Counterpreservation

Sandler, Daniela

Published by Cornell University Press

Sandler, Daniela.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/49329
Living Projects

Collective Housing, Alternative Culture, and Spaces of Resistance

In the trendy Prenzlauer Berg neighborhood circa 2004, amid a profusion of graffiti and tags, a stenciled slogan proclaimed: “Der Prenzlauer Berg sagt: man kann alles kaufen” (fig. 2). The slogan was printed on sidewalks and walls throughout the neighborhood. The sentence can be translated as “The Prenzlauer Berg says: Everything can be bought.” Formerly part of East Berlin, and therefore outside of the private real estate market before unification, the district of Prenzlauer Berg has been overhauled by a flurry of investment, development, and commerce since 1989. Apartment buildings that had been property of the East German state were turned over to their legal owners and, more often than not, subsequently purchased by developers and put on the market as condos, office space, or upscale rentals. Hip and fashionable destination areas developed, such as Kollwitzplatz, a leafy square surrounded by stately apartment buildings. Designer shops selling clothes, furniture, stationery, and other consumer goods popped up alongside new restaurants, cafés, bars, grocery stores, and an organic public market. A shopping mall, the Schönhauser Allee Arkaden, was built near one of the area’s

main subway stations in 1999.\textsuperscript{2} If the initial post-Wall liveliness of Prenzlauer Berg had been due to the festive alternative culture of squats, parties, and nightclubs, the area soon was taken over by a more diverse public—from hipsters to yuppies (to use a term often heard locally), from tourists to families with young children.

The stenciled slogan alludes to this transformation. “Everything can be bought”: buildings, common spaces, the merchandise for sale in the new shop windows, and, metonymically, the whole neighborhood. The slogan, as part of an active local graffiti output, can be read as a critical voice representing those who were displaced by the new developments: the squatters and their communities, the students and artists who enjoyed low rents immediately after unification, the East German citizens who had lived in the area for decades before the fall of the Wall (including pensioners, artists, and dissidents). The statement can be understood as bemoaning commercialism and consumerism in general, and the commodification of urban space in particular. The words have a dark ring to them; if “everything” (spaces,

cultural practices, communities, objects) can be bought, something is lost in the process of buying. Buying means not only acquisition, but also loss. At the same time the statement has a hint of sarcasm, pointing at those who believe they may belong in an alternative scene by buying into it: even the hipness of Prenzlauer Berg is for sale.

But the voice behind this deceptively simple stencil is not only the assumed critical voice of displaced social groups. It is also, and explicitly, the voice of the neighborhood: “The Prenzlauer Berg says.” This voice inscribes itself as an intrinsic identity, not a transient one (as a person or a group might be), as if the neighborhood were a stolid witness to transformations in time. More than that—Prenzlauer Berg figures in the statement as an oracle. Just as an ancient Greek priestess, this modern-day oracle discloses hidden truths and reveals prophecies: all is for sale, including the vibrancy of an alternative culture that, once reified, can be consumed more or less voyeuristically. Inevitably, as the slogan prophesies, everything—even the whole neighborhood—is sold. The gravitas of the slogan (its curt, serious, almost cryptic delivery; the finality of its declaration) also builds on the myth of the “legendary Prenzlauer Berg,” which, before the fall of the Wall, was a site of political activism and bohemia, clandestine art galleries and subversive salons, lively corner Kneipe (bars) and reputedly crazy parties. After 1989, this myth was compounded by the effervescent Wende years—the period of transition from the end of the GDR to the early phase of unification. At the time, Prenzlauer Berg became a hub for squatting, alternative art projects, and a vibrant nightlife. To this day, the myth is continually evoked in publications and walking tours that take visitors along the sites of the “wild years” of the GDR. It is this legendary, venerable, and elusive Prenzlauer Berg that announces its own defacement through the seemingly ineluctable urban, social, and economic processes that the fall of the Wall and German unification set in motion.

This particular stencil speaks a truth that is by now obvious, not only because the gentrification of Prenzlauer Berg is glaring and extensive, but also because gentrification as an urban process in general has been a hallmark of “contemporary global


4. The word Wende means “turn” and evokes the social, political, cultural, and material transformations that accompanied the end of the Socialist regime and the reknitting of the two Germanys after forty-five years of division. The periodization of the Wende is not clear-cut. While some see the fall of the Wall in 1989 as the defining moment of change, others argue that the change had started a few years earlier in East Germany. Some circumscribe the Wende to the years 1989 and 1990, and others consider that the period extended into the mid-1990s. See Inge Stephan and Alexandra Tacke, eds., Nachbilder der Wende (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau, 2008); Bill Niven and J. K. A. Thomaneck, eds., Dividing and Uniting Germany (London: Routledge, 2001).

urbanism” since at least the 1980s. Gentrification is hardly a surprise anymore, but this does not make it any less fraught with conflict and opposition. The stencil is also interesting for more than its revelation. It suggests a mode of engaging with the city in the public sphere that opens up spaces for communication, even if the dialogue is truncated. The stencil both verbalizes and makes visible a perception otherwise shared and discussed only within the limits of specific, private or semi-private circles (not only the circles of squatters or students or former GDR citizens, but also the circles of academics, urban planners, and activists). Through this opening up, the stencil “makes the city speak”—an idea that Rosalyn Deutsche explores in her essay “Reasonable Urbanism.” Deutsche sees the possibility that a city may “speak for those with no voice of their own, even . . . in defense of their rights.”

In her essay, the city speaks through ekphrasis (the literary description of a work of art) and prosopopoeia (the figure of speech that gives voice to inanimate things):

> Among the silent, immobile objects that can be brought to life and lent a voice through ekphrasis and prosopopoeia are the things of the city—buildings, monuments, streets, parks and the built environment as a whole.

The stencil that gives voice to the neighborhood is a kind of skewed prosopopoeia. It erases “human” authorship by ascribing the statement to Prenzlauer Berg; in doing so, it allows the whole neighborhood to speak as both an imagined place (the idea of Prenzlauer Berg, its identity) and concrete sites (the places where the graffiti was stenciled are actual points of inscription and iteration).

This mode of “urban speech” is not exclusive to graffiti; it is also a common strategy of activists, squats, and cultural projects, widely used in Berlin since the postwar era. In this tradition, which continued after the fall of the Wall, the façades of buildings are treated as manifestos. Banners and posters with political and countercultural messages hang from the façades; the large lettering of these messages is visible from a distance, readable from the other side of the street or from inside a passing car or bus, and easily propagated in photographs and videos. The banners blur the boundaries between public and private, between text and architecture, between a building as a place to live and as a support for artistic or political views. They turn otherwise laconic structures into eloquent, loud participants in open-ended dialogues. These dialogues can be potentially carried out by any passerby,

8. Ibid., 188.
any fellow city-dweller, or even any reader or viewer who might see the messages in a newspaper, TV broadcast, or online social media. The perspectives and agendas of graffiti artists, activists, and squatters model a powerful form of collective communication—a public sphere in the age of digital reproduction, carved out in the interface between the space of the street and the space of the private building. Such communication points the way to a more participatory and involved polity, inseparable from the urban and architectural spaces it inhabits. Architecture itself, resignified, becomes more than an object of aesthetic enjoyment, connoisseurship, or preservation; more than a utilitarian means to shelter or comfort; and more than a backdrop. It is this socially energized architecture, inseparable from the agents who occupy and transform it, that is the subject of this chapter.

