

The Grandhotel Cosmopolis Augsburg (Germany)

interviewed by Anna Frech

The Grandhotel Cosmopolis is not a usual hotel. Based on the idea of the Social Sculpture, it accommodates refugees, artists, musicians, and travelers under one and the same roof. Unlike in ordinary asylum seeker homes, this model provides an alternative solution of how refugees can be integrated into social life rather than live completely isolated from society. Susa Gunzner, Susi Weber, and Stef Maldener, members of the artists collective “Kunstkoncontainer” at the Grandhotel Cosmopolis, took their time to answer my questions.

Anna Fech: What started your interest in creating a Social Sculpture with the Grandhotel Cosmopolis?

Kunstcontainer: In the city centre of Augsburg, a former nursing home stood empty. Augsburg is located in southern Germany and has a migration rate of over 40%. The building belongs to the *Diakoniewerk*¹ of Augsburg, and the landlords were already about to negotiate with Swabia’s government to establish a home for asylum seekers, when the idea of Grandhotel Cosmopolis sprang to mind for three young creative people. The concept was based on the local conditions (such as the empty house in the city centre, a lack of affordable artist’s studios, and accommodation for international guests at reasonable prices in Augsburg) but also with the desire for more humane treatment of refugees. Thus, they formulated a vision creating a win-win situation for everybody. However, this vision of “acting together” could only be realized through an astonishing degree of creativity and by involving the social environment. This Social Sculpture, suddenly, manifested itself in the space-time-continuum.

From this initial desire—a more humane interaction with each other—the possibility was given to expand the original community through the support of many different parties: the open mind and heart of the landlords who agreed to participate in this artistic and social experiment the colourful mixed group of artists and creative people, and the support of the friendly-minded city community,

which today forms the heart of the Social Sculpture. It was highly pleasant for us to observe how a constant process of re-defining the location of home has taken place.

AF: Which role does the community play for you within your concept?

KC: Many challenges we were confronted with during the past three years, we have been only able to cope with as a community. Which is not easy sometimes—every member has to balance out his individual versus the collective needs every day.

Very often we ask ourselves: what does unite people from such a heterogeneous group that we have in our house? What does “unity” and “unity in diversity” mean? When we, for example, meet for dinner or work together on a project, the difference between the participants moves to the background. Cultural origins, social status, or the reason why a person stays in the house do not play a role anymore in joint actions and in everyday interactions. It is much more important to share a common idea or event with each other. A hotel guest can leave again tomorrow, a refugee can be deported suddenly; therefore such moments of joint experience and actions are very special and important for us.

AF: From your experience with how artists, refugees, and guests from all over the world interact with each other, do you think there exists a sense of community beyond regional or cultural borders?

KC: The people staying at the Grandhotel Cosmopolis are placed here due to a number of situations. Some of them are here because of their own volition, looking for new ways and experiences and wanting to be involved in projects; others are re-located to this place by the government, because they had to leave their home country and are accommodated in a shared accommodation facility during the time of their asylum procedure; again others are here because they visit the city and take a guestroom in the Grandhotel Cosmopolis. It’s a temporary

home—for whatever reason. However, to experience the feeling of community, to have a conversation, to meet, to build up mutual trust, and to open ourselves up needs time and a basic interest to engage with each other. Otherwise, the different people are only co-existing side-by-side but not living together.

AF: In what way would you like to initiate a change with your Social Sculpture?

KC: Of course, already in the initial concept a different understanding of community was anchored. We were very well aware that the project would create a certain experimental situation regarding the social engagement with refugees. Today, from experience in the house, we recognized that in many situations the prevailing differences between the people are not very much taken into account – but rather the connecting moments. In the sense of the Social Sculpture we are interested more in the characteristics of the individual—also transcultural—that enrich our lives.

AF: What problems are you confronted with within this process of change, and how did you deal with them?

KC: A refugee seeking asylum in Germany is very limited in his/her personal development, and overseen by, for example, the residence restriction and constantly kept in the threat of state repressions. Against this background, it is very difficult to create an atmosphere of real participatory communication and meeting on the same eye level. However, this for us is a basis for living with each other in a supporting community that should provide help in any problematic situation. To compensate for such differences, Wilde 13² was founded, which deals particularly with the problems of the asylum legislation and the associated challenges, on the individual level as well as on the political level.

AF: Do you think something has changed already?

KC: To compare it with other asylum housing facilities, we have quite a low conflict rate among the different ethnic groups encountering each other. We experience a very communicative exchange beyond any language barriers. Also, many of our asylum-seeking guests see themselves as a part of a big family, some of them have been offered a possibility of their own apartments, but preferred to stay in the house. The acceptance within the city society

increased in the meantime, probably also related to the big media echo caused by the project. The artists do not create a stage to act for themselves, but contribute to the society with their practical work, which is very normal in our project. Within this Grandhotel-cosmos, the people participate and contribute to a system that works disconnected from a conventional understanding of labour. This affects not only the artist's works but is expanded on all the other different fields of the project. As a result, a system of values develops, which is marked by self-responsibility and inner necessity.

AF: Do you think the model Grandhotel Cosmopolis might be a trendsetter for the future and will be a source of inspiration for similar projects?

KC: The Grandhotel Cosmopolis has already been called a realized utopia. Several projects in Germany and Europe are interested in our approach and develop similar projects, of course, adjusted and implemented according to the specific local conditions. The idea to change the social organism from its contemporary state of deformation to a more human and worthwhile living shape leads many people to work on their immediate surroundings – being aware of the prevailing and often restricted structures. Instead of losing energy and time in demonstration, which finally highlights rather the differences between the social groups, it is essential to concentrate on the interpersonal exchange and to understand them as such—as humans. The potential lies much more in the individual and local surrounding situation of every individual person and the necessity of becoming personally involved to improve things. In this sense, we would like to quote R. Buckminster Fuller: “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”³

Notes

1 Diakoniewerk is a charity organization of the Protestant Church. The German Diakoniewerk helps to shape the life of the Church and society in Germany.

2 Wilde 13: Volunteers at the Grandhotel Cosmopolis supporting new refugees with regard to official administration work, translation, research, etc., to facilitate their arrival in Augsburg.

3 Niels Bohr and Buckminster Fuller, “It’s Not What You Think...It’s How,” In Possible Futures: Creative Thinking for the Speed of Life, (Lifestage Publications: New York 2008), 15.

