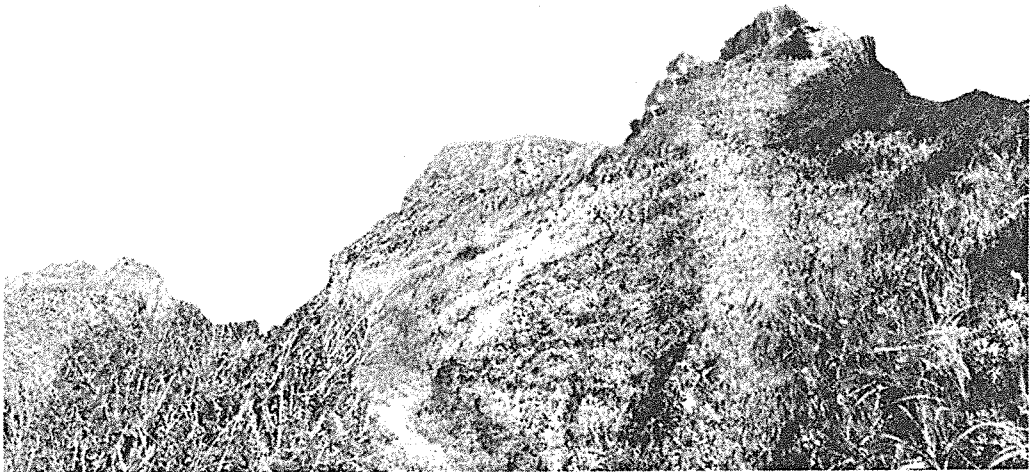




INCLUSIVE / EXCLUSIVE CITIES

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SINERGI Project

Social Integration through Urban Growth Strategies

The SINERGI Project (Social Integration through Urban Growth Strategies) is a network of twinned cities that provides exchange of knowledge, experience and good practices of partner cities, Universities, civic organizations and social groups enabling better social integration through joint development of urban growth strategies. The project has enriched the sense of identity and mutual understanding between European citizens by bringing upfront problems and issues of urban life that are shared among them, but also by sharing common values, history and culture in an open dialog.

The network organized two seminars as a platform for creative and open debate between local authorities, academics, experts, civil activists and citizens from local communities about the problem of social integration in ever-growing cities. The SINERGI Book One: "The Projects for an Inclusive City" is the result of these two seminars. The purpose of this book is to provoke decision-makers and citizens to challenge their perception of the city and, through critical understanding of mutual interests and shared values, to create a sustainable and lasting network of cities and active citizens.

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Creativity for Integration: Contested integration of refugees and the art project “My house is your house!” in Gera, Germany

ABSTRACT

Gera has only recently starting to accept refugees. As part of the former East of Germany, the city is situated in a peripheral area and bears heavy social costs from the transformation as a former mining city. Today, tensions between German inhabitants and newly arriving migrants and refugees can be identified in many ways. Most evident, a citizen's protest movement wanted to prevent the government to open up a refugee house. With a broad open debate, some social acceptance have been established and a small group of pro-refugee activists has been founded. Since many years, the authors are undertaking social research in the city in Gera and have been interviewing actors and refugees this year about the local situation. As consequence, a creative project called “My House Is Your House” has been initiated with the local theatre group. The paper will first present the local situation of Gera and its mayor subjects of social transformation. It will then document the results of the fieldwork undertaken by the authors. A main part of the paper will present the work of the project. It will finally draw conclusions in howfar creative projects can have a positive effect on situations where integration policies are contested. It will pay thereby particular attention to the aspect of how refugees and citizens can be brought into contact, how communication can be fostered and framed and what the long term effects on the mutual perception can be.