Living Projects

This chapter focuses on Hausprojekte, or “living projects.” Hausprojekte are the most prolific category of counterpreservation, in terms of number of examples. They embrace and deploy architectural decay for sociopolitical goals related to affordable housing, diversity, and personal experimentation. In this chapter, Hausprojekte are examined through the focused discussion of two case studies: the KA 86 and Tuntenhaus (considered together, as they are both in the same building), and the Köpi. As with any such selection, the case studies typify the category in general, while also at the same time presenting unique characteristics. So this chapter considers both Hausprojekte in the plural—as a broad social movement that illuminates important aspects of counterpreservation—and the singularity of each case study. The KA 86 and Tuntenhaus and the Köpi are important characters in the post-Wall history of Berlin, yet they have figured only fleetingly—if at all—in scholarly studies. This chapter therefore also wishes to contribute by telling their stories, and recognizing their role in shaping urban spaces and debates.

Hausprojekte are residential communities with a political bent, which have had a formative role in many central areas of Berlin since unification. Hausprojekte have a long tradition, dating back to 1970s counterculture and the squatter movement on both sides of the Wall (see the introduction). The fall of the Wall in 1989 refreshed the role and vibrancy of Hausprojekte, as population and property fluxes opened up room for their proliferation. Related to squats and communes, but not always identical to them, Hausprojekte boomed in the early 1990s, and were gradually curbed by police and legal actions, gentrification, and official urban policies. They represent a crucial moment in the construction of the New Berlin, as the revamped capital has been called, and continue to shape the cityscape and urban discussions.

Here, I analyze Hausprojekte as sites of socially produced space as defined by Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau. However, the present work is not a social history. I take the architecture of these sites seriously—their materiality, the choices made in the configuration and refurbishment of their spaces, their visual
appearance, their relationship to the immediate and not-so-immediate urban context. Hausprojekte represent alternative ways of treating historical buildings, in line with the concept of counterpreservation. They are also an example of guerrilla or insurgent urbanism: the creation of meaningful urban spaces outside of official plans, often with improvised means and limited duration.\(^\text{10}\) The instability of Hausprojekte, which is both social and architectural, is not a shortcoming but rather a crucial condition for their role as counterpoints to an increasingly gentrified, globalized Berlin—a city that is relinquishing precisely the kind of free, noncommercial, experimental urban spaces that made it so unique since the postwar era and well after unification.\(^\text{11}\)

The word Hausprojekt describes communal living arrangements where the residents are joined not only by the necessity to cohabitate, but also by the desire to create a cooperative way of life outside of mainstream forms of rented apartments, condos, or single-family houses. The word Projekt connotes the proactive, constructive, and sometimes utopian character of these communities. A “project” implies an impulse to create, to propose, and to display. Hausprojekte attempt to forge and maintain a set of social relations realized in space and time; they are oriented both toward their urban context as dissonant enclaves, and toward the future as new, possible models. They may also be read as utopias insofar as they create spaces of self-determined living conditions that are different from the social norm.\(^\text{12}\)

Germany has a strong tradition of such communal and alternative living situations. They are also known by other words, each with a slightly different meaning: Wohnprojekte (residential projects), the ubiquitous Wohngemeinschaften (residential communities, known by the acronym WG, which are house-sharing and roommate arrangements), and Kommunen (communes, which are more overtly political and collective).\(^\text{13}\) These living communities encompass a wide range of ages, life stages, family situations, professions, and socioeconomic conditions. Today, Wohngemeinschaften—the most common type of collective living—do not necessarily correspond to cooperative political goals, but can be formed simply for financial or social reasons. At the start, however, Wohngemeinschaften stemmed from revolutionary and critical positions, and were the forebears of contemporary Hausprojekte. As

---

\(^{\text{10}}\) See the introduction, note 2.


Hartmut Häußermann and Walter Siebel put it in their comprehensive study of living arrangements in Germany,

Wohngemeinschaften entered public consciousness as a special revolutionary development of the student revolts in the second half of the 1960s. Wohngemeinschaften are the sole new type of household consciously developed from a political perspective against the dominant lifestyles and residential forms of the “repressive” bourgeois nuclear family. They were created, and theoretically grounded, with social-revolutionary intentions: de-individualization of lifestyles, collective economy, and collective political engagement.14

Although this description might not fully apply anymore to the majority of Wohngemeinschaften in Germany, it does apply almost to the letter to Hausprojekte, which can be understood as the heirs of the original residential communities, updated to the context and political issues of the twenty-first century: gentrification, globalization, neoliberalism, and the loss of social welfare.

In Berlin, the countercultural and hippie movements in the 1960s and 1970s created Wohngemeinschaften and Hausprojekte in particular neighborhoods, forming niches in the city where these communities shaped social relations, street life, and the cityscape. In East Berlin, Hausprojekte flourished in the neighborhood of Prenzlauer Berg, inhabited not only by artists, musicians, and students, but also by political dissidents.15 In West Berlin, these communities were concentrated in the district of Kreuzberg, a self-fashioned haven for people who did not agree with West Germany’s sociopolitical and economic regime—from leftist radicals to punks, from army-service objectors to students and artists.16 There were Hausprojekte in other neighborhoods as well, such as the western district of Schöneberg, long associated with gay culture and bohemian lifestyles.17 Many communities were closely related to the Autonomen movement.18 Autonomen, or “autonomists,” are political militants not affiliated with a party or government (hence the term “autonomous”), engaged in leftist and Socialist causes. The origins of Autonomen date back to workers’ movements in Italy in the 1960s, particularly operaismo, but the movement changed depending on location and context. It was particularly strong in Germany, and was first associated with the radical leftist politics of the RAF and Baader-Meinhof groups. Over time it developed into more diverse practices and perspectives, concerned with issues such as feminism, environment, war and international politics,

and—significantly for this book—squatting. *Autonomen* have not only practiced squatting as a way of finding housing, but also as a political gesture in defense of affordable urban living; squatting is thus both a practice and a rallying cry.

After 1989, many new *Hausprojekte* were founded in the former eastern neighborhoods of Mitte, Prenzlauer Berg, and Friedrichshain. Initially, these *Hausprojekte* participated in the euphoric climate of the immediate post-Wall period—a time of informal nightclubs, clandestine parties, and occupied buildings. As of official development plans and gentrification started to spread over these neighborhoods, the *Hausprojekte* acquired more and more the role of antigentrification enclaves, fighting for their right to exist in an increasingly hostile environment, and hoping to spread their messages to the rest of the city.

