

The Ypsilon Building

An Architectural Y in the Heart of Bayreuth

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When I moved to Bayreuth, I was overwhelmed by the city's eagerness to offer directions to the Y-House at many crossroads. I thought, what an interesting way to name a "Frauenhaus", a women's shelter. But the extensive signposts to the Y-house, also made me get distressed: I wondered, is it that bad in Bayreuth? I know that almost every day in Germany, a woman is murdered. The numbers are rising rapidly. In 2022, there were 155 cases; in 2023, already 360. In addition, there were 578 other attempted killings of women or girls in 2024. In 2025, too, on average, two to three women a day are targeted in attacks on their lives. The figure is likely much higher, because many women do not even dare to report the crime. In most cases, the perpetrator is a partner or ex-partner—often also the father, or another male relative or acquaintance. Such femicides, though, are just the tip of the iceberg of domestic violence. And because of it, women are not safe where they should be the safest—at home. Many women have to survive in the midst of serial violence. Some, however, manage to leave and find shelter for themselves and, if applicable, their kids in so called "Frauenhäusern", "women's shelters". In Germany, there are some 400 of such refuges, offering about 7.700 places, which never suffice. So, when seeing all the signs directing at "Y-House", I was startled: Was the good signage a result of domestic violence being particularly high in Bayreuth? Or does the "Frauenhaus" advertise its location, because there is next to no violence against women in Bayreuth and they have, unlike the rest of the country, a lot of free spaces? Maybe, I also thought, the city is just nice and wants to make sure that a woman in need will have no difficulties finding the "Frauenhaus", and thus shelter, easily? Or is it a bad idea telling the violent partners where they could stalk their ex-partners easily?

While I kept turning such thoughts over in my mind for weeks, I also learned that Bayreuth has a high-rise building with a pool at its rooftop. I got

very excited about this and eventually learned that this high-rise is called “Y-house”, because it is shaped like a capital Y. This was when I eventually realised my mistake. I understood that the sign-posted Y-house is not a women’s shelter. It’s a residential building with three extending wings meeting in the centre. There is a Frauenhaus in Bayreuth, one, that is run by the Caritas. It has a capacity for 10 women, and the kids they might have. But this one is situated at Bürgerreuther Straße 9 (and only the internet, and no signs on the crossroads, would tell you this) and it has absolutely nothing to do with the Y-house—and vice versa.

All across the globe, Bayreuth is known as the city of Richard Wagner, as the city of the Wagner-Festspiele. And Wagner came to Bayreuth, because he liked the Prussian architecture that Bayreuth owes to, above all, Markgräfin Wilhelmine. There are still some of the historic villas that also recall that Bayreuth was as dear to Hitler as Wagner. Because of its geographical closeness to Hitler’s capital of the heart, Nürnberg, Bayreuth was also facing numerous bombings in World War II that also destroyed besides the station some of the classic buildings, including the Markgräflische Opernhaus that is listed as world heritage.

After the war, the city was rebuilt in the so-called *Trümmerarchitektur* of the 1950s that was first and foremost pragmatic. The Y-House, constructed between 1972 and 1974, was an architectural intervention into this. From a distance, the Y-house appears to be a grey giant, drawn in the sober architectural language of the 1970s. But if you look more closely, or down from the sky, you can see how shaping the house like the letter Y is all about fluidity, innovation, openness, movement, future. This, however, did not happen in a vacuum, but was part and parcel of Bayreuth’s reinventing itself in the mid-1970s—to which the founding of the University of Bayreuth as one of Germany’s younger universities was a milestone.

The founding of the University of Bayreuth in 1975 was part of a broader reformist movement in higher education policy aimed at structural innovation, societal engagement, and the epistemological reorientation of the West German university system. As a so-called “reform university”, Bayreuth was from the outset committed to questioning entrenched disciplinary boundaries and to establishing new research frameworks that were thematically and methodologically integrate (Mittelstraße 1994). It focused on traditional disciplines, while also embracing innovative teaching and research.

A paradigmatic example of this approach was the early institutionalisation of African Studies as a central profile field. In contrast to many other

German institutions, where African Studies historically remained shaped by colonial and linguistically or anthropologically driven paradigms, Bayreuth deliberately embraced an interdisciplinary orientation from the beginning (Seesemann 2003). The founding of the Iwalewaha in 1981 as a centre for contemporary African art, theory, and practice permanently anchored post-colonial perspectives within the university's institutional structure. Of course, early African Studies have still also reproduced *white* supremacist power structures and epistemologies, and yet there was a pillar for Bayreuth's African Studies becoming a major site of the reconfiguration of African Studies under the visionary leadership of Rüdiger Seesemann.

The university's commitment to be innovative was also reflected architecturally: the university's campus layout was deliberately conceived as a space of proximity and exchange—a structural counter-model to the often anonymous sprawl of traditional universities. The spatial closeness of the departments was intended not only to symbolise but to enable interdisciplinarity in practice. Thus, from its inception, the University of Bayreuth positioned itself not merely as a site of knowledge production but as an epistemic space: a space in which knowledge is reflected in its social embeddedness, critically examined, and productively recomposed.

Eventually, the designs of both the university and the Y-House are closely related in their desires to create new modes of transition and openness. The Y-Building and the Campus university are commitments to modernity and transition. Both offered a response to the city's need for urban attractiveness and density without social constriction (*Nordbayerischer Kurier* 2023).

Also, as a result of having become a city with a university, Bayreuth was growing and the Y-Building offered a response to this, too. Today, nearly 400 apartments span 18 floors, along with that rooftop indoor pool, a sauna, a small row of shops, doctors' offices, a hair salon, and an engineering firm. Between 2005 and 2012, the house was renovated—energy-efficient upgrades, new windows, a fresh façade color.

At its peak, more than 800 people lived under this single roof. Today, less people share this space, but the spirit of a transgenerational home remains. Long-time retirees live alongside young students, newcomers beside those who were already there for the topping-out ceremony of the Y-House (Schönbauer 2018). One of the most early tenants remembers: "Back then we were young and curious. I liked the sense of newness, of urbanity... The indoor pool was our meeting place – we celebrated, swam, laughed there." But the pool is just one of the highlights. It is complemented by the amazing

view that is granted to those living in the upper floors. There, one can see far beyond Bayreuth, all the way to the Fichtel Mountains. “You get the feeling of hovering above the city – and at the same time being right in the middle of it.” (*Nordbayerischer Kurier* 2023)

Indeed, like any other house, it is more than a place to live in. It’s a home to people and thus to their stories, too. One of them is mine. The other day, I went to the playing ground in front of the building. A father was playing with his child and then decided that it would be time to go upstairs. The child started what many 3 year-olds love the most: asking the Why-question. “Why do we have to go home?” – “Because it’s late!” – “Why is it that late?” – “Because we have been awake for so many hours!” – “Why do we need to sleep, Papa?” – “Because our body . . .” – This went on for a while, until the father repeated: “We have to go home now.” When the child responded, once again, with their sweet “why”, the father seemed ready to play his last card: “Because the Y has a long tail.” The child, seemingly startled in the light of this swift Joker, stopped asking and started to enter the Y-house via one of its long tails. Maybe the child already knows that the house they live in looks like a Y.

References

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