KEYWORDS: *art, refugees, East-Germany, perception, urban transformation*

1 INTRODUCTION

Being once the main mining center for uranium mining during the socialist period, the city of Gera and its region have been subject to substantial urban transformation. The city has thereby lived through different periods of planning paradigms and political approach to cope with the situation. In the year 2015, the recent influx of refugees to Europe has also reached Gera. Unknown to foreigners, the reactions have become increasingly hostile while a group of citizens have also started to deploy activities for the establishment of a "welcoming cultures". One of the projects has been started by artists and students of the Bauhaus-University Weimar. The major idea is that cities can only be developed to be integrative if patterns of perception on the urban society are enabling a differentiated view on newcomers and autochthon citizens alike. The project is motivated by the idea that creative approaches can enlarge perceptive concepts of local identity and thereby contribute to the inclusive strength of the city.

This chapter will first sketch the urban transformation of Gera (Eckardt, 2011) and the experiences with different political and planning approaches (Chapter 2). It will then present research on the "Welcoming cities" in Thuringia undertaken in 2015 with a special focus on Gera (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 presents the ongoing project "My house is your house". In the concluding part, the experiences made so far in Gera will be discussed with regard to the question whether creative projects can have an impact on the perception on urban life and what possible conclusions can be drawn from the case of Gera with regard to the subject of inclusion of foreigners.

2 THE URBAN SOCIOLOGY OF GERA

Understanding a city requires a complex set of orientations. For the sake of description, a choice has to be made regarding the importance of factors that can be discussed explaining urban changes. In this regard, the city has to be seen first in the light of its embedding into a society that has undergone a profound transformation into a new and all-encompassing political and economy system. This means that the city has been conceptualized to serve the societal objectives of a socialist idea and which needed to be re-oriented towards a free market economy and the West-German political system of democracy. Economically, the urban transformation implied a profound change of ownership and the implementation of the concept of competition. This has led to a severe process of deindustrialisation, as the key industrial basis of the city could not keep up against the global competition. Not only has the privatization of formerly state owned companies pushed Gera to a status of low production capacities and thus producing a high level of unemployment, but also the soft factors of economy like the value of the labor competences and the place bound qualities (infrastructure, housing, social and cultural services) were increasingly devalorized.

The political transformation of the city after the German reunification was systematically organized to take over the institutional settings as worked out

so far in the West-German democracy. While the process of institutional adaptation has been accomplished in the first ten years, the innovation of the local political culture underwent different phases and might not be regarded as strong as it would be needed. While political parties have been set up in the style usual for a democratic system, the empowerment of the former GDR citizen to take up responsibility beyond the forms of representation has started but not achieved a level that could be called a civil society. An active participation in the sense that citizens self-organize for their interests and for the bonum commune has only slowly increased in the last 25 years. To mention are initiatives for cultural projects like the support for the underground cellar rooms ("Höhler") which are used for artist exhibitions. Another important area of citizen's engagement for the green spaces at the edge of the inner city which is connected to the former mining area. Again, this has been initiated by a top-down project that has been enabling the organization of the National Gardening Exhibition (BUGA) which needed to be sustainably followed up and thereby is given into the hands of an association consisting of a group of engaged citizens. Participation has often been requested by federal or European funding institution as a prerequisite. Gera as many East-German cities have fulfilled this obligation in a formal manner and often by setting up citizens' organisations which were dominated by officials.

From the observations on the particular situation in East-Germany, one needs to take into account that the local and regional discourses were predominated until now by the assumed imperatives of demographic change (Nipper, 2013). As East-Germany has lost many inhabitants in the last two and half decades, the predictions foresee that this process will continue. Coping with "shrinkage" meant firstly, that political actors and the broader public have to recognize the ongoing process and the difficulties implied for financing the infrastructure, keeping up the social and cultural institutions and psychologically to destroy larger parts of the cities that has been building up before German reunification. Until today, the discussions on how to plan and to live in a city that has no option to grow, start new projects and thereby organize collective experience to shape an authentic local identity (cp. Richter, 2012), and place attachment remains extremely difficult.

