



qualitalk

Information on Technology and Society

October 2015
Internet-Version
ISSN 1615-9667
16th Year
56th Issue

Print-Version
ISSN 1435-1641
21th Year
72th Issue

Migrants, asylum-seekers, refugees – you name it – from Afghanistan, the Mid-East, Africa, the Balkans, they all have been converging on Germany in fall 2015. The communes were no longer interested in the exact total numbers of them, be they over one million or below: they had enough to grapple with when several hundreds of them were flooding their places at a moment's notice. The impact of a plan to establish an accommodation for refugees at the local level is shown in this issue by

Chris Schuster

Page 2

Conversion

The Cost of Detente: Empty Places

Fewer Troops in Europe

Page 3

Refugees' Shelters In The Middle Of A Posh Residential Area of Gonsenheim

Page 4

Costs, And More Costs

Page 5

Choice Real Estate Pieces For Investors

Page 6

Explanation Of Building Laws

Page 7

Impressum



Housing Area Finther Landstrasse: Lots of open green spaces, many old trees made this former residential area of U.S. Armed Forces in Germany also a pleasant recreation area for their German neighbors as well. At the playground, German kids played with their American counterparts, enjoyed getting to know each other and having a good time together.

Conversion

The Cost of Detente: Empty Places



*Once upon a time ...
German kid playing on
American playground.*



Empty Residences: *The last civilian employees of U.S. Armed Forces Europe left in March 2015. Since that time, the empty buildings of the housing area at Finther Landstrasse in Gonsenheim have been fenced off.*

CONVERSION is the magic word that is supposed to restructure the emptiness left behind after the U.S. Military had moved out. Gonsenheim is not the only place where barracks and residential areas were vacated and whose use and reintegration in the respective communities had still been hotly discussed until recently. Just to cite another example, PATRICK-HENRY-VILLAGE, a residential compound for military and civilian personnel of USA-REUR (Headquarters of U.S. Armed Forces in Europe), constructed in 1952 and situated close to the city of Heidelberg, had at its peak a population of 16,000, its area being as large as the area of downtown Heidelberg itself. In 2002, the U.S. Forces were thinking to enlarge the compound but both the city of Heidelberg and the province of Baden-Württemberg objected.

Fewer Troops in Europe

Could it be that the slogan »Ami go home« worked too well? Well, not all Americans did »go home«,

but military presence in Europe was reduced dramatically: after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the focus was shifted away from sluggish tank forces to a rapid deployment force. Shortly after that change of thought, plans gelled to move headquarters from Heidelberg to Wiesbaden. PATRICK-HENRY-VILLAGE was cleared out. Since September 2013 it's been a ghost town – until the refugees came.

Now, refurbishing has started to change PATRICK-HENRY-VILLAGE into a Center of Registration which should process the arrival of three quarters of all refugees entering Germany and at the same time offering them a first, short-time lodging place. More German government personnel and renovated facilities at PATRICK-HENRY-VILLAGE (PHV) should then ensure a faster process of registering refugees. The concern is, however, that this new refugee »hub« at PHV will be pushing its limits soon as more and more refugees are streaming into Germany.

Moving U.S. Armed Forces Head-

quarters to Wiesbaden also meant that U.S. compounds in the Mainz area were to be vacated. The smallest one of those was the HOUSING AREA FIN-
THER LANDSTRASSE, an almost bucolic area with a standing of beautiful fir trees, at the western edge of Gonsenheim Borough, a section of the city of Mainz. No wonder then that the compound was reserved for officers and their families. At the beginning, their residences carried fanciful plates with name and rank of the officer. Among them were at one time or another General Norman Schwarzkopf famous for leading U.S. Forces during the Gulf War, and Alexander Haig, Supreme Commander of NATO Forces in Europe. With the increase of terror attacks and kidnappings name plates at the entrances were soon removed, the area fenced in and heavily guarded.

The last residents of HOUSING AREA FIN-
THER LANDSTRASSE were civilian employees of U.S. Headquarters situated across the Rhine river, in Erbenheim, a borough of Wiesbaden, barely fifteen minutes away by car. But then, U.S. Armed Forces increased the housing area in Erbenheim, to ultimately accommodate 1,700 families; an additional 1,900 apartments have been rented. This led to the closing down of HOUSING AREA FIN-
THER LANDSTRASSE. It was locked up and basically forgotten – until the arrival of refugees.

