

Brücken culture-gap

BY DAN MCNICHOL

When maintenance is deferred, infrastructure suffers and service deteriorates.

LAST MONTH I LEFT the United States for Germany. Landing in Berlin I hopped the subway known as the U-Bahn and explored the previously divided capital. Resisting the urge to indulge in the ongoing Oktoberfest in the South, I headed north. Traveling at high speeds to Hamburg, the quick trip of “steel wheels on steel rails” covered 300 kilometers in 90 minutes. We on the train enjoyed a smooth, hands-free ride while out performing 500-horse-power Porsches driven along the nearby Autobahn.

I spent a week in the historic port city, photographing and studying its roads, bridges, and waterways. Today, I am back at home in a state of culture shock and awe. I should have seen it coming.

Prior to leaving the states, I asked my friend Mimi Hall, whose German heritage is heavy, what I should see while in her home country. “Look at the undersides of the bridges—they’re beautiful,” the globetrotter said before driving her point home, “They’re not like they are [in America]: dirty, rusty and falling down on you. There is a dignity to these bridges.” Mimi knows little about engineering but gushed about her motherland’s bridgework.

True to Mimi’s words, the undersides of the bridges—a.k.a. “brücken”—I examined were impressive; even beautiful. They were freshly painted and free of corrosion. They were often outfitted with nets to keep pigeons and their droppings from corroding and weighing down supporting structures (guano weighs about 20 pounds per cubic ft). Transit trains sliced through densely populated neighborhoods with a blurry swoosh, not a shaking and rattling like so many of our antique transit systems. Transportation centers of all modes were clean and buzzing with riders as well as shoppers (they act as community shopping centers and transit depots). However, the entire infrastructure was not freely accessible: tolls on public toilets were about a buck a pass.

On one of my last nights, I sat next to a table of young German professionals performing a bit of company bonding over dinner and “bier.” The group of architects and engineers invited me to join them. I dragged my bowl of soup and 0.3 liter of beer (precise people these Germans) and did as they suggested.

Marc Springer, the ringleader, was a full-time professional and part-time professor of urban design. Marc is a fan of Americans, but he worries for us.

His English was as excellent as his travel tales long. Marc said he was in New Orleans before the levees failed. Avoiding that disaster, he moved on to a story of traveling to one of his favorite cities: “I love Chicago, but there is such a contrast between its world-class skyscrapers and that old train on elevated tracks—what do you call it?” I answered, “The El.” He laughed, “Yes, that piece of history! I couldn’t believe how long it took to get from the airport to the city. I mean it was considerable.” He continued, getting stimulated by the depth to which our infrastructure has sunk. “At first I did not know why everyone was wearing headphones,” saying he thought they were suffering a physical disorder of some sort. “Then, I realized, they were listening to loud music—trying to drown out the noise of the train on the old tracks!” Sadly, he was serious. “And, what about those telegraph wires hanging from, what do you call them, those wooden masts?” Telephone polls, I admitted.

I nearly wept. Instead I ordered two more 0.3 liter beers, one for me and one for Marc. The difference

in our infrastructural behavior is stark. In short: German’s have high expectations. They demand good service from their governmental transportation agencies. Like in the United States, infrastructure in Germany is still seen very much a government matter. What’s different is that the German people understand the need to protect their investments with preventive maintenance. Too often our standards are driven down by deterioration triggered by deferred maintenance.

“Germany did not have the choice but to rebuild almost all its infrastructure after having it destroyed in World War II,” said Marc, adding cold comfort. The reverse point he was making is that America *does* have a choice whether or not it rebuilds. And, that it is to our disadvantage that we do not have to. But, I know I can speak for Marc when I say we must rebuild. **MSC**

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A Hamburg view. When a German friend was asked what one should see in her home country, she said, “Look at the undersides of the bridges—they’re beautiful.”



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