

Cultural Activities for Refugees

# TRAINING THE “SOCIAL MUSCLES”

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“Social Muscle Club” participants are given insights into foreign cultures; | Photo (detail): © the photographers

**Be it cookery, music or a foreign language: refugees can give people in their host countries an insight into foreign cultures. Many projects in Germany are designed to engage refugees in cultural activities.**

Sport is good for you, keeps you fit and makes your body strong. So if you want to build up your muscles, you go jogging or swimming, or play football perhaps. But how are you supposed to train your “social muscles” – the “muscles” you require to get to know strangers despite feelings of shyness and insecurity? People are increasingly asking this question now that so many people have sought refuge in Germany – the majority of them from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. And so more and more art and cultural projects are aimed at building bridges between refugees and the local population.

The initiators of the “Social Muscle Club” (SMC) have even developed a training programme specifically for this purpose. Without any pressure or formal constraints, SMC participants are encouraged to get to know strangers from their own country as well as refugees from elsewhere, in a fun and relaxed setting.

## GIVE AND TAKE

Roughly every two months, the SMC transforms the Sophiensæle in Berlin into a ballroom decked out as if for a wild wedding reception. On the stage, musicians, singers and performers support the training session – and are now able to do so in three languages: German, English and Arabic. This is because the team, which was established in 2012, has grown to include many new Berliners from abroad. A young man from Syria is now the MC, while the culinary delicacies on offer were prepared by a Syrian couple – many of those attending the event come from countries ravaged by war.

The concept of the SMC could not be simpler: each guest is seated at a table next to someone they do not know and notes down on a piece of paper one thing they want and one thing they could give. Things like “Offer an evening of Syrian cooking” or “Can give a crash course in overtone singing” meet with wishes such as “Looking for a strawberry plant for my balcony” or “Would like to have a German lesson”. If one of the people at the table wishes to fulfil a wish or accept an offer, there is a “match” – and two complete strangers end up swapping phone numbers. In a matter of hours, people from all over the world get to know one another, and it is irrelevant who is a refugee and who is not.

## AUTHOR

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## LANGUAGES THAT EVERYONE UNDERSTANDS

Mohamad Al Halabi is one of those sitting at a table. Before the evening is finished, the 25-year-old will be whirling across the parquet floor of the Sophiensæle with Syrian and German dancers. “Where I come from, some say that dancing is not for men. And to dance on the street you need a permit from the government”, explains Mohamad, a breakdance pro from the Syrian capital, Damascus. That is why he left his home country even before the civil war. After a difficult journey, he reached Berlin in early 2016, where he came across the SMC at a dance party for refugees – and joined a dance group. “The idea for today’s choreography was integration”, he says. “When dancing you can communicate even without language”.

That ties in with the SMC concept: “Everything is a question of practice – even making contact with strangers”, explains Jill Emerson, a performer from the USA who teamed up with other artists to establish the SMC in a living room before the project moved into the Sophiensæle in 2013. “But we wanted to take the pressure out of social training.” The idea certainly worked during this entertaining evening of give and take, providing opportunities for something which Mohamad sees as his philosophy of life: “share if you care.”

More and more people in the world of art and culture are living according to this philosophy in Germany. The Berlin Mondiale project, which initiates partnerships between cultural institutions and refugee centres, is another example of the sort of fruit this can bear. Since its launch in 2014, it has already put people from 13 refugee housing facilities in Berlin in touch with a university and 13 cultural institutions.

## A CITY MAP HIGHLIGHTING PLACES OF COMMON INTEREST

Within this framework, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) has been opening its doors to refugees from the Haus Leo housing facility in Berlin’s Moabit district ever since the autumn of 2014. “After originally staging workshops with Haus Leo’s children and youngsters, this gradually broke the ice with their parents too, giving rise to all kinds of new suggestions”, explains HKW programme coordinator Leila Haghighat. “In 2015, we jointly came up with an idea that is genuinely helpful: the ‘Arriving in Berlin’ digital city map project that maps out Berlin based on the experiences and requirements of refugees”, says Haghighat.

The map was developed by a core group of four refugees: the Afghan town planner Hamidullah Ehrari, the Syrian businessman Alhadi Aldebs, the Afghan translator Mohammad Yari and the Iranian biotechnologist Farhad Ramazanali. It highlights not only multilingual doctors and advice centres for asylum-seekers, but also flags up police stations – where protection can be sought – and libraries offering free Internet, something that many refugee housing facilities do not provide. Already available in Arabic, Farsi, English and French language versions, the map is to be further developed and supplemented by an app that will also allow it to be used offline. Thus the scope for shared experiences and places of common interest will continue to grow – in line with the philosophy of “share if you care”.

## MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION

The Goethe-Institut provides information on the facets of migration in the modern world and the related discourses and wants to encourage dialogue about this important issue.

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