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# GROUP EFFORT

## Participatory Student Building Project

Spinelli, Mannheim, Germany

Atelier U20 and Faculty of Architecture, TU Kaiserslautern

Photography by Yannick Wegner



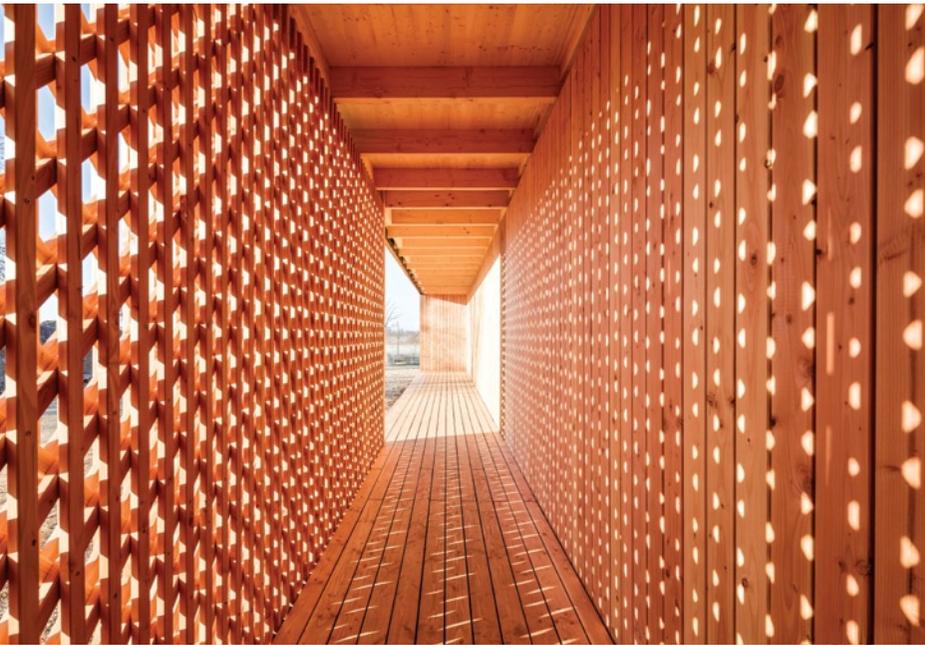
This fine, small timber structure is located at the former Spinelli Barracks in Mannheim, currently a refugee centre, and was conceived and erected with the help of architecture students and faculty from the University of Kaiserslautern. Twenty-five refugees also assisted with the building, which acts as a community centre for the enclave. Local building companies pitched in on the worthy project. It is an excellent example of a modest exercise providing benefits to all involved.

The refugee crisis in Europe is well known, and Germany has been at the centre of efforts to welcome, accommodate and assimilate new arrivals from Syria, Africa and elsewhere. The numbers have become startling, but the country continues to meet the challenge on moral grounds, even if it is a controversial policy.

The project was treated seriously from the outset, with participating students involved from the initial design stages through standard approvals and

permissions phases all the way through to onsite construction. This ensured that as a learning exercise, it would be abundantly useful; it was not to be merely a 'charity' endeavour. The 500sq ft building is an elegant structure that wraps around an open courtyard space that can be used for meetings, events, casual socialising or even performances. It is open and protective at the same time – an apt metaphor for the refugees' situation and their relative good fortune in being within Germany. There is a series of seating nooks incorporated into the timber frame walls, as well as a small workshop, a kiosk, and a rear 'silent garden' area that is contemplative and serene. This fully enclosed space features a lattice wall that screens it from the exterior context, which is itself rather drab. In all, the centre feels not unlike a miniature monastic retreat, a series of spaces that seem to encourage peace of mind.

Because the actual construction phase was limited to a period of six weeks, many of the centre's components were prefabricated offsite and then delivered for erection by the team. The softwood one-storey building is designed on a



structural grid and uses lightweight trusses to span the roofs and brace the walls. The process of construction allowed the refugees to practise their German language skills and, along with the architecture students, to learn a bit about the building process in their new country.

The project would be laudable for its social and pedagogic achievements alone, but the building is genuinely compelling. With very modest means, formally and economically, the centre manages to use plan to create a series of diverse spaces that are useful and pleasing at the same time. Essentially, a thick perimeter wall that holds minor programme (such as seating) turns this way and that to produce spaces inviting human use. These spaces evolve as you move through them, from most open to most enclosed, most public to semi-private. Perhaps this is a metaphor for the journey of the refugees themselves; regardless, in the beneficial ambiguity of spatial definition, this project offers something quite grand.