Although there are variations among *Hausprojekte*, most of them share certain characteristics. These communities have a strong public dimension, even though there are clear limits between insiders and outsiders. They are aware of their impact on the city, and are concerned with larger urban processes such as gentrification, affordable housing, and cultural diversity, as indicated by the political discussions and actions they support, by banners and posters on their façades, and by texts on their self-maintained websites and publications (fig. 3). Most *Hausprojekte* are connected to each other in some way, and they often join forces or demonstrate reciprocal support. Contemporary *Hausprojekte* take advantage of digital communication and social media by maintaining their own websites, where they publicize current events, display images and texts associated with their communities, and list other *Hausprojekte*, art projects, and organizations connected to their goals.

The public face of *Hausprojekte*, either on their façades and banners or in their online presence, is not their whole story—there is also, of course, a private (and socially meaningful) dimension to the lived everyday experiences and spaces of their inhabitants. But the public face endows the *Hausprojekte* with civic significance; that is, it turns these residential spaces into spaces of public political discussion, struggle, and exchange. It is an inflection of the “personal as political,” made powerful through the collective character of each *Hausprojekt*, and through the collaborative network created among them throughout the city. So while in many senses the *Hausprojekte* are a specific phenomenon, restricted to a particular subset of the population (by no means the majority), at the same time they are also bigger than themselves, participating in a broader dialogue about the production and transformation of urban space. They are a vocal and proactive minority whose impact on the city is both symbolic and material. *Hausprojekte* are thus significant for the whole of Berlin, not only as exotic attractions that display the city’s famous alternative scene to potential tourists or voyeurs (although this is undoubtedly and

---

increasingly a part of the experience), but also as agents of urban change and active participants in Berlin’s public sphere and public spaces.

The *Hausprojekte* have other characteristics in common. While their social composition is varied, they often include artists, musicians, students, political activists, punks, anarchists, and *Autonomen*. The population of *Hausprojekte* is usually young, but also includes people of all ages; sometimes families raise children there. They rely on a collective organization structure for managing the community and making decisions about every aspect concerning the use, form, and character of their spaces. Some of the buildings have private apartments, but sometimes the living arrangements are collective (shared kitchens or bathrooms, for example). Courtyards, storefronts, and sidewalks are turned into spaces for formal and informal gatherings. Finally, and crucially, *Hausprojekte* are low-rent spaces. Some of them started as squats, but almost all have been legalized in one way or another. Because of Berlin’s rent control policies and the lack of renovations, their rents have been kept low. This does not mean that *Hausprojekte* are safe from eviction. Often, there are legal disputes involving new landlords who purchased the buildings after unification (and after they were already occupied) and want to renovate the buildings and rent them at more profitable rates. These landlords might refuse to renew rent contracts, and threaten or pressure residents in various ways.

*Hausprojekte* are usually installed in buildings dating from the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, which in German are called *Altbauden*, or “old buildings.” The inhabitants refashion the external and internal

---

**Figure 3.** KA 86 and Tuntenhaus, street façade on Kastanienallee 86 (2003): “We remain different.” © Daniela Sandler
spaces through gradual interventions and accretions. The result is an architectural bricolage, improvised and ephemeral, always changing, reflective of the actions of the inhabitants. On some of these buildings, the paintings and inscriptions resemble urban tattoos. Applied to the surface of street façades, they create a permeable membrane that simultaneously allows for porous communication—drawing attention, alluding to social or cultural meanings—and creates an opaque skin between street and interiors. The eye stops at the colorful paintings and does not go beyond, breaking correlations of form and function; often the windows are obscured by paint, graffiti, and posters. If the façades are sometimes forbidding, the interiors blur relationships of public and private. Common-area walls in entrance halls, doorways, interior corridors, and courtyards become surfaces for communication through posters, banners, images, and notices.

The architectural design of these Hausprojekte does not follow conventional principles of conservation or restoration—most of them look weathered, downright dilapidated, and incorporate improvised new installations and fixtures. At the same time, the treatment of space cannot be misunderstood for vandalism or neglect. These are resourceful communities that have the cultural and material means to alter their living spaces, as demonstrated by the interventions they do carry out (from fixing structural problems to installing awnings, sculptures, and murals). They make a deliberate choice to present these buildings in a state that is rough looking, different from conventionally restored structures, and open to further interventions, keeping the signs of the passage of time without freezing buildings into a single historical point or style.

Hausprojekte use counterpreservation as a marker of their alternative character, and as a response to the widespread programs of urban conservation, architectural revamping, and economic development in Berlin since 1989. This response is twofold. First, counterpreservation is a way to stake claims to buildings or urban areas. By keeping buildings dirty and run-down, local inhabitants produce actual spaces of difference and resistance. Using Lefebvre’s distinction, which will be examined in more detail later in this chapter, these spaces are enclaves of social and cultural practices (use value) in an urban environment increasingly dominated by commercial and speculative transactions (exchange value).20 Because the buildings are run-down, rents are much lower than the ever-rising average for Berlin’s central-eastern neighborhoods.21

Second, counterpreservation is a discursive response to gentrification. Grimy façades and dingy courtyards express dissent from values such as consumerism, globalization, and neoliberalism—values associated with “Disneyfied” areas (con-

---

21. According to a resident of the KA 86 Hausprojekt, the inhabitants are conscious of the fact that if their buildings were to be renovated, their rents would skyrocket. Werner Kernebeck, interview, June 2010.
trolled by private entrepreneurs, kept clean and safe through surveillance, with idealized and smoothed-out backdrops of historical architecture). Given the communicative dimension of Hausprojekte mentioned above, the symbolic allusions evoked by the physical state of their buildings are part and parcel of the way these communities express their political positions in the city. A glancing look at these buildings from outside, even from afar, will suffice to reveal the dissonant and sometimes aggressive stance of their inhabitants toward their urban milieu.

The current state of Hausprojekte is delicate. The last squatting Hausprojekt in the neighborhood of Mitte, the Brunnen 183, was evicted in November 2009. One of the most important and visible Hausprojekte in the district of Friedrichshain, the Liebig 14, was evicted by police in January 2011. There are fewer Hausprojekte than before, and they are being pushed out of the most coveted areas of the city. After the fall of the Wall, there were more than two hundred squats in Berlin, including older squats and newly formed ones. According to the website Berlin Besetzt, which maps Berlin squats geographically and historically, in 2015 there remained about sixty Hausprojekte that had been founded in or after 1990. Many of these do not have guaranteed tenure in their buildings even if they have lease contracts; leases have limited terms, and sometimes new landlords come in with different plans for the building—this will be illustrated in the discussion of the KA 86 and Tuntenhaus and the Köpi below. At the same time, the Hausprojekte continue to be part of Berlin’s unique identity. Berlin’s alternative culture has long been a source of attraction and interest for tourists, new residents, new development, and artistic and intellectual practices. The Hausprojekte not only lend alternative flavor to the image of Berlin, but have also become sites of tourist visitation.

**KA 86 and Tuntenhaus**

The Kastanienallee is one of the main thoroughfares in the district of Prenzlauer Berg, and it is accordingly lined with bustling sidewalk cafés, clothing stores, leafy trees, and bright apartment buildings. The renovated façades brim with

---


23. “Räumung Liebigstraße 14 in Berlin.”