While undeniably the shrinkage of East Germany in terms of population will continue as the economic pull factors from the more competitive West German cities will remain and the birth rate is not assumed to rise (with less young people remaining), the social geography of East Germany has developed an own logic. This has led to a pattern where differences between cities in Thuringia have become more important. Since 2005, there is an urban core along a major motorway (Erfurt-Weimar-Jena) that not only stabilized demographically but even were regarded as growth poles economically. Here, affordable housing becomes a critical subject. In contrast, North and South from this imaginary "urban line", the shrinkages are taking shape even sharper. With 2,5 million inhabitants, the state of Thuringian has to expect a further loss of 400,000 inhabitants in the next ten years.

The predominance of the idea of shrinkage has narrowed down the general perspectives on state and local level (Bürkner, 2012). Even in 2014, when Germany in total received as many foreigners as never before since the German reunification, no public debate can be identified that this might change also the very basic logic of development in Thuringia. While this discursive failure is charged by all East German cities and states, however, Thuringia needs to be looked at more closely. Since the 2000 years, the emergence of life style diversity in Thuringian cities can be observed. This is due to the fact that a more intensive interaction with West German metropolises takes place. The geographical nearness – in contrast to Saxony for example – enables for many people to integrate the experience of working and visiting West German cities. This has prevented in many border regions to Hestia, Lower Saxony and Bavaria that inhabitants of small and economically weak cities are leaving their home town and instead commute daily.

Being geographically situated in the East of Thuringia, the city of Gera is rather disconnected to the rest of the country (Freistaat). Symbolically, the city is one of the few cities in Germany which still lack access to the electric railway lines. Train connections are hindered also by partly one line narrowings. Psychologically, the feeling having lost status has been underlined by the fact that the former mining town no longer holds the position of a "Bezirksstadt" of the GDR but as second largest town of Thuringia has not been granted any mayor regional institution like a university or government buildings.

Today more a psychological than a real barrier, the city has often been seen as embodying the "death triangle" of the contaminated earth left over from the uranium mining. Gera was seen as one angle of a territory forming a triangle of intoxicated landscape. While the process of decontamination has been extremely intensive and expensive, the stigma of being "deadly" is regarded as a hinder for investors, visitors and foreigners to settle down, so far. Feeling treated unfairly by the outside world has led to a certain resentment against anything from "outside". Early reports on racism in the high rise estates on the fringe point at a high level of unsolved social problems. As there were few opportunities for higher educated youth to built up a professional career, citizens with an above average degree were leaving the city. Who remained can be characterized with a social profile as being rather less educated, male, and with a strong orientation towards the local culture. The later derived from a classical working class orientation where the value of loyalty was kept upright in the first place. Living together in one place for a very long time without much disturbance from the outside has created a local life world where many not explicit rules for the daily life have been developed and internalized.

With the collapse of the uranium industry and the massive loss of jobs, this local culture had to undergo a devaluation of its very substance. One can describe this process as a classical crisis of local identity which has not been solved by the measurements undertaken "from above". The idea of branding the city according to a local painter (Otto Dix) has not produced an offer

which has meaning in everyday life. Accompanying investors into culture and urban planning like the re-installation of the tramway did not work economically. On the contrary, the city had to close many social offers, when in 2015 Gera hardly could prevent to become bankrupt.

3 WELCOME TO GERA

In the run of the last 15 years, there has been substantial research undertaken at the Institute for European Urban Studies regarding the transformation of urban life in Thuringia. Early, a representative survey indicated the change of meaning of cities in a transformed landscape of lifestyles (Eckardt, 2002). Intensive studies have been undertaken with regard to different aspects of urban transformation in the following years leading to the installation of the "Workshop Social Space Analysis" in 2014. As part of this workshop, indications of difficulties regarding the hosting of refugees have been reported from different places. As consequence, we started exploratory studies in six cities, one of them was Gera. The selection was motivated by the access to key actors and to the refugees. As we have the chance to include Arabic speaking students in our study groups, the work is focused on experiences with this particular refugee group.

