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CUT, CROP,

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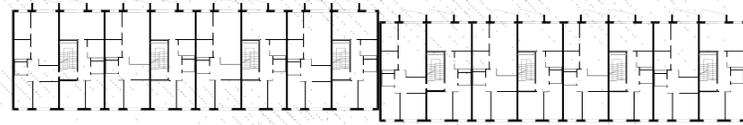
STEFAN FORSTER CHOPS OFF ENTIRE FLOORS OF SOCIAL-HOUSING BLOCKS IN NEED OF RENOVATION.

Text Terri Peters / Photos Jean-Luc Valentin

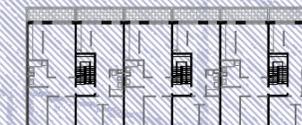
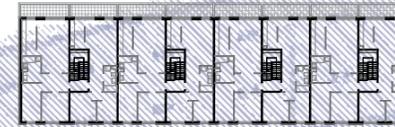
Housing Block 5

Leinefelde / Germany
2006

BEFORE: 80 UNITS
TYPICAL FLOOR



AFTER: 39 UNITS
FIRST FLOOR



The before and after photographs of social-housing blocks that architect Stefan Forster has had his way with look like preoperative and postoperative images advertising architectural plastic surgery. Entire floors have been chopped off, balconies carved from floor plates and building massing sculpted into manageable chunks. But while they may seem to convey an architect's dream of what could happen to ageing, post-war housing stock without the constraints of budget, clients or even gravity, the architect is quick to point out that these are low-cost, user-friendly transformations built according to strict timetables. Forster's office has amassed a portfolio of nine such projects in the past decade, eight of which are in the small town of Leinefelde, Germany.

Forster has converted half-empty housing blocks into modernized family homes and introduced gardens into gloomy concrete housing once burdened by windowless stairwells. 'When I look at a prefab-concrete housing block, I see no sense in tearing it down,' he says. 'I think of all the energy that went into putting it in place to begin with. Often the concrete is in good shape.' Ever the optimist, Forster explains: 'I always look first for potential in these projects.' His renovations inject colour, daylight and utility into grey. Communist-era monotony, while also improving the invisible aspects of housing design including building performance, safety, accessibility and interior modernization.

'In the Communist era, people were connected with these buildings. Living in

them would have been a great honour,' he says. Now, though, many of these projects have become run down; others are vacant and under threat of demolition. Located in Thuringia, part of the former East Germany, Leinefelde is in the southern foothills of the Harz Mountains. With only 15,000 residents, like many towns in the area it has suffered from unemployment, migration and building vacancy since the fall of the wall.

More than a decade ago, local authorities decided to confront the problem head on. Their radical plan was to demolish half the city and rebuild the other half in hopes of providing the town with a new identity. The government consulted with urban planners, sociologists and financial analysts in an attempt to save the best parts of Leinefelde.

Forster has been integral to this team, and his challenge became how to adapt the town's social-housing blocks, to upgrade them to meet normal standards and to make them desirable to today's tenants. 'The initial architecture competition was held in 1996, and we started in 1998,' he says. 'Our first project was finished in time for Expo 2000 in Hanover. It was well received, and we obtained permission to continue.'

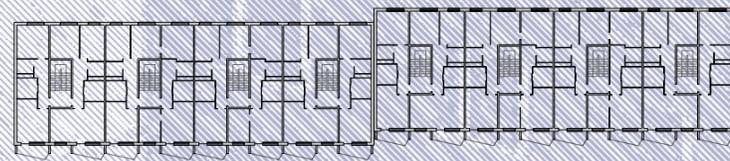
His office has completed one project a year since the work began. 'Now we have done eight in Leinefelde. We start each project by analysing the existing building, looking at problems and pinpointing opportunities,' he says. Speaking to tenants and consulting with them on floor plans is part of the process. 'It's always the same. The kitchens are too small, »



Housing Block 6

Leinefelde / Germany
2007

BEFORE: 57 UNITS
TYPICAL FLOOR.



AFTER: 36 UNITS
FIRST FLOOR



there are no windows, there's not enough living space – and always a need for more balcony space.'

