



Schader Stiftung

Welcome to Darmstadt
Table Talk with Rocío Guenther
Fellow of the Schader-Residence
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Report: Valeria Elsesser

Introduction

The host of the table talk was Rocío Guenther, Federal Chancellor Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the third Fellow of the Schader Residency in Darmstadt (from September 2023 to March 2024). Previously, Guenther had worked as a journalist and in local government in Darmstadt's sister city San Antonio, Texas.

As part of her Fellowships, Guenther is engaged in a project analyzing local government approaches to the influx of migrants and refugees in the City of Darmstadt in contrast with the City of San Antonio. Her goal is to produce a multimedia journalistic piece that tells the story of both sister cities amidst a global challenge facing governments all over the world. For this purpose, Guenther is conducting in-depth interviews with scholars, government officials, residents, civil society organizations, and individuals within the migrant/refugee community. She is also gathering European Union perspectives on migration by carrying out interviews with different political and civil society actors in Spain. The results of the interviews will be supplemented by current research literature, news articles, audio recordings and photographs.

During the second table talk titled "Welcome to Darmstadt", participants delved into a comprehensive exploration of Darmstadt's multifaceted identity and its various dimensions as a City of Science, a hub for higher education and industry collaboration, its relationship with neighboring cities, its cultural heritage, and the lived experiences of its residents and workers.

City of Science and Arts

Beginning with Darmstadt's designation as the "City of Science", participants analyzed the historical, social, and economic factors that led to this recognition. The discussion illuminated the city's longstanding commitment to scientific advancement, underscored by its diverse scientific institutions (e.g. Fraunhofer, GSI Helmholtzzentrum für Schwerionenforschung, European Space Operations Centre etc.) and interdisciplinary research initiatives. Notably, the inclusion of art as a component of Darmstadt's scientific identity, particularly in projects fostering collaboration between artists and scientists, highlighted the city's innovative approach to integrating artistic expression with scientific inquiry. This interdisciplinary ethos,

coupled with an international outlook, was identified as a key driver of scientific progress in Darmstadt.

The importance of collaboration between higher education institutions and leading companies in Darmstadt's economy was a focal point of discussion. Participants emphasized the necessity of such partnerships in preparing students for the evolving job market and driving economic growth. However, concerns were raised regarding the potential influence of corporate sponsorship on educational and cultural institutions, prompting reflection on the balance between industry engagement and academic integrity.

The significance of cultural heritage, exemplified by Mathildenhöhe's UNESCO World Heritage designation, prompted reflection on the impact of such recognition on Darmstadt's cultural and artistic landscape. While participants celebrated the prestige associated with UNESCO status, questions were raised about the accessibility and practical implications of heritage sites, highlighting the complexities of balancing preservation with urban development.

Between Collaboration and Competition

The relationship between Darmstadt and its neighboring city Frankfurt on the Main as well as the whole Rhine Main Area / Greater Frankfurt Area was examined through the lens of collaboration and competition. While cooperative efforts in higher education were acknowledged, participants noted the challenges posed by Frankfurt's economic dominance and the need for Darmstadt to assert its unique identity. Guenther noted that similarly to the Texas Triangle, the focus should be on promoting the region rather than individual cities. This would primarily benefit Darmstadt, whose attractiveness is at least partially dependent on Frankfurt's charisma. The tension between attracting resources and preserving local character emerged as a central theme, reflecting broader debates around urban development and identity.

Why not Darmstadt?

Finally, participants shared personal perspectives on living and working in Darmstadt. The discussion delved into the city's unique identity, exploring its distinctiveness amid its economic, historical, and social landscape. Participants reflected on

the city's pragmatic appeal, acknowledging its role as a hub for employment, education, and scientific advancement. Despite lacking the picturesque charm of neighboring towns like Bad Nauheim or Heidelberg, Darmstadt is celebrated for its "hidden treasures". The conversation also touched on the tension between development and preservation, highlighting the challenge of maintaining the city's character amidst rapid urbanization. As property prices rise due to its proximity to Frankfurt, Darmstadt grapples with the balance between growth and affordability. Yet, its allure lies in its vibrant public spaces, surrounded by lush greenery, and its manageable size, fostering a sense of community and opportunity. Ultimately, participants shared a consensus on the city's appeal, praising its blend of livability, professional opportunities, and liberal ethos.

Overall, the seminar provided a nuanced exploration of Darmstadt's identity and dynamics, revealing its strengths, challenges, and aspirations as a City of Science and Art. Through interdisciplinary dialogue and critical reflection, participants gained valuable insights into the complexities of urban life and the interplay between science, industry, culture, and community in shaping the city's trajectory.