24. The Berlin Besetzt website tracks the foundation date and place of each squat, its eviction or end when applicable, in addition to providing a historical overview and chronology of squatting in Berlin since 1970. The website still identifies these communities as squats even when, as is the case with almost all of the surviving ones, they have been legalized. There are many more than sixty surviving squats today, but most of them were founded in the 1980s and therefore belong in a different period and discussion, since they were for the most part well established by the time of unification. I arrived at the number sixty by counting the post-1990 squats marked on the map. I excluded the Tacheles, which was evicted in 2012. See Berlin Besetzt, http://berlin-besetzt.de/#.
architectural details: crisply restored moldings, neatly coursed masonry, polished railings, columns and pediments, bay windows and balconies. In the middle of the picturesque homogeneity of the area—which can be found in many other European cities—one building stands out (fig. 3). It is, like most of its neighbors, a nineteenth-century building. Unlike its neighbors, its whole façade is a sooty, bumpy gray—the same grime that covered most of the neighborhood under the GDR, when coal heating spewed dark fumes, and façades went uncleaned and unpainted for decades.

On this particular building, the outer layer of paint and stucco has disappeared at points, revealing the bricks underneath in irregular, lighter-colored patches. Some sections of the façade have been turned into small bright murals, with splotches of colorful paint. On the ground floor, and along the right side of the building all the way up to the roof, overgrown plants, bushes, and ivy shoot up as thick greenery during the summer, and as wiry tangled branches in winter. A tall archway, highlighted by a brightly painted rainbow, marks the entrance to the building and to the inner courtyard.

The rainbow leads to the Tuntenhaus, or “Queer House”—a residential project created and maintained by and for gay men. The origins of the community go back to West Berlin in 1981. At that time a group of gay squatters occupied a building in the bohemian West Berlin district of Schöneberg, on Bülowstraße. The squat was dismantled a few years later, and revived in 1990 in East Berlin—first, very briefly, on Mainzer Straße, but the community was evicted along with many other squats on that street after riots and violent confrontations with the police. The Tuntenhaus migrated to the Kastanienallee in May of that year. There the squat was eventually legalized, and the Tuntenhaus members acquired the right to remain in the building as tenants.

The Tuntenhaus occupies the back of the building. The building is known, as is common in Berlin, as Kastanienallee 86, after its street address; other tenants, sympathetic to the philosophy of the Tuntenhaus and similarly organized in a communal Hausprojekt, inhabit the front of the building as the KA 86 Hausprojekt. The Kastanienallee 86 and its neighboring building, the Kastanienallee 85, form


a minicomplex of alternative social and cultural projects besides the Tuntenhaus: the vegetarian Café Morgenrot, the collectively managed Buchladen zur schwan-kenden Weltkugel (Bookstore by the Floating World Globe), a Volxküche (people’s kitchen, a leftist and lay version of a soup kitchen), and a shop that distributes free groceries to low-income citizens.\footnote{Kristina Pezzei, “Kapitalismus stiftet Verwirrung,” \textit{Die Tageszeitung}, November 30, 2010, http://www.taz.de/1/archiv/digitaz/artikel/?ressort=ba&dig=2010\%2F1I\%2F30\%2F0135&cHash=4b85fb138ea619fe3dd394bb0507bd.} For about a year, in 2009 and 2010, there was also a free-goods store, the Umsonstladen, where all things on offer cost nothing and were donated by customers; previously, that space had housed an alternative art gallery.\footnote{Kastanienallee 86, postcard, http://ka86.de/pic/postkarte.pdf; “Umsonstladen schon wie-der von Räumung bedroht,” \textit{Wir bleiben alle!} (blog), August 24, 2010, http://wba.blogspot.de/2010/08/umsonstladen-schoen-wieder-von-raeumung-bdroht\%3B%3C%3Br%6Ch,%22Räumung%20in%20der%20Kastanienallee:%20Polizisten%20als%20Zuschauer,” \textit{Die Tageszeitung}, August 31, 2010, http://www.taz.de/!5136428/; Caspar Schlenk, “Räumung in der Kastanienallee: Polizisten als Zuschauer,” \textit{Die Tageszeitung}, August 31, 2010, http://www.taz.de/!5136428/.} The Umsonstladen was vacated against the desires of the house inhabitants, in an effort by the landlord to reclaim a portion of the building spaces for more profitable uses (the ground and basement floors of the front of the building are especially coveted because they face the street and could house commerce and services). In addition to the social initiatives described above, the inhabitants of the Kastanienallee 86 (including the Tuntenhaus) periodically organize parties, events, and festive demonstrations in the courtyard.

Architecturally, the building on Kastanienallee 86 is typical of its time: built around 1870,\footnote{Denkmaldatenbank, Berlin Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung und Umwelt, OBJ-Dok-Nr.: 09065105, http://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/cgi-bin/hiidaweb/getdoc.pl?DOK_TPL=lda_doc.tpl&KEY=obj\%2009065105.} it contains walk-up apartments distributed around a central court-yard, with some facing the street in the front wing (\textit{Vorderhaus}), and some in the side and back wings (\textit{Seitenflügel} and \textit{Hinterhaus}). It has plenty of the kind of architectural detail that, when restored, makes a building look “historical” and “whimsical,” qualities that garner attention and higher rents. It is also included in the Berlin Preservation Authority monument list as part of the Kastanienallee historic ensemble of apartment buildings. If the building were to be restored, it would blend into its surroundings more or less seamlessly. It would gain physical and stylistic integrity according to conventional criteria for historic preservation, but at the same time the building would lose what makes it unique. The spatial interest of the Kastanienallee 86 lies in the combination of its old, intricate, and decrepit architecture with the juxtaposed, often chaotic, and improvised additions of its current inhabitants.

This symbiosis begins on the street, where the inhabitants have turned the façade into a dynamic, ever-changing surface: the architecture keeps weathering; signs and posters are added, displaced, twisted; plants grow, shed leaves, are cut, grow again; strokes of colorful paint are added here and there. The façade establishes
a contradictory, ambivalent relationship with the street. On the one hand, it announces itself loudly because of its difference, exuberance, and posters; verbal messages in particular mark the building as a site of enunciation and dialogue. It thus beckons, screams, and invites attention. On the other hand, it pushes away outsiders—the passersby, mere onlookers, residents of the gentrified surroundings. It marks itself as different and accessible only to those who belong; its surfaces are dirty, rough, and aggressive, in a kind of punk architectural aesthetic. The entrance, despite the rainbow painted on top, is not clearly marked; it is tucked to the side and partially obscured by overgrown plants. The façade is hard to decipher, except for the messages it delivers with intentional glare in posters and banners. The building is a blemish in the renovated streetscape, a kind of unhealed scar, and as such it commands the eye both to look and to look away.