In 2014 the first government of the left ("Die Linke") has been elected in Thuringia. With this political change, a new discourse have been installed that formulates the objective of an "welcoming culture" especially towards refugees. The political turn to three parties of the Left has however not been motivated by any kind of position on the subject of migration. While it can be said that the voters could have known the general position of these parties concerning integration, it did not play a role in the election campaign then. It is clear however that this would have been different already one year after the election and the clear positioning of the leftist government in favor of refugees. The new attention for the subject can be related not only to the pro asylum-attitude of the new government and the real influx of app. 20,000 refugees in 2014 but has to be seen in the light of wide spread xenophobia in the East of Germany. With regard to East Germany (cp. Behrends & Poutrus 2005), this contextualisation is publically difficult as an often formulated "argument" against pronouncing potential particularities of the East-German situation is motivated by the attempt to not-stigmatizing East-Germans as being more racist than West-Germans. Academically spoken, however, there can be doubt whether the contact hypothesis (implying that having contact with foreigners reduces prejudices) is applicable everywhere, the contrary cannot be said either. The statistical likeness to become a victim of racist attacks is 50 times higher in the East – where the presence of foreigners is nearly everywhere below five percent (in contrast to West German cities with 20 per cent). This fact at least allows asking whether the missing personal encounters with foreigners in Gera so far and the above national average of racism are somehow related to each other. When looking at the behavior of local actors, it is therefore reasonable to expect a lacking "know how" and a wide spread of individual and institutional

uncertainty. This assumption is supported by the experiences we have made in the welcoming cities project in early 2015 (Eckardt , 2015).

From the interviews and observations undertaken, a wide range of difficulties have been identified with regard of the local integration of refugees. The most of them have not been regarded as being special for Gera but can be as common to all six case studies. In general, the local political and public debates have not been adopted to the necessities deriving from the lacking experiences with foreigners (and "otherness" more generally) but are a product of rather abstract concepts preavailable in the city before the arrival of the refugees. We found furthermore that ideas of "integration" and the action of the administration are decoupled from each. Neither the logic of the administrative organization nor the role understanding of its personal has been directed by a "problem solving"-attitude but by the continuity of more statist approaches where the citizen is a receiver of state deliveries and where he is not regarded as a communicate and controlling self-aware person. The refugee therefore is firstly regarded as a fixed case of burdening which will not develop to a self-aware citizen. This follows the logic of the remaining authoritarian idea of the citizen being a receiver of public goods and not the basis of democratic society. The idea of empowerment is completely absent.

The refugee as "burden" is a very common concept even shared by people who organize help for the refugees. This leads to a certain patronizing behavior where the experience of the refugees is not the starting point of the relationship with the few inhabitants who want to welcome them. In many interviews, the refugees feel lost between well-intended "help" – mostly offered to them in forms of clothes and other practical goods – and open or subtle forms of rejection in public life. Apparently, the lack of experiences in communication in situations of open encounters, citizens is not used to develop the empathy that is needed to include the perspective of the refugees. This leads to the fact that many refugees have complained that nobody takes time to listen to their story. "We do not need more clothes, we need an open ear", one Syrian refugee told us. The situation is described in terms like "we are living here in a refrigerator" or as being "voiceless". As English is not available for the middle aged and older population, the language barrier is often mentioned to be the reason for the miscommunication between refugees and local citizens. However, the deeper reason for the non-emphatical contacts might rather lie in the different definitions of situation. Asked what the main problems are, most social workers reported that there are conflicts on subjects of housekeeping, garbage separation and noise. The concrete examples for these conflicts show mostly that these conflicts are soon seen as very symbolically by the German citizens. In this regard, the underlying issue is an assumed argument on norms and control of the existing norms in a place. Neighbors are not willing to negotiate the existing rules and do not want to develop an understanding for the needs of newcomers. The constant call for more "Demut" (humility) on the side of the refugees points into this direction as well.