'In a normal social-housing refurbishment, the work involves fitting new windows and adding insulation, new bathrooms and kitchens. But here we've tried to change the actual architecture, the experience of living in these buildings.' Forster cites inspiration from the Garden City movement, with its focus on housing that allowed people to move away from isolated building blocks with little connection to their environment and to live with nature and gardens.

Forster's office has researched the low-rise, prefabricated-concrete building type extensively. He studies where the building can be flexible and how it can be chopped and

changed. 'I always need to know how much we can take away,' he says. 'How can it be pared down to the basic structure and rebuilt?'

The budgets for Forster's social-housing conversions range from €1.1 million (Housing Block 4) to €1.1 million (Housing Block 8). A project takes about two to three years, from design to occupancy. After renovation, the buildings meet current building regulations with an occasional exception: staircases, in terms of daylighting, and acoustics, when a difficult construction permits no improvement. Forster generally adds 14 cm of insulation to the façades to help meet current energy regulations, reducing the original cost of heating to about half. 'The government funded these projects in Leinefelde,' he says. 'Of course, without the funding, we'd have had no money



to transform these buildings. It's cheaper than paying for a new building; that's for sure. In social housing especially, budget is everything. If renovation isn't cheaper than rebuilding, what's the point?'

Housing Block 5, completed in Leinefelde in 2006, bears almost no resemblance to the five-storey building that was the point of departure. Forster begins with an understatement: 'It's different now; we made it shorter.' He says the team 'added long balconies, interpreting traditional typologies, as well as gardens on two sides of the buildings, a new entrance and a new approach from the street. We separated the building from the urban space with the use of thresholds.'

The renovated building has three storeys, with a gap in the middle where housing units

were removed completely. 'We created a distinction between open public spaces and private areas. We built a wall to define ground-floor gardens, which are private, personal areas. People like the idea of "my garden".' Forster raised the ground floor, giving flats on both sides the benefit of private garden space. He used new brick, which he calls 'an expensive material', for the feature wall. He provided the building with a variety of apartment sizes and floor plans, increased living spaces and enlarged top-floor flats with 'patio rooms'; outdoor spaces within the façade. All 39 units are barrier free to allow disabled access. Each has a balcony or a garden.

At the urban scale, this building completes the Poets' Quarter, forming a courtyard with Forster's earlier projects: Housing Blocks 2,

3 and 4. 'It took 15 months to transform this building, and no one could live there during that time. Luckily it was empty, thanks to a previous plan to tear it down.' After a difficult experience with Housing Block 1, he limited his renovation work to housing that's been vacated.

Forster's engagement with Leinefelde began with Housing Block 1. 'The project involved a 120-unit building that we were to convert into an 80-unit complex. It was very, very complicated,' he says. 'People lived there while we did the work, preventing us from removing two storeys that we wanted to eliminate.' Completed in 1999, the building eventually proved a huge success with both residents and client. 'It gave us a lot of confidence. It was a breakthrough. We tried out quite a »

Housing Block 7

Leinefelde / Germany
2004

BEFORE: 150 UNITS
TYPICAL FLOOR.



AFTER: 90 UNITS
FIRST FLOOR



few of our research ideas there, which turned out to be the best way to show the client that these ideas worked.' The result was a series of commissions and a bolder approach to subsequent projects. 'But it was this experience that led to our decision to work only on vacant buildings.'

Housing Block 7 involved the conversion of a 200-m-long building made of precast-concrete slabs into eight separate villas. The existing building – which looked like a dirty, grey, horizontal skyscraper – was dotted with small, identical windows and had no relation to the neglected gardens that surrounded it. Forster immediately saw the need to break up the monotony of the block. He now faced his biggest challenge: the complete transformation of a building type. After removing the

top level of the building, he extracted every second staircase and the adjoining flats, creating big gaps in the building's footprint and allowing the massing to become eight distinct villas. He enlarged the windows and added variation to the façades. Pairs of villas share a courtyard, a letter box and an entrance. New steel balconies oriented to the south and west are 1.8 m deep, like small terraces, and read as part of the façade. The staggered arrangement of these balconies opens each one to the sky.

Completed in 2004, Housing Block 7 cost about €4.8 million. Even before construction began, tenants had applied for all ninety dwellings. During the design phase, they were asked to choose from a series of layouts, and their input on colours and finishes was also taken into account. Private garden zones at

street level were part of a plan to persuade occupants to help maintain outdoor space. Surrounding gardens and other greenery are an aspect of Forster's strategy for introducing thresholds that demarcate private, communal and public areas.

