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FURNISHING NEW LIVES

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Bellevue di Monaco

Integration, piece by piece. The *Bellevue di Monaco* furniture collection tells the story of how design and humanity came together—and, in passing, reveals a business model of a rather different kind, built on collaboration and solidarity instead of egotism and segregation. Intercultural encounters in the heart of Munich.

Munich, on the corner of Corneliusstrasse and Muellerstrasse. Guests sipping a coffee in the café at *Bellevue di Monaco* are treated to a microcosm of the contrasts that reign in the Bavarian capital. Tourists stroll up to Gaertnerplatz, the square that becomes an open-air arena for the locality in the summer. An open-top Porsche roars past. Young people greet each other effusively, locals and *blow-ins* exchanging warm hugs; the trendy Glockenbach district has recently become a home for migrants. *Bellevue di Monaco* is a five-storey block built in 1958 and now extensively renovated. Each floor is a separate shared apartment housing four refugees, directly overlooking the old heating plant that

was transformed into luxury residences in 2013; apartments in *The Seven*, as the plant is now called, cost around EUR 20,000 per square metre.

But it doesn't have to be that way. *Bellevue di Monaco* is owned by a social cooperative that took out a long-term lease from the City of Munich for the block and two adjacent buildings and has renovated them. Apartments designated as social housing may only be rented at EUR 7 per square metre. *Not a very lucrative prospect for commercial renters*, laughs architect Matthias Marschner, one of the project's initiators. Over three years he and his colleagues worked their way

through the building centimetre by laborious centimetre, renovating windows, wiring and plumbing and re-establishing the aspiration of peaceful coexistence in the centre of booming Munich, the self-styled *cosmopolitan city with a warm heart*.

It all began in 2012 with the threat of demolition. To save the kickabout area behind the Glockenbachwerkstatt cultural and youth centre and protect the encircling residential blocks, leading lights of Munich's cultural scene occupied an empty apartment and demonstrated how easily it could be renovated. The squatters gained plenty of media attention, and even more sympathy. Many Munich citizens agreed with them, keen for the kickabout area to stay and having little understanding for why city-owned properties should stand empty for years before finally being expensively demolished and replaced by modern social housing. Architect Marschner joined the protests. He had a personal connection to the spot; his daughter had attended kindergarten at the Glockenbachwerkstatt. In Marschner's view, *if it really takes 15 years to clear a block of its tenants and then build new social housing, then something's badly wrong*. His intention was to bring about change by helping people to help

themselves, banking on independent initiative and renovation instead of demolition and rebuilding.

And the miracle happened. The city council agreed with the plan and rented the buildings to the newly founded social cooperative, *Bellevue di Monaco*, on a long lease, both parties agreeing over socially responsible renovation as the aim. Hundreds of volunteers joined in. At the time, swelling waves of refugees were pouring into the city as Chancellor Merkel promised, *We can do it!* In 2015 Matthias Weinzierl, co-chair of *Bellevue di Monaco* with Till Hoffmann, summed up the prevailing mood in an interview with *ProAsyl*, announcing, *We want the city centre to be home to a project offering housing for refugees, but much more besides. Admittedly, the buildings here are not very big — they can house 30 or 40 people at the most — so given the overall scale of what's needed, this is a tiny project. But the plan was to include an information café where refugees can get advice, network and make contact with others, as well as workshops and facilities for socio-cultural activities such as a stage. The vision of the social cooperative, as described in its advertising flyer, was to place refugees at the centre of society instead of banishing them to the*

outer reaches of four cities, to industrial estates or isolated locations. A clarion call rejecting intolerance and segregation — and a declaration of war against the Bavarian government as it simultaneously stepped up the rigour of its asylum policy.

Spanning two storeys, the *Bellevue di Monaco* café is now a centre of social encounter and a flagship for change. Four storeys of the block are taken up by housing for refugees; the first floor of the adjacent building contains a professional stage built with assistance from Munich's prestigious Kammer-spiele theatre, and the courtyard has an amphitheatre. There is also a bicycle workshop. In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper, Matthias Weinzierl enthused over the cooperative's *perfect marriage* with the nearby Glockenbachwerkstatt, which helps migrants to find career prospects. 16 groups and charitable organisations in the three buildings supply free assistance for migrants, including advice on asylum claims and employment opportunities, German courses and help with homework. *Bellevue di Monaco* became a showcase project of successful integration, its fame spreading far beyond Munich's borders. In 2018 it was one of 33 initiatives to be nominated for the German Inte-

gration Award. On that occasion Annette Widmann-Mauz, Minister of State and Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration, pointed out that integration was successful where there were places and opportunities for encounter. *And yet places like those are often invisible. The aim of the Integration Award is to honour those positive stories about integration and turn the spotlight on them. This is exactly what has been achieved in the heart of Munich.*