Refugees' Shelters In The Middle Of A Posh Residential Area of Gonsenheim

What a shock for the neighbors! The city government of Mainz realized they had a problem at hand and in an effort to do damage control they called for a citizens' meeting in Gonsenheim. The venue chosen was

the musty beer cellar of Gonsenheim's Gymnastic Club, founded in 1860, probably to convey a feeling to the assembled citizens of the cramped conditions of already established accommodations for refugees. Nevertheless, the interest was greater than the government representatives must have been expecting: first of all, they had provided only two rows of chairs, way



too few so that behind them people from the neighborhood had to squeeze in and were densely packed wall to wall. They all were in a testy mood and the initial remarks by Kurt Merkator (SPD), Department for Social Services, City of Mainz, did very little to lessen the palpable apprehension of the audience: »We are not here to discuss whether refugees should not be accommodated in that area. Rather, we need to talk about how we can make this togetherness a peaceful one.«

It must be said that despite the U.S. American families having left

Depressing was the ambiance at the citizens' meeting in the small beer cellar of Gonsenheim's Gymnastic Club, hastily called together by city representatives to inform the neighborhood about the upcoming influx of migrants, on 29th September 2015.

the residences in top conditions, it wouldn't be possible for refugees to simply move into the facilities of HOUSING AREA FIN'THER LANDSTRASSE. The buildings have to be refurbished to fit the needs of the arrivals. The talk was about the need to adapt the large apartments –each of a size between 120 and 140 sq.meters (approx. 1,300 to 1,500 sq.ft.) –dividing them into much smaller units. This will require that some larger recreational rooms and common kitchens be installed, as well as containers with sanitary facilities. Cost: 1.3 mio. Euros (roughly 1.5 mio. U.S. Dollars).

the HOUSING AREA FIN'THER LANDSTRASSE function only as an intermediate stop for the refugees before they will be assigned to other cities, towns and hamlets for final settlement. And Kurt Merkator, Head of Social Services, continued: Dividing the habitations into smaller units will therefore allow about 300 refugees to move in, that is three to four times as many persons as during the time the residences were inhabited by U.S. Armed Forces personnel. One could notice that such an increase in inhabitants did not go down too well with quite a number of the attending citizens. On the oth-

Round Table »Citizens' Information« Panel (left to right:) Franz Ringhoffer, Wohnbau Mainz GmbH [Public Buildings Mainz Corporation]; Sabine Flegel, Borough Mayor of Gonsenheim; Kurt Merkator, Head of Department of Social Services, City of Mainz; Behrouz Asadi, Head of Migrants' Support at the Maltese Order.



Gonsenheim Borough Mayor Sabine Flegel (CDU) wondered whether a refurbishing would be necessary at all: wouldn't the apartments as they are right now be just right for the refugees' extended families about which the media have repeatedly reported? The answer was: First of all, there are no plans to permanently settle refugees in this area. Second, the ones coming in – in fact 80 percent of them will be single young men therefore not with any family. The intention is to have

er hand, originally voiced concerns about potential loss of parking spaces in the narrow streets of Gonsenheim thereby became rather irrelevant.

Costs, And More Costs

HOUSING AREA FIN'THER LANDSTRASSE will be refurbished and managed by Wohnbau Mainz GmbH; the city of Mainz owns the company. Moreover, its chairman is no other than Kurt Merkator, Chief of Social Services of the city of Mainz. The

owner of the real estate, however, is BImA –Bundesanstalt für Immobilienaufgaben [Institute for Federal Real Estate] –which, among other tasks, provides NATO Forces on German soil with suitable land and facilities. BImA agreed to let HOUSING AREA FINThER LANDSTRASSE to the city of Mainz, free of rent for the first five years. Costs for refurbishing the compound and its operating costs, however, will be for account of the city.

One citizen in the audience asked whether the lawns and trees will continue to be cared for; others wanted to know whether the playground and its adjacent grill area will be kept and the area again be made freely accessible. Mr. Merkator had only some vague answers to those questions; obviously, these were points of no immediate concern to the city.

Mr. Franz Ringhoffer, Managing Director of Wohnbau Mainz GmbH, said that the five units earmarked for refugees will be refurbished by 1st December 2015. Before refugees will move in citizens will be able to have a look at the habitations and a chance to talk with support personnel. The motive behind this is that the city will want to show that tax money will not have been excessively used, and at the same time it should diminish any fears about the refugees and give parents the assurance that their children can play again on the playground –despite 300 refugees scheduled to live there.

Choice Real Estate Pieces For Investors

The remaining six town houses are to be rented to German federal employees, after a simple paint job. The plan is that those employees will move in at approximately



the same time as the refugees. This should avoid having buildings stay empty which in the past had led to illegal house occupations and vandalism in some German cities; it will also prevent that the compound will turn into a refugee ghetto.