The rainbow painted on the arch over the passageway that leads to the building and to the courtyard signals the sexual sympathies of the community, and also invites one in. Walking under a rainbow is a camp, even trite proposition; but the use of the architectural molding as a basis for the rainbow outline is formally clever, and the connection between the rainbow and the Tuntenhaus alludes to the widespread use of rainbow flags and stickers to signal gay and gay-friendly spaces. The gesture comes off as both candid and self-conscious. Once past the rainbow, the passageway offers a dark, long space, covered in posters and graffiti, in contrast with the wide openness of the street. The darkness, grime, and confinement of the passageway evoke the innards of an organism. The corridor then transitions into a canopy built by the occupants of the house, finally opening up into the expansive courtyard.

This space, although open and apparently arranged at random, is also picturesquely contrived. Overgrown plants fall down in cascades from the corners of the building, evoking a romantic garden. A large blue chandelier hangs overhead in the middle of the courtyard, with wiry arms that curve downward (fig. 4). The space contains not only the usual furnishings and objects of a typical Berlin courtyard (trash bins, bicycles), but also pieces of domestic furniture: a couch, a round table, chairs. A banner hangs on the back wing of the building, where the Tuntenhaus is located: “Berlin ohne Tuntenhaus is wie ein Garten ohne Blumen”—“Berlin without the Tuntenhaus is like a garden without flowers.” The walls are painted with colorful images, and a black sign with red lit-up lettering announces: “Tuntenhaus—seit 1990” (Tuntenhaus since 1990). In the middle of it all, there is a metal sculpture that looks like a stylized drag queen, with an upright ponytail and exaggerated, full red lips. This roofless space, enclosed on all sides, is the theatrical setting for everyday life—chance encounters, people walking to and from their apartments or having coffee at the table—and for special events and festivities. The whole arrangement has a rough and provisional quality, as an accretion of elements that can continually be added or removed, or left to weather and decay; it is both overfilled and unfinished. Provisionality is not only a hallmark
of the architecture, but also part of the mind-set and lifestyle, at least for some inhabitants.30

On the variegated canvas of the street façade of the Kastanienallee 86, a large-scale message is spelled out in vertical and horizontal words made of thick metal lettering; the letters, affixed individually to the wall, jut out a little from the surface. The letters say: “Kapitalismus normiert, zerstört, tötet” (fig. 5), meaning: “Capitalism normalizes, destroys, murders.” The lettering was put up in protest in 2004, after the building was bought by the current owner (Kastanienallee 86 GbR, which stands for Gesellschaft bürgerlichen Rechts, a type of business partnership), who wants to renovate the building. The new landlord’s plan to renovate the building

would inevitably entail the eviction of the current inhabitants and a steep rise in rents—this has been the norm in the restoration and management of historic properties in the area (as opposed to other possible approaches, which have not been prevalent since unification—say, publicly funded restorations for social-interest housing). The members of the Tuntenhaus and the KA 86 are aware of this, and their treatment of the building’s architecture—from the lettering to the material conditions of surfaces and spaces—is a conscious response to the threat of disappearance through gentrification. Therefore the fragmented, unfinished, and partly decrepit state of the building can be seen as carefully cultivated; it is a marker of difference from gentrified, bourgeois, yuppie surroundings. Additionally in the case of the Tuntenhaus, the difference extends to sexual identity, so that the dissonant, effusive, strange appearance of the building might also be understood as a self-fashioned queer space (the queerness of the space is not limited to its appearance, but extends also to the communal domestic arrangements inside, which do not follow the conventional partition of private spaces and functions of homes inhabited by typical nuclear families).

Before the current lettering was installed, the façade had supported other banners and messages. In the early 2000s, it featured two large banners that displayed similar statements: “We remain different,” and “Against the yuppification of
Prenzlauer Berg and the disappearance of cheap housing.” On the ground floor, over the door lintel on the left side of the building, the words “No SpekuLand” were painted directly on the wall. The combination of political messages with dilapidated background highlights the character of the manifesto: the banners reiterate what the architecture of decrepitude signifies. In the middle of freshly painted façades and cute ice-cream stores, decay is appropriated as a material and symbolic stand against gentrification, allowing the city to speak and suggesting the critical possibilities of counterpreservation. “Wir bleiben anders” means to remain different from the majority in terms of urban politics, sexual identities, and sociocultural practices.

Since unification, rental prices have risen steeply in Prenzlauer Berg, even in dwellings originally designated as social-interest housing and partly subsidized by the government.\footnote{31} When a landlord renovates a building, he or she is allowed to increase the rental price accordingly.\footnote{32} The Kastanienallee 86, having been built before 1918, falls within a highly valued category because of its age and historical details. Because it has not been renovated, the rent is very low for the area. This means that residents have to deal not only with a decrepit façade, but also with communal bathrooms, worn-out materials and fixtures, and coal heating; if something needs maintenance or repairs, the residents have to carry out the work themselves. The housemates do not mind these conditions. Werner Kernebeck, an inhabitant of the Kastanienallee 86, explained to me in an interview that they know their rents would rise if the house were made more comfortable, so they prefer dealing with small discomforts, such as messy coal bricks for winter heating.\footnote{33}

The Kastanienallee 86 should not be taken as a paradigm—nor would the people who live there want it to be. It is an exceptional space for particular groups of people, from the gays who live in the Tuntenhaus to the activists who embrace collective lifestyles in the KA 86. According to Kernebeck, most people who live in the house have some sort of connection to a political project and leftist sympathies. New housemates are usually found through word of mouth, so that there is a certain degree of proximity or validation through friends and acquaintances.\footnote{34} This is a small-scale model of affordable housing, which is not only inclusive in some


\footnote{33. Werner Kernebeck, interview, June 2010.}

\footnote{34. Ibid.}
ways, but also exclusive and restricted to a particular social set. As such, this model is not reproducible, nor could it easily be adapted or co-opted by an institution or a government. But this does not make the project of the Kastanienallee 86 any less valid, or any less important for Berlin. It is precisely because it is a space of exception, social dissonance, and cultural difference that it contributes to the overall diversity of the city. In a neighborhood that is becoming ever more homogenized in its architecture, social and demographic composition, and economic activities, the Kastanienallee 86 offers a critical counterpoint—a physical space for people who dissent from hegemonic views, and a symbolic reminder of the need for diversity.