In Gera, the situation first escalated when the Thuringian Ministry for Migration announced to set up a new asylum center in a village formerly attached to Gera. Citizens mobilized themselves with a signature list against this plan. The debate was motivated by a diffuse concern with no major aspect put in front of the resistance. In our observation, this protest came from the inhabitants themselves and has not been embedded into a wider xenophobic discourse. In contrast to other protests against refugees in Thuringia, any kind of influence of the right wing party NPD or the neo-conservative AFD has not been noticed. To meet the concerns of the citizens, a public debate with the local politicians and the minister was organized. In an interview with the authors, the minister later said that he had the impression that he could break the resistance by promising a better communication with the affected citizens. Furthermore, he reported that the protest organizers rejected heavily to be seen as racist or right-wing extremists. They felt stigmatized by those who are in favor of the asylum center.

While this conflict seemed to be solved to some extent, the later plans for using a former hospital of the uranium miners to host 2,000 refugees had evoked a larger protest in Gera. This protest again was announced in a non-racist terminology by putting their concern positive. The demonstrations were organized "in love for Gera". As the hospital is more centrally placed, well-known to the citizenry and embodying a lost past, the protests have been shared by a larger group of people. More than 1,000 citizens joined these activities regularly. It seems that this form of camouflaged xenophobia is able to articulate itself in a way that is acceptable for a larger part of the city. It can be assumed that this means a discursive hegemony of a narrative where the idea of a fixed identity of Gera has become strong. This has led to an increasing confusion how to act. It seems that many actors in the city are waiting of this discourse will lead to success and will therefore avoid the settlement of more refugees in the city. The city of Gera officially cancelled the cooperation with our institute "for the moment" without further explanation.

4 "MY HOUSE IS YOUR HOUSE"

"My House Is Your House" is an expression used in many cultures to denote a welcoming gesture for someone visiting or staying temporarily in your house. Whereas the general public, informed by daily and social media, is very much aware about the arrival of newcomers in the cities it seems that the newcomers actual presence in public space is rather absent and that contacts with newcomers are almost non-existent. Despite the fact that newcomers have arrived informal debates with citizens often show that the newcomers are nearly invisible, or in other words, that they are somewhere there (in clearly designated "refugee centers") rather than among the inhabitants in public spaces. Having no place in and being absent from public space also means being unrepresented and marginalized. Related to

this, devising new and creative strategies of coexistence between newcomers and inhabitants and materialization and localization of these practices in urban space is therefore more than substantial at the moment.

Concerning current social and political debates on "Welcoming culture", the seminar "My House Is Your House" takes a closer insight into the actual coexistence between newcomers and residents, the every day lives of newcomers and the impact that these have on urban space production. The research focus has been laid on the relation that newcomers have with a particular city in Thuringia, in terms of social encounters and interactions with local citizens as well as subjective perceptions, experiences and feelings of urban space. In the collection of essays titled "Urbanographien" Elke Krasny and Irene Nierhaus argue that "in everyday practice and cumulation of emotions, moods, atmospheres, assurances, myths and assumptions everyone produces the city according to individual, subjective and social understanding as well as based on personal experience."⁶⁵ (Krasny & Nierhaus, 2008:7) In reference to this, the seminar aims to investigate and question heterogeneous modes of urban production, understanding the "right to heterogeneity as a strategy of radical inclusion in the city"⁶⁶ (Krasny & Nierhaus, 2008:8)

Departing conceptual notion and theoretical approach is Vilém Flusser's proposal that exile and creativity are inter-related. Flusser, who has been a refugee himself and lived in exile for most of his life, claims that the expellee actually does not have other choice but to be creative. (Flusser, 2003:81) In Flusser's terms exile can be explained as life led outside of the habitual order, which in turn is a positive and informative assumption because it forces us to think about what is usual. Flusser argues that habits prevents us from perceiving and noticing information and that precisely due to the "misunderstanding" caused by different cultural, religious and social habits of the expellee and the settled inhabitant a creative dialogue can be developed. The objection of this creative dialogue is the production of new information, he notes, that is, when external dialogues caused by the arrival of the expellee, and internal dialogues in the expellee, involving exchange of previous and new information, are harmonized and resonate with each other, there is a fertile ground for a creative activity. (Flusser 2003:86).