The latest project, Housing Block 8 (2010), is in Halle-Neustadt, which, as the architect explains, is 'a new town built in seven years in a Communist state for 70,000 people. We used many of the same ideas found in our first seven projects: gardens on two sides, new entrances, thresholds between public and private areas, cutouts at upper levels for light and balconies, huge balconies, shorter buildings.'

Looking at photographs of the complex, he says: 'I hate it now, because it was so difficult. This was actually one of our first

transformation projects. It dates back to 2003, but because of political issues we didn't get started until 2008.' Inspired by the drab surroundings, the new palette is bright yellow and off-white, with hints of orange. 'This area is so grey. If you walk around outside, you're surrounded by grittiness. Everything is faded. Even the interiors are dark.'

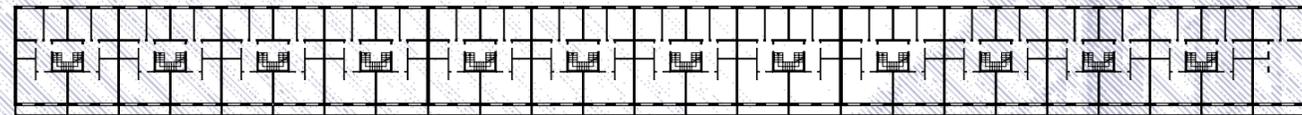
The renovated building is bright and inviting. Replacing the concrete car park are entryways, gardens and communal spaces at ground level. 'In the "before" picture, it's interesting to see that people wanted to park directly in front of their window. That's important to many people; it's what these residents used to care about,' he laughs. What he has given them to enjoy goes beyond a space for the family car. 'People started to be creative »



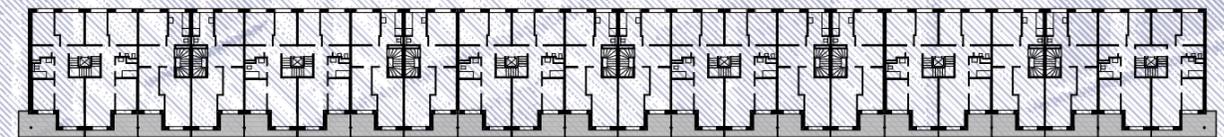
Housing Block 8

Halle-Neustadt / Germany
2010

BEFORE: 125 UNITS
TYPICAL FLOOR.



AFTER: 81 UNITS
FIRST FLOOR.



straightaway, to fix their gardens, to add more colour, to enliven the façades. You see changes throughout the whole area – regeneration, life outside and around the building. If all buildings could change like this, the city would be so different.

Every apartment used to be identical to all the rest. The new design, with units that offer a variety of sizes and layouts, is attracting a different mix of people to the area. The original 125 apartments have been converted into a total of 81 units, with 18 different floor plans, all with large terraces. But the process has been exhausting for Forster. 'This type of project always ends up in discussions about money,' he says. 'Every sentence is about how much something costs. The client has no money to spend. As an architect, you work very hard

and earn almost nothing. It's a problem that faces every architect who does social housing.'

Housing Block 8 will likely be his last social-housing project for some time. 'We've been researching this building type for over ten years. At the moment we're scouting around for more urban projects, like how to resolve city centres that no longer look like they did in the 1920s and '30s, thanks to ugly redesigns realized in the 1950s and '60s.' He is also drawn to low-energy housing. 'I think problems relating to sustainability are even more interesting than prefabrication.'

Forster's difficult but rewarding decade – ten years spent transforming Leinefelde – has influenced architects and clients from around the world who have visited his experiments. As poorly performing post-war housing becomes

an increasingly greater problem throughout Europe, more research and more creative efforts like Forster's are needed to encourage debate and to urge authorities to consider preserving existing buildings – and the legacy of modern architecture – even if it means changing them beyond recognition. Recalling the government's readiness to demolish old, vacant housing blocks, Forster emphasizes that 'now they are completely full, and people want to live there'. Indeed, architecture has the power to give buildings and towns new lives and new identities. «

www.stefan-forster-architekten.de