**Køpi**

The Køpi, sometimes also known as Køpi 137 (after its street address, Köpenicker Straße, number 137), is one of Berlin’s most legendary Hausprojekte, a radical and enduring site of alternative life in Berlin, associated with anarchists, punks, and Autonomen. It has enjoyed somewhat of a cult status as a center of alternative culture since its foundation, with an international reputation beyond Germany (which sometimes, according to a Køpi resident, makes her feel as if she were “living in a bus station,” given the constant stream of guests). It is not only “one of the most important sites where leftist groups and Autonomen carry out organized political work,” but also “an important meeting point for those who seek alternatives to commercial entertainment: . . . concerts and parties, cheap food, affordable theater plays and cultural events.” That is, the Køpi is a site of political activity and sociability, where everyday practices can themselves be read as politically charged counterstatements to mainstream capitalism: for example, a nonhierarchical system for

---

35. The name “Køpi” is often written with different diacritical marks. The Køpi community, in its presentation materials such as posters and web pages, uses the Danish ø. Many publications follow this; however, several other sources, from newspapers to websites, use the German umlaut, which indicates a sound similar to that of the Danish ø. Some sources, especially in languages such as English or Spanish, write Køpi with no diacritics. In my own text, I follow the Køpi community’s spelling; however, when citing sources that use “Køpi” or “Kopi,” I reproduce these sources’ orthography. This explains the variance in spelling found in this text.


decision making, relying on weekly assemblies; shared living quarters and communal meals; and the choice of many residents to live on little to no money.\footnote{38}

The Køpi, self-described as a “living and cultural project” (Wohn- und Kulturprojekt),\footnote{39} is home to about one hundred people—fifty in the building, and fifty in an adjacent Wagenplatz (trailer park).\footnote{40} In addition to the residences, the building includes an active roster of social and cultural venues, all of which are noncommercial, free or affordable at a small cost, and committed to political and social causes. There is a bar; spaces for concerts, parties, and theater performances; a vegan Volksküche; a free movie theater known as Peliculoso, which in nice weather shows movies in the open air; a printing workshop called Kommandatur, which is open to the public for do-it-yourself projects; a gym; music rehearsal spaces; an information shop (Infoladen), which also houses a videoarchive of political movies; and a “self-organized, non-commercial” and “queer-friendly” climbing room (Kletterraum) with vertical and inclined walls and climbing equipment.\footnote{41}

Despite the waves of gentrification lapping from all sides, the area where the Køpi is located—in the neighborhood of Mitte, in what was formerly East Berlin, very close to the border with the western district of Kreuzberg—is relatively undeveloped: many vacant lots with overgrown vegetation, ruined or dilapidated structures, nondescript apartment buildings. The industrial past of the area still shows in warehouses and industrial buildings, not far from the River Spree—which here has not yet been fashioned into scenic waterfront as elsewhere in the city. The street is wider, grayer, grimmer than the ultragentrified centers of Prenzlauer Berg and Mitte. Critic Michael Philips, writing for the Scheinschlag—a magazine devoted to the urban and architectural transformation of the center of Berlin since unification—described the area as a “torn landscape” in 1999; ten years later it still remained rough around the edges.\footnote{42} Philips went on to say that “the sight includes something monumental”: the Køpi building, which looms tall and wide, surrounded by open space and set back from the street.\footnote{43} Philips deems the Køpi “an imposing structure,” a quality that stems as much from the building’s relative isolation—which enhances the perception of its size—as it does from its formal aspects (fig. 6). If this is an “imposing structure,” it is not so in the conventional sense of beauty or self-glorification, but because it is aggressive, uncanny, intimidating. The residents might want it to be so, at least to a certain audience—there are signs warding off tourists and picture-takers, and a plaque that states that the Køpi is
risky business ("Køpi bleibt Risiko-Kapital"). This is the motto of the community, repeated on its website and in demonstration posters, aimed at potential developers.

The building is massive and dark, and fronted by a tall screen of thick, untamed shrubs and trees. On the left side it adjoins a boarded-up, halted construction of cinder blocks covered in graffiti. To the right, its party wall faces an overgrown garden and trailer park. The Gründerzeit façade that runs parallel to the street, separated from the sidewalk by a deep front yard, is symmetrical, with five stories of small rectangular windows and a central internal stairwell. The courtyard is partly enclosed by two short building wings on either side that jut out toward the street, so that the whole structure forms a shallow U footprint. These building wings are really stumps, remnants of a formerly larger structure partly destroyed by bombing.

---

at the end of World War II. On the street side, the walls of these stumps still display the outlines of lost rooms, floor by floor, bookending the central façade surreally.

There used to be a front wing as well, close to the sidewalk, so that the courtyard was enclosed on all sides, and what is currently the main façade was the back wing (Hinterhaus). The front wing was completely destroyed by bombs in February 1945.\textsuperscript{45} The war destruction resulted in a building that ends abruptly, a common sight in the aftermath of the war, but which is rare today. The bombing also carved out the generous setback from the street, atypical for a Gründerzeit building. The surfaces of the building are all severely damaged from the bombing and ensuing decay: most of the molding has fallen, except for a few jagged and isolated remains of pediments, lintels, and corbels; the stucco is also mostly gone, surviving in scattered patches—including a section where the decorative coursing remains (seen on the right side of fig. 6). Most of the exposed surface of this building is now brick, small and gray, of the kind meant to be hidden behind stucco or stone facing. This is the backdrop for an irregular, ever-changing collage of graffiti, banners, and posters with political messages, often related to the Køpi or other Hausprojekte and to issues of urban development, public space, and gentrification. At the entrance gateway to the front yard, under a wiry metal canopy, one of these signs reads: “You are leaving the capitalist sector”—a play on the signs from the postwar era that announced the borders between different occupied zones in Berlin.

Carving out a space for alternative living, as much as possible outside of the constraints of capitalism, means that the Køpi is both a welcoming and free space, and a regulated and exclusive one. The Køpi community is open to Autonomen, sexual minorities, punks, anarchists, musicians; it offers free culture and entertainment because it is opposed to commercialism and capitalism; and it operates on a democratic and egalitarian structure because of the community’s Socialist and anarchist political views.\textsuperscript{46} At the same time, and precisely because it is a space of dissonance and dissent, it excludes by necessity a host of social groups: not only potential developers and authorities, or right-wing groups and individuals, but also anyone directly or indirectly associated with gentrification and commercialism. This might mean tourists, yuppies, hipsters, anyone who is middle class, conventional, or spießig (bourgeois).

The exclusion of these groups relies on spatial cues—from the obvious messages printed on plaques and signs to the ostensibly displayed dilapidation of the building to the makeshift aesthetics of the street fence, the trailer park, and the courtyard. The Køpi represents a radical version of counterpreservation, worn loudly on the streetscape as a sign of identity comparable to tattoos, piercings, dreadlocks, or a


\textsuperscript{46} Blase Rösch, resident of the Køpi, interview by my research assistant Irene Hilden, August 14, 2015.
Mohawk (fig. 7). The combative architectural and urban stance of the Køpi can be better understood with relation to its history, which from the beginning was marked by transgression (trespassing and occupying property), conflict (protesting and resisting eviction), and struggle (fighting for the right to remain in place in an increasingly gentrified environment).
The Hausprojekt began as an occupation or squat (Hausbesetzung), when a group of Autonomen from West Berlin decided to occupy the vacant, semi-destroyed building at Köpenickerstraße 137, on February 23, 1990, in what was then East Berlin, near the border with the western district of Kreuzberg (a center of Autonomen culture and occupations).\textsuperscript{47} The squatters were attracted by, among other things, the many large rooms in the building—the double-height ceilings on the ground floor, and the open spaces in the basement.\textsuperscript{48} The building was then owned by the GDR government. It had been used as a sports facility during the GDR era, which also took advantage of the large spaces (for a bowling alley in the basement, for example), but by 1990 it had been vacated and was slated for demolition.\textsuperscript{49} The building was in precarious shape, dirty, missing windows and other fixtures, with a nonfunctioning infrastructure. It was the squatting and the creation of the Köpi that prevented its demolition. The occupation was peaceful and did not meet with police repression. This was common in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Wall; it was only after unification in October 1990 that the police began to evict squatters systematically and often by force, as this is when it became clear that those buildings would eventually rejoin the private real estate market and be the object of property restitutions. The most controversial thing about the Köpi at the time, according to members of the Köpi community itself, is that it was the first squat inhabited by West Berliners that was located in what was still East Berlin.\textsuperscript{50} This was significant: although at the time the Wall had already fallen down, Germany was not yet officially unified as a political entity; moreover, the cultural and physical differences between East and West Berlin remained strong in the minds of Berliners long after unification. There had been a lively Hausbesetzer scene in East Berlin, just as in West Berlin, but they had been separated by the Wall as much as everyone else in the two Germanys.