In order to help synchronize these external and internal dialogues and bring about creative possibilities of coexistence, culturally mixed group of students (most of them recently arrived in Thuringia as well) with architectural background, explores both the local inhabitants' and the newcomers' perspective of the city by considering social and spatial relations; cultural and religious differences but also parallels embodied in daily life; common place identities, including female identity, that reflect upon shared and

⁶⁵ Author's own translation. The original text reads: Im täglichen Handeln und Ansammeln von Emotionen, Stimmungen, Atmosphären, Gewissheiten, Gerüchten und Vermutungen erzeugt jede/r nach individuellem, subjektivem und sozialem Wissen sowie aufgrund eigener Erfahrung "Stadt".

⁶⁶ Author's own translation. The original text reads: Recht auf Heterogenität als Strategie radikaler Inklusionen

segregated forms of urban production and appropriation of the urban; the immediate surrounding and living conditions of the newcomers etc. By processing and translating the research findings into artistic projects the objective is to bridge gaps and initiate contacts and communication between the population through aesthetic experience in and of the urban space.

Furthermore, in light of the so called "mobility turn" and concerned with the influence that currents of global movements have on local urban space production as well as the social implication of these movements, the seminar deploys mobile methods of urban research that rely upon ethnographically informed exploration. In other words, the research blueprint is that each student explores in tandem with one newcomer one area or a place, a certain route or walking path, daily activities, immediate surroundings etc. on foot and while moving through the city. At the same time informal and intimate dialogues between the research partners are to be developed and these concerning, but not limited to, subjective experiences and perceptions of the city, personal biographies and memories as well as future imaginations concerning the life at home and in Germany.

Through this collaboration, besides experiencing the city by walking and anew, physical movements in the city but also on the way to Germany, overlapping or divergence of mental routes and paths, emotional relations and cultural connections between homeland and newland and locals and newcomers are being traced. Additionally, accompanying the newcomers on their daily routes ("the go-along method"⁶⁷), participating in their daily activities (i.e. regular meetings at the "Caritas International Cafe"), doing leisure activities with them (i.e. playing chess, football, listening to music, visiting certain places of interests, etc.), mapping memories of distant and places in immediate surroundings, locating activities of appropriation and re-appropriation in public space are also some of the actions that the students undertook with their research partners. At the same time, going along and accompanying the newcomers and the locals and listening to their ways and stories allows the students to develop a closer relation with the newcomers, see the city through the eyes of "the other" and better understand possible instances of de-alienation.

In this approach, and by documenting with video, photography and mapping, on one hand research material is obtained and on the other, through the very act of walking through and talking about the city new urban space is produced. In other words, the ways and the activities which the students, the newcomers and the locals jointly undertook in the city are important elements of individual and collective understanding of urban social production. Through everyday practices in the city personal areas and territories are build in which memories and experiences are situated and located. By walking over and articulating and narrating the (unspoken) personal space biographies are localized in urban space and own, subjective cities are produced. The bodily movements in public space

67 Kusenbach, Margarethe (2003). *Street phenomenology: The go-along as ethnographic research tool*. London:Sage Publications

additionally help reveal what is invisible and highlight presence in public space. In this vein also, by combining the act of walking, narrating and listening, not only a diversity of many cities is created in one urban space, but also claims to inclusion of different perspectives and experiences of the urban are integrated in the city as well.

