in Frankfurt am Main and can be interpreted on several levels. The overall link is set: Architecture, be it urban environments and neighbourhoods, housing facilities, or temporary accommodation, has a major impact on the integration process. It makes for heimat, a sense of home, and is the basis for a new everyday life.

To start with, General Commissioner Peter Cachola Schmal and curator Oliver Elser, together with project coordinator Anna Scheuermann, have created a growing Refugee Housing database on the internet, gathering examples from many places. The recently-built and planned refugee accommodation in Europe, as well as the first-admittance facilities, lend an insight into the mediocre reality. There are apartments for refugees and the homeless, and ad hoc containers and modular structures or light-frame

construction halls for emergency programmes like those in Munich. Twenty of the readymade halls, housing around 200 people each in an area of nine square metres per person, are under construction in various parts of the city. Immigrants of different ethnicities and ages live in those barracks-style halls, which are mostly on the outskirts of the city in zones where nobody normally lives. Many of the entries in the database, some of which are shown in the exhibition at the German Pavilion, are evidence of the sobering circumstances in the first-admittance facilities. Hence, it could have been beneficial to curate the database projects, mark the outstanding facilities, and cast a critical eye on the architectural quality of the projects, which varies considerably.

But the question, of course, is not only an architectural one. As soon as refugees have achieved the recognised status of asylum, they can apply for social housing. However, there are simply no such homes available in most German cities. In Munich, even before the wave of immigration, 30,000 apartments were lacking. Since politicians in many cities have failed to develop new affordable housing, the current market crisis shifts the whole social balance. The gentrification process in cities like Munich is accelerating, and even affordable homes are fewer. So the challenge is not only to offer new homes to immigrants, but to define an affordable housing policy and quickly turn it into an urban reality.



A Hall in Munich of light-frame construction, as part of the emergency programme
Photo: Michael Heinrich

Apartments for refugees and the homeless in Ostfildern, built to last 40 years
Photo: Markus Guhl

Emergency and first-admittance facility tents in Hamburg
Photo: Mari Wahdat

A view inside the German Pavilion
Photo: Kirsten Bucher



Then there is the second level of meaning in Making Heimat. Germany, Arrival Country. Structured into eight main arguments worked out in close collaboration with Doug Saunders, Canadian journalist and author of the book Arrival City (2010), the exhibition layout (by Berlin-based architecture office Something Fantastic) is minimalistic and consequently follows the predetermined rules of charming understatement. The pragmatic and improvised character typical of arrival cities is transferred to the design of the space: reduced posters with photographs, statistics, and short texts, printed on ordinary copy-shop paper and fixed over the corners of



Inside the German Pavilion
Photo: Kirsten Bucher

Portrait of Arthur Seitz by Jessica Schäfer / Offenbach is Almost All Right is one of the sections of the Biennale exhibit, with photos of people living in the city

the walls. They visualise different arguments on the nature of arrival cities, as a city within a city, an affordable environment, or an area close to business. Some of those observations, such as the informality of the arrival city, seem hardly to exist in Germany, except for instance the Dong Yuan Centre in Berlin, which is showcased here. Conversely, others are very much present in today's urban environments and were set up many years ago. A series of shops in Berlin-Neuköln, for instance, where many migrants have opened their own businesses, testifies to the importance of available small-scale, ground floor spaces in creating new neighbourhoods. The exhibition floats from different arguments and pictures to figures and glances of daily life in Offenbach (near Frankfurt), the city with the largest population of immigrants in Germany. The individual case studies, documenting moments in the life of café owners, janitors, and families, are among the best photographs in the exhibition, as they draw a picture that is not at all ghetto-like but just different from other cities.



The Arrival City is Informal:
Dong Xuan Center, Berlin
Photo © Kiên Hoàng Lê

The Arrival City is on the
Ground Floor: Learning from
Neuköln, Berlin, 2013
Photos © Florian Thein



Views inside the German Pavilion
Photos: Kirsten Bucher

Peter Cachola Schmal with Alejandro
Aravena, Director of the 15th
Architecture Biennale

The third level of interpretation of this German contribution to the Biennale is the most symbolic and convincing; namely, the architecture of the Pavilion. Since its rebuilding in 1938, it has been seen as a monument serving the programme of Nazi domination – possessing a mute force, a hermetic orderliness. In order to translate the welcoming gesture of Making Heimat into the architecture, the Pavilion has been transformed into an ‘open house’, with four large openings in its walls. Over 48 tons of brick were removed from this protected historic landmark in the process. The building will be open day and night until November, just as Germany was open last year. Visitors can use it as a resting point. From the central main entrance, there is a view of the garden through the new opening in the back wall, and simple plastic chairs can be used indoors and outdoors. This open gesture is that of an Arrival Country. It is a call to rethink Germany as a welcoming nation for immigrants. And as a metaphor for a societal departure that still has an uncertain future. We would do well to think about these kinds of transformations and the needs of our cities – in Germany and in Europe. •

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