As was the case with many Hausprojekte in the early 1990s, the squat was an illegal occupation that took advantage of the no-man’s-land status of buildings caught in between owners in the transition from Socialism to capitalism. While many of these projects were ephemeral, several were granted official status and could survive longer; this was the case of the Köpi. In 1991, through an agreement with the administration of the Mitte district, the squat was legalized, and the occupants were granted some security.\textsuperscript{51} This legalization notwithstanding, the tenure of the Köpi would be challenged several times in the ensuing decades.

\textsuperscript{47} “Köpi-Flugblatt Feb. 97,” Squat.net (archives), February 1997, http://old.squat.net/de/berlin/koepi.html. This document is a collectively written pamphlet recounting the history of the Köpi, published by Squat.net. See also “Köpi-Wohnprojekt: Aufmarsch gegen Zwangsversteigerung.”

\textsuperscript{48} As recounted by Blase Rösch in the documentary \textit{2000 10 Jahre Köpi}, at 3 min. 47 sec.


\textsuperscript{50} “Köpi-Flugblatt Feb. 97.”

\textsuperscript{51} In 1993 the management of the building passed to the Gesellschaft für Stadtentwicklung (GSE), which became responsible for the rental contracts. “Köpi-Flugblatt Feb. 97.”
1995, Volquard Petersen received the property from the government through the property restitution process that marked the liquidation of Socialist holdings, and became the new owner. Petersen founded a company to redevelop the Køpi site, and proposed an ambitious plan under the name Sonnenhöfe (Sun Courtyards). The building would be renovated, the ground floor would be leased as commercial or office space, and the apartments in the upper stories would be sold as condos. The Wagenplatz area would be home to a new structure with offices, condos, and an underground parking lot. These plans were approved by the Mitte administration, but the developer was not able to raise enough money. In the meantime, Petersen threatened the Køpi residents and attempted to evict them, with no success.

As the plans languished, the Køpi Hausprojekt continued to flourish, by then almost a decade after the initial occupation. The Køpi residents refurbished the building to fit their needs, from guest rooms and apartments to the common areas and cultural spaces. According to the residents, “It cost a lot of money and labor to fix and keep the apartments, garden, event venues . . . in usable condition.” The documentary 2000 10 Jahre Køepi registers some of the work that was carried out by the residents themselves—plumbing, resurfacing, cleaning. This underscores the fact that groups like the Køpi community are able and willing to invest energy and resources in renovating and maintaining their living spaces according to their own designs. Although the argument could be made that they have limited resources and must focus on infrastructure before cosmetics, there are many accretions to the building that are not purely functional, such as murals, sculptures, and reliefs (figs. 7 and 8).

If they leave spaces and surfaces in an unfinished, partly decayed, or rough state, this can be interpreted as an intentional choice. Indeed, an interview with Blase Rösch, a longtime resident of the Køpi who often represents the building in public pronouncements, confirms this, as he states that leaving the façade in its dilapidated state (as they had encountered it) was “intentional” (he used the word Absicht). According to Blase, the motivation was “to show that Berlin is a city with a history.” Blase mentions the prewar past of the building as a “dance hall . . . where poor people went dancing,” then brings up its bombing during World War II, explaining: “We believe that people must live with their own past, and for us this includes even Fascism.” The Køpi community engaged this history by organizing an exhibition of Nazi-era objects and fragments found in the building, such as swastika flags, steel helmets, and mail correspondence. The exhibition was temporary, but the counterpreservationist attitude is an enduring way of alluding to this history:

52. Philips, “Räumung einkalkuliert.”
53. “Køpi-Flugblatt Feb. 97.” The Køpi residents add: “In the past seven years, we haven’t received a single Mark from the owner, landlord, the state, or anybody else. AND IT SHOULD REMAIN THIS WAY.” This is further indication of the resistance to institutionalization and public support.
54. 2000 10 Jahre Køepi.
Figure 8. Køpi, interior, stairwell (2009).
© Marcela Faé—Fotostrasse.com
“We wanted to show that . . . World War II had happened, but also that [there were] new people with new aspirations, and that’s why there are all these colorful murals there . . . but that we haven’t forgotten history.” And then he adds: “I believe that the building looks really good.”

Further indirect proof of this intentionality is that other groups have provided models of affordable housing in gentrifying neighborhoods with self-financed, self-built architectural renovations carried out by tenants, not by developers or landlords, restoring buildings in a more conventional way. For example, the Mietgenossenschaft SelbstBau e.G. (a registered cooperative of tenants whose name, SelbstBau, is the equivalent of SelfBuild), founded in 1990 in what was still East Berlin, has developed sustainable and low-cost restorations in Prenzlauer Berg and Friedrichshain, with the motto “Comfortable and affordable dwellings in central areas are not myths.” The buildings renovated by the SelbstBau e.G. look sparkling clean; while the cooperative is also critical of gentrification and profit-oriented urban policies, it does not share the radical political orientation of the Köpi.

The decade came to a close, and soon the Köpi would face a cycle familiar to many Hausprojekte and alternative cultural projects: forced auctions, protests, changes in ownership, unrealized proposals for private development, lack of investors, a period of quiet, more forced auctions . . . A few years after gaining property rights to the site, Petersen fell into debt, owing more than 2 million euros to the Commerzbank; the property was foreclosed, and the Commerzbank became the legal owner. In 1999 the Mitte administration enacted a “compulsory auction” (Zwangsversteigerung) to recover the money that was owed to the bank. The Köpi community and numerous supporters organized protests in public spaces; these protests have themselves become part of the identity, iconography, and memory of the Köpi. Every time there is a protest, journalists delight in describing the protesters’ dark hoods, their anticapitalist posters and rallying cries, and their tactics. Photographs of the protests are reproduced by the Köpi community itself, displayed on its website as part of a selected gallery of images of the Hausprojekt. Side by side with photos of the building and Wagenplatz, the photos of protesters holding banners are presented as a significant element in the Köpi’s self-definition, even if the protests were held elsewhere in the city. This underscores the political dimension of the Hausprojekt—in the self-presentation of the Köpi, it is not enough to live

---

56. Ibid.
60. The photos were shown in a section of the website called “Gallery,” which was visible until early January 2014, when the website was redesigned and the page was taken down.
an alternative lifestyle or inhabit an alternative space if these experiences are not also accompanied by political action. The protests and their imagery (photographs, posters, banners, T-shirts) are another example of the public dialogue with the city I described in connection with the KA 86 and Tuntenhaus. Here, again, the Hausprojekt creates an interface with other, broader audiences, through the occupation of public space and communication via both mainstream and alternative media.