Concerning establishing contacts and communication with the newcomers the most frequent problem reported by the students was the language barrier as many of the students, besides their mother tongues (i.e. Chinese, Persian, French, Portuguese, Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic), speak only English which in turn not all newcomers could. The other difficulty was the unresponsiveness by the NGO's working with newcomers, which the students contacted and asked for support. The only place and strategy that allowed them to establish an immediate contact with newcomers was the "Caritas International Cafe" and the regular meetings organized with newcomers there. Alternative possibilities were using the online platform "Weimar Connect" where a personal profile is created and people get connected according to common interests, as well as using already existing contacts of either Syrian students or other students at the Bauhaus-University working on the same thematic.

Worth mentioning is that all of the students were interested in getting to know the newcomers on a more personal and friendly level as well as learning more about their biographies, interests and hobbies. In this sense, they have also managed, in a very short time, not only to earn their trust but also to undertake activities with them that go beyond the framework of scientific and artistic research. Through their research practice, in fact, they have created good examples of co-existence and welcoming culture. So for instance, the students took the newcomers to their favorite places, shared their usual walking paths and short-cuts in the city, gave them information about their personal city space, organized dinners and shared cooking of traditional meals, made new connections to other newcomers and organizations for them, and more importantly, they encouraged them to imagine and experience a nice future in the city. In addition, they have learned a lot from the newcomers too, about their places and ways in the city, their culture, food, tradition, life-style, everyday problems and aspirations.

Related to mapping and walking in the city several issues and points of interests have been raised and developed. Whereas some projects focused on the present time and space and subjective perceptions of the city, that is, quotidian interactions with and encounters in urban space, experienced through walking along common paths and visiting places integrated in daily life, other projects focused on creating relational spaces, overlaying past and present experiences and merging them into heterotopical spaces. So for example, one project used mapping in order to transfer the route from Syria to Germany onto a walking route in Weimar. The route involving different stations in many countries (i.e. Turkey, Macedonia, Croatia, Austria) was overlayed on a city map in Weimar and was walked through. The stops or stations that the newcomers made on their way to Germany were also

mapped and used as stops while walking, which allowed for many coincidences and chances for new (unexpected) relations between two distant places to emerge. For instance, a one-story houses neighborhood in the suburbs of Weimar could be compared with a similar one in Hama, Syria or a spot at the river Ilm in Weimar to be related to a spot in the Mediterranean sea.

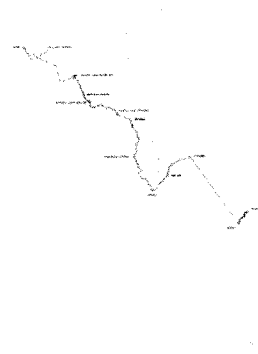


Figure 1 by Helena Pooch

Similarly, in another project the newcomer's memories evoked by certain places in the city were explored. Both research partners proposed places which have a mnemonic effect and remind of similar places in their hometown. Besides visiting these places, i.e. a Shisha bar and a bridge on the river Ilm, the student and the newcomer shared their memories stirred by these particular places and at the same time also created new memories by experiencing these places together. In this way, they have both brought memories of their life before coming to Germany and have localized them in the city. Moreover, they have produced new moments and memories and captured them photographically and textually, thus linking present places and past times.

Furthermore issues of identity and representation have also been an important topic of discussion and research. This included on one hand issues concerned with self-identification, considering both the perspective of newcomers and the locals, and female identity on the other, casting light on women empowerment and self-confidence among muslim women. The former project questioned ideas about self-perception and the fine differences between words that make distinctions between categories, such as: "refugee", "foreigner", "stranger", "outsider", "expelled", "emigrant", referring to the newcomers and "citizen", "native", "resident", "local" related to the inhabitants. By asking various people to introduce themselves and chose and say out loud one the proposed identifications in front of a video camera instances of construction and reproduction of self-perception and -identity were tackled.