At *Bellevue di Monaco* design is a way of connecting people, never merely an end in itself. Instead of simply buying off-the-peg furniture for the new café, Marschner decided to launch a project in keeping with the Fifties style of the building, designing furniture which could be manufactured by the migrants themselves. He contacted his old school friend, industrial designer Michael Geldmacher, who recalls, *Right from our first meeting, we quickly established that we weren't looking for 'designer pieces'. Instead, we wanted to create furniture within the community that would echo the participative nature of the renovation process. That was where the students at Munich University of Applied Sciences came in. The furniture collection was*

designed over two semesters under the direction of Professor Florian Petri and with assistance from Michael Geldmacher himself. 15 students were involved in the project in the 2016 summer semester. *I really wanted to be part of the project, not only in order to explore the concept of furniture more deeply, but also to give concrete help in solving an acute problem, remembers Katrin Lehmann. Carina Sabbagh adds, I have Syrian roots, so designing furniture for refugees was the right project at the right time for me.*

The starting-point that inspired the collection was the brightly coloured Thonet Cocktail Chair. This cheery little piece was all the

rage in the Fifties with its splayed feet, upholstered sprung seat and curved back picked out with upholstery tacks. But its modern-day design offers far more than a mere update of the classic piece; it enhances and advances the lightness of the original. The new chair has a two-part bentwood back and shell screwed to a tubular steel frame, highlighting its filigree structure. The matching three-cornered table is also a masterpiece of lightness, truncated at its three points and with smooth bevelled edges. The furniture is designed to make an inviting impression and inspire communication, explains Professor Florian Petri. *We aimed to create a feeling of security and transparency for visitors.*

Maurus Reistenthel

Born into a family of entrepreneurs, Reistenthel is a design graduate. While on a sabbatical, he was asked to support Bellevue di Monaco and immediately agreed, welcoming the long-considered opportunity to strike out on a new path. Today he is head of product management in the family company. (Page 149)

Michael Geldmacher

Cycle paths that end in the middle of nowhere are the biggest bugbear of the designer and cycling fan. When Geldmacher's old friend, Matthias Marschner, asked him to help out with chair design, he immediately agreed and introduced design school students to the project, taking the role of coach and enabler.





Mathias Marschner still directs the furniture project, where volunteers and migrants work side by side. The project's *warehouse* is a ground-floor room at *Bellevue di Monaco*, where dozens of chair backs and tubular steel elements lean neatly against the wall next to stacks of seats and table tops. Average of five one-of-a-kind pieces are created in each session by a *close-knit team of eight*, as Marschner explains. The team meets every two weeks; migrants assemble the parts, glue chair legs and produce print stamps. Michael Geldmacher describes them as *the key players: Prince White, Prince Brown, Elviz, General, and all the other workshop members from Nigeria, Syria and other places around the world*. The individual pieces tell stories of arrival in Munich, of their creators and, sometimes, of the distant homelands left behind. One chair back bears the word *Freedom*, another *Tolerance*. The gold chrome-plated tubular steel frames are decorated with stripes and patterns. Every table and every chair passes through three workshops; every two weeks, the pieces are built by volunteers and migrants, painted and decorated with personal elements before receiving their final coat of protective varnish. They become a pictorial record of flight and expulsion, of hope and new beginnings in a foreign land.

The furniture is on sale. Every purchase supports the work of the social cooperative. The *morality of objects* was a core principle at the Ulm School of Design; but this context imbues the synthesis of morality and design with a completely new meaning. The *Bellevue di Monaco* collection is the story of how design and humanity came together—and, in passing, reveals a business model of a rather different kind, built on collaboration and solidarity instead of egotism and segregation. Furniture producer Maurus Reisenthel, Brand Manager at GO IN GmbH—the company founded by his father—also joined the project, as an unpaid volunteer. *I was immediately attracted by the collaborative approach, coupled with the humanitarian and charitable idea of bringing together the efforts and energies of many participants, he recalls. I never considered business reasons when I decided to take part, so I never needed to worry about return on investment.*

So is the project a blueprint for furniture production in the 21st century? Even the optimistic Geldmacher is sceptical, pointing out that the project would be almost impossible to scale up and only functions in this specific setting: *Everyone works here as a volunteer; none of the participants or organisers*

Matthias Marschner

The architect took charge of the building renovations in Müllerstrasse, but also proclaimed his goal of offering the inhabitants new perspectives. The Bellevue di Monaco furniture project has achieved it as a meeting-point for Munich locals and new residents, homeland and abroad, hope and practical training. (Page 148)

earn any money from it. No attempt to describe Bellevue di Monaco can quote money as the key; in this project, money is nothing more than a tool.

The *Bellevue di Monaco* collection was launched in 2016 as a joint project by designers, students, architects and a host of volunteers and migrants, who pass on something of themselves with every piece. *What's most special about it is that it's nothing special, sums up Geldmacher. We never set out to create designer furniture; we wanted furniture that suited Bellevue, that was a response to the Fifties setting and that was comfortable and functional. And so the story of the*

furniture collection becomes part of a bigger story about migration and welcome, loss of home and help that spans continents. Of course there were setbacks, reminisces Geldmacher. But none of them were devastating enough to make us want to abandon the project. At one point we couldn't get the financing together for a website with online shop, and sometimes the workshops were poorly attended. But once you've experienced the fun and enjoyment at the workshops, the thought of giving up and abandoning the project is simply unconscionable. No, they're certainly not quitters. Just people that want to change something. And they already have.