

Dear Ms Sassen,

in an interview with the German daily 'tageszeitung' published on May, 25th 2013 you answered extensively with regards to your position as curator of this year's international building exhibition (IBA) currently underway in the Hamburg borough of Wilhelmsburg. Throughout the interview you emphasize that there can be no talk of 'gentrification'. You virtually refrain from corroborating your statement with hard facts beyond your repeated statement that the managers of the building exhibition show 'goodwill' and that it is their 'declared aim' to not drive out the 'local residents'.

We were quite surprised to read this. Judging by a few of your texts which we have studied, it was our understanding that it is your intention to point out a growing polarization as a result of the development of 'global cities'. In the interview published by the 'Tageszeitung' you point out your experience of Latin American cities, amongst other, and mention that you have seen 'the full brutality of New York's gentrification'. Surely these experiences are significant. However, the situation of people that are evicted from their homes or that have to pay an increasing part of their household income for their rent is not being alleviated by pointing out that it can even be worse elsewhere.

We don't doubt your answer that you've seen much of the world. However, in your role as curator for the building exhibition you obviously seem to have had your eyes closed. A simple research would have shown that since 2000 the rents in our town have risen in a degree overshadowing all other German towns. The developments in Hamburg have even surpassed those of Munich which is well-known for its continuously rising rents. It wouldn't even have been necessary to talk to representatives of the 'right-to-the-city' movement or to our own initiative. The very publications of the IBA assert that rents have risen in Wilhelmsburg comparatively more than in other similarly poor boroughs of Hamburg.

Indeed, new tenants in the boroughs on the islands of the Elbe (Elbinseln), i.e. those where the IBA has developed most of its activities, are faced with rents that have doubled throughout the last decade whilst wages of low-paid workers as well as incomes of the unemployed have remained stagnant. In our view it is cynical at best to call this an 'upgrade without displacement' while at the same time referring to 'Latin America' as a negative example.

In our view there is an undeniable relation between these developments and the IBA. The IBA must be considered a strategic instrument which is intended to improve the image of the borough not just by means of the newly erected buildings but also beyond those as part of the Hamburg Senate's campaigns 'Growing City' (Wachsende Stadt) and the envisioned 'Bridging of the Elbe' (Sprung über die Elbe).

We assume you might agree with us when we say that an improved image has repercussions for the housing market and we are therefore surprised to find that an 'upgrade without displacement' is sufficient in itself to not be looking more closely at local developments. The project you refer to, i.e. the so-called 'Global Neighbourhood' (Weltquartier), comprises flats that have been substantially refurbished. During the refurbishment phase the majority of the residents were relocated to other flats. An unknown number of tenants returned into the as yet unfinished project. These tenants receive new contracts which, according to our information, oblige them to pay up to 20% more for their basic rent as compared to the old contracts. Claiming, as you do, that it is only to do about 'a few cents more' clearly shows a lack of information about the borough's current situation on your part. Additionally, tenants have to pay higher rents because of the enlarged flats. Contrary to your claim many tenants initially refused to have their contracts rescinded. This in itself was a strong pressure tool which considerably slowed down the construction process and may have prompted the SAGA/GWG to make more concessions with regards to compensation, provision of funds for removals and the tenants' right to return to their flats.

This development has a lot to do with the tenants' attentiveness and their self-organization and nothing with 'participation' as there has been no participation of the tenants in the redevelopment of their borough

whatsoever, may the landlords and the IBA representatives claim whatever they wish to. Whether or not the development of the 'Global Neighbourhood' will result in displacements cannot finally be ascertained as of today. This is, of course, no surprise in gentrification processes which take place over years or maybe even decades. However, the numbers you give in your interview seem to be completely unfounded in our view. Not even the IBA has published them anywhere.

The interview's headline runs 'We have protected the people' and you thus provide a legitimation for the city's urban development schemes in general and more specifically for its realization in Wilhelmsburg while at the same time delegitimizing the critics by mentioning 'young people from the anti-gentrification movement' whose arguments supposedly are not well-founded. In our view your interview makes your stance as a critical scientist incredible. Given that rents are rising all across the market these newly constructed IBA buildings hardly provide a protection: the basic rent for flats in these buildings is three times as high as it was in Wilhelmsburg ten years ago. And nobody will earnestly suppose that the residents of a working-class neighbourhood characterized by high rates of unemployment, labour migration and low-paid jobs will have an opportunity to move to the newly erected high-priced owner-occupied flats in other boroughs.

Have you had a chance to talk to the inhabitants of the Korallus neighbourhood (Korallusviertel) which are obliged by the real estate corporation GAGFAH to pay ever rising rents for continuously deteriorating flats? And have you had the chance to speak with at least one tenant of the 'Global Neighbourhood'? In our view critical science is characterized by taking sides for these very people. You, however, are taking sides exclusively with the officials of the building exhibition. Critical Science must act truthfully with regards to facts. However, you have not provided any evidence for your claims. It remains incomprehensible to us why a critical urban sociologist simply ignores obvious policies meant to attract so-called middle-class tenants or rent rises resulting from a symbolical upgrading and talks of an 'upgrade without displacement' without providing any evidence whatsoever. It is similarly incomprehensible to us why a renowned urban sociologist shows no intention to at least keep a minimal critical distance to development projects she is invited to participate in.

Given that the idea of critical science is still of importance to us and given that we hope to establish a communication on urban development projects in Wilhelmsburg and the Veddel we encourage a dispute beyond allegiances and third-party funding in the hope of opening up spaces where neoliberal urban development projects can be named as such. In this sense we hope for a lively discussion on urban development in the global cities of the Global North and for a science that becomes less complicit in urban development strategies, thereby making it less complicit in enforcing exclusion processes that are being criticized elsewhere.

We would very much appreciate a response to the following address: aku-wilhelmsburg@riseup.net.

Arbeitskreis Umstrukturierung Wilhelmsburg

This open letter is supported by other initiatives, who are part of the right to the city network in Hamburg: Avanti – Projekt undogmatische Linke, BUKO-Arbeitsschwerpunkt Stadt Raum Hamburg, Centro Sociale, Gängeviertel Hamburg, Keimzelle Hamburg

The original interview in the tageszeitung is to be found here: <https://www.taz.de/l116970/>

More information about the developments in Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg: <http://akuwilhelmsburg.blogspot.eu/>