I am an emigrant
 I am an outsider
 I am an expellee
 I am a newcomer
 I am a foreigner
 I am a stranger
 I am a refugee
 I am a resident
 I am a native
 I am a local
 I am a citizen
 I am an inhabitant
 I am an autochthon

I am a human

Figure 2 by Mahgol Motallebi

The later project dealt particularly with female self-identification and representation by taking a deeper insight into the life of one Syrian newcomer. By obtaining an extensive biographical information, following actively her daily life and analyzing the living conditions in the refugee centre where she lives, the project's intention is to incorporate the woman's own observations and perceptions of the living surrounding in Germany. Important research findings, to be gathered in a documentary video, show her strength and determination to have a successful life and a professional carrier in Germany, which in turn break stereotypic images of muslim women. In addition, and related to topics on integration in Germany, they show her difficulties when interacting with other newcomers living in the refugee centre, which break stereotypic beliefs that differences between people are culturally and nationally based and that newcomers, often perceived as one homogenous mass of people, do not necessarily better co-exist and integrate with each other rather than with locals. The creative organization of her living space and the privacy thereof, was an inspiration for a possible model of designing architectural spaces for shared living.



Figure 3 by Hala Ghatasheh

Exploring the religious practices of the newcomers and finding ways of their accommodation in the daily life in Germany was also a point of interest. The

intention of this project is to learn from the perspective of the newcomer and hear his voice and his opinion on how to improve and facilitate practicing religious rituals in Germany. A small house adopted into a mosque near the refugee centre was taken as an example in order to analyze and experiment with possibilities of re-appropriation. Another project seeks to re-define the relation between people and the built environment in terms of place identity. The "Caritas International Cafe" was taken as a source and a successful example of multicultural coexistence and social interaction between newcomers and locals. By taking a closer insight into the meetings and events that this place offers and by talking to people who participated regularly in these gatherings, the aim is to transfer and implement the activities and experiences in the cafe to a wider public space and in this vein to also disperse positive practices of co-existence.

Although still ongoing the creative project "My House Is Your House" allows for several conclusions to be drawn. Due to the sensitive approach to the topic that the students adopted, in the sense that besides extracting research material first and foremost they have concentrated on meeting new people and establishing inter-human relations with them, the research results presented through their artistic projects offer different images of newcomers than the ones spread through the daily media. They show and highlight the individuals behind the all-embracing term "refugees" and in this manner also challenge and question the common perception that people have of the newcomers. While many projects shared very similar interests and working approaches, the fine differences between the methodologies the students deployed allowed for many diverse artistic formats to emerge. By presenting them to a general audience these works of art bring about new forms and possibilities of getting informed on the topic and entering a creative dialogue with newcomers, namely, through aesthetic experience.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, we developed an understanding on how a creative approach to stimulate integration needs to be framed and contextualized. It has been worked out that the particular situation of a city is determining the opportunities for this. Approaches to answer the general question on the potentials of art interventions, public art, artistic projects and cultural initiatives cannot be outlined on the basis of single case studies. Nevertheless, the findings presented from our work might point at the necessities and limitations of such an approach at least for cities in a post-socialist society with so far little experience with "otherness" and foreigners. The case presented is moreover embodying the particularity of cities in (economic) decline. In both regards, the case of Gera might be helping to reflect on many similar cities in Europe.

When trying to come to general conclusions in the light of the project presented, one has to recognize the constraints of the available (human) resources in the first place. It is evident that bringing in students – and even more important: international students with an informed view on refugees

and personal experiences in intercultural communication – is an asset and probably a precondition for any kind of inclusive project to build on some “bridging knowledge” which enables a common understanding of the perspectives of refugees and autochthon inhabitants. In “My house” this is brought in by students deriving from an internationally oriented course of an external university.

Although the ongoing work of the project presented here does not allow to foresee its impact on the general perception of refugees in the city, the approach to include the view of the refugees has been experienced as the right starting point. In this sense, the exploratory approach followed in “My house...” has been proven to enable at least to create a path of possible further steps in one way or the other, so to improve the visibility of the “other” perspective on Gera. What can be learned is that any kind of inclusiveness starts with the recognition of the diversity of perception.

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