And then for the rest of the compound, the city is looking for investors: to convert the single-family homes and the villa formerly serving as a U.S. General's residence, and put them on the market. Some restrictions will apply: buildings, if new ones are to be erected in place of the old ones, have to conform to the surrounding residences, also mostly single-family residences. The CDU members of Gonsenheim Borough Council have already been active that this will be implemented; the Borough Council voted six to five that the character and general appearance of HOUSING AREA FINThER LANDSTRASSE must be maintained. It will be interesting to see how the majority-SPD city government of Mainz will react to that. □

Yellow Bag Enclosure in the Housing Area (historical picture) as a sign of German perfection of garbage separation and collection, in an American environment.

The yellow trash bags were put in a specially erected wire enclosure, to be protected from wind gusts, as well as foxes, crows and other small animals.



The »Prime Choice« (called that way because it was in the past the residence of a U.S. General) facing on its left side Max-Planck Street – hidden behind the trees.

Explanation Of Building Laws

Widespread doubts about whether the HOUSING AREA FINTHER LANDSTRASSE 's building character will be preserved were addressed by Prof. Ernst-Rainer Höne, expert in preservation of sites of historical interest in Gonsenheim's Finther Landstraße neighborhood. He in person went from house to house in the neighborhood and distributed a detailed information booklet covering that aspect. When he met people at their home he readily took the time to explain legal ramifications and possible recourses, to ensure the area's preservation status.

In his booklet Prof. Hönes said, among other things: »Not only has Gonsenheim a number of century-old buildings such as the court house dating back to the Renaissance period – it was built in 1615 – but also residences

as early as from the »Gründerzeit« (approximately 1840 through 1873) when many newly moneyed industrial barons wanted to show their cultural refinement by also having sumptuous villas constructed; these can particularly be found in the neighborhood of HOUSING AREA FINTHER LANDSTRASSE Later, in the 1950s, the U.S. American occupation forces took over several lots for their housing area through outright requisition or – later through purchases from Gonsenheim citizens. They constructed new residences which were obviously built according to U.S. building codes requiring incorporation of sufficiently open areas, their building codes being well beyond and above German ones.

However, that also means that at present there are no construction plans left behind which German

authorities could consult and refer to, and be requested to adhere to. Prof. Hönes continued: »We have to consider the plight of refugees, of course, but at the same time need to preserve a time monument witnessing – after overcoming initial hardships – the beginning of German-U.S. American friendship after the end of the War. It must therefore be considered a historical monument to that era. We sincerely hope that the provincial capital of Mainz will agree with Gonsenheim’s draft of preserving these sites of historical interest, as executed by its Borough Council, and to protect them according to § 172 BauGB [law of construction of buildings].«

But now preservation of the historical U.S. American style of the HOUSING AREA FINThER LANDSTRASSE is also endangered by a recently issued federal law authorizing changes to

the building code to allow for lower standards because of the difficult situation created by the influx of the masses of refugees*). From its date of issuance, this new federal law initially will be in effect for five years.

Prof. Hönes criticized that during the Gonsenheim Borough meeting there was no discussion nor was it mentioned at all whether the city of Mainz would invoke that new federal law of lowered building standards also for Gonsenheim’s HOUSING AREA FINThER LANDSTRASSE so that the area can make room for an even greater number of refugees: higher density, more funds from the federal government. □

*) *Until and including 31st December 2019 the laws of § 35, para. 4, sub para. 1 are applicable if the purpose is to provide shelter for refugees or asylum seekers in immediately areal connection of built-up areas within the settlement considered to be according to § 30, para. 1 or § 34. (excerpt, German Federal Law, 2014: Part I, No. 53, issued at Bonn, 25th November 2014)*



In the vicinity a typical villa.

qualitalk qualitalk edited by
Chris Schuth | Max-Planck-Straße 45
55124 Mainz | Germany
phone (+49) 06131 - 476466

www.chris-schuth.de
mail (schnabel-a) chris-schuth.de

October 2015
published four times a year.

Pictures: by the author, if not stated otherwise

ISSN 1615-9667 [Internet]
ISSN 1435-1641 [printed Edition]
German-English Translation by
Dr. Dieter von Jettmar, Vienna (Austria)

qualitalk will be forwarded to registered readers by e-mail and can be downloaded from the internet via www.chris-schuth.de/qtalk_72_en.pdf

Readers not connected to the internet receive the publication by snail mail.

© Chris Schuth

Impressum



Chris Schuth

Photo by Maurice de Chlourigon