This dialogue, in its different iterations, is not a futile exercise. Some commentators speculate that the difficulty of finding investors willing to buy the Köpi site or to back up development projects there is at least partly related to the resistance they expect to find from the Köpi community and supporters.\footnote{According to the newspaper Tagesspiegel, “Offenbar fürchteten potenzielle Käufer Racheaktionen der Linken” (“It appears that potential buyers fear vengeful reactions from the left”), “Köpi-Wohnprojekt: Aufmarsch gegen Zwangsversteigerung.” See also Sebastian Puschner, “Die Köpi soll für Schuldner bluten,” TAZ.de, February 26, 2013, http://www.taz.de/FREIRAeUME/111787/.


\footnote{“‘Köpi’ für 834.000 Euro zwangsversteigert,” Die Welt, May 8, 2007, http://www.welt.de/regionales/berlin/article858583/Koepi-fuer-834-000-Euro-zwangsversteigert.html.} These statements suggest that, at the very least, the Köpi’s many occupations of urban space—from public demonstrations in the city to the actual occupation of the building—have played a role in securing the community’s existence over two decades. The Scheinschlag writer is sympathetic to the Köpi and other similar projects, but more conservative media outlets sometimes represent the situation with a touch of fearmongering. In the newspaper Die Welt, a short article summarizing the history of squatting in Berlin—where the Köpi is one of two examples mentioned by name—describes the “potential for violence” (Gewaltpotenzial) of squatters, devoting as much as space to these potential dangers as to the history of the scene: “Even if the [squatter] scene is much smaller now, it remains now as ever highly prone to violence. . . . Arson and other forms of property damage are preferred modes of action.”\footnote{”Köpi” für 834.000 Euro zwangsversteigert,” Die Welt, May 8, 2007, http://www.welt.de/regionales/berlin/article858583/Koepi-fuer-834-000-Euro-zwangsversteigert.html.

The police also tend to be overly vigilant whenever there is a demonstration or protest; for example, on the occasion of another forced auction of the building in 2007, there were three hundred police officers at the ready to protect the courtroom—and three hundred protesters, among members or supporters of the Köpi. While it is true that squatters and Autonomen have been associated with violent demonstrations, violence does not represent the modus operandi of the majority of Hausprojekte residents. If the perception of squatters, Autonomen, and residents of alternative Hausprojekte as violent and radical leftists has helped to stave off investor interest and therefore protected the Köpi—as noted above—this
perception also contributes to the difficulties that *Hausprojekte* face when searching for ways to secure their status.\(^{65}\) One difficulty is the public and mainstream media conflation of legal, rent-paying *Hausprojekte* (which applies to the Køpi and to most former squats) with illegal squatters.

Another challenge is garnering public sympathy toward their cause, which in such negative representations is seen as illegitimate. But the demands to secure “free spaces for alternative lifestyles,” to curb gentrification, and to increase the amount of affordable housing are far from unreasonable, and indeed resonate with the needs of many other social groups. Affordable housing, be it for alternative social groups, ethnic minorities, or other low-income populations, is one of the most important issues for contemporary cities—which, as many sociologists and urban geographers have argued, are increasingly becoming polarized, exclusive, and segregated along extreme social, ethnic, and financial divisions.\(^{66}\) Not only that, but for the first time in decades Berlin is facing a severe and possibly worsening housing crisis. The crisis of the housing market, under pressure from rising migration into the city, has been met with the typical response of socially engaged Berlin: street protests, such as in the summer of 2015.\(^{67}\) While the model offered by the Køpi and other *Hausprojekte* would not fit most other circumstances and situations—the collective organization, the unconventional physical spaces—the fight for affordable housing resonates with the needs of a large population (a population so diverse that solutions are bound to be varied).

The two attempts to auction off the Køpi in 1999 were not successful. There were no serious bidders, and the Køpi residents proposed buying the property for the symbolic amount of one mark.\(^{68}\) This would have meant, of course, not an attempt to compensate the Commerzbank within the rules of the real estate market, but rather to secure public support and sanctioning for special status outside of the private market. The residents wanted the Mitte administration to declare the Køpi building and garden a “special-use site for experimental living” (*Sondernutzungsfläche für experimentelles Wohnen*), and ensure the community’s long-term

---

65. A systematic study of mainstream, alternative, and social media representations might yield insights into public depictions and perceptions of the Køpi and other *Hausprojekte*. Such a systematic study is outside the scope of the present work, and therefore my observations are preliminary hypotheses based on a small sample of news stories.


68. J. S., “Køpi bleibt volkseigen.”
existence. The bank and the Mitte district did not accept this proposal. After the first failed forced auctions in 1999, another auction was enforced in 2007. This time around, the building and adjacent Wagenplatz were bought in the name of a developer called Novum Köpenicker Straße 133–138 GmbH, based in the West German city of Duisburg. This is a common pattern for East Berlin, where many properties were bought by absentee developers based in West Germany; this pattern has helped define the image of investors as foreign, removed from the local realities of the city, and concerned only with profits. Right after buying the property, the Novum company threatened the residents with eviction, but in 2008 the company signed a thirty-year lease with the Köpi community. According to Friedrich Spek, a real state lawyer who represents the Novum company, the developer wanted to start building on the site as early as 2007, right after the purchase, but could not obtain financing from banks to fund the redevelopment because of the many protests by the Köpi residents.

As it turns out, the Novum company too fell into debt, and the Commerzbank again called for a compulsory auction, this time in 2013. There were several auctions, all of them involving portions of the Wagenplatz and not the building (the lease status of the Wagenplatz was less clear and secure than the thirty-year contract extended to the building). Early in the year, the first auction resulted in a pro forma change of hands, as the winning bid came from a company related to the previous owner. The winning bid was relatively small, as it was the sole offer (another interested party gave up). Later in the year, another parcel of the Wagenplatz was sold in a forced auction for 210,000 euros. There were three offers—one from the legal representative of the current owner; one from a man who wanted to convert the area into a social-interest recycling project in conversation with the Köpi; and the highest and winning bid from a man named Rolf Nordström, manager of

70. “Köpi Berlin Radical Space to Be Auctioned Off,” UK Indymedia, April 26, 2007, http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2007/04/368853.html. The starting bid was reported as 1.67 million euros for the Köpi building, and 1.81 million euros for the garden. Köpi residents and supporters complained that the forced auction was kept secret until less than a month before its court-appointed date, and that the appraisal of the value of the site was “made up” (UK Indymedia) and misrepresented the legal status of the Köpi residents as squatters instead of legal renters.
71. The building had been valued at 1.67 million euros, but the winning bid was only 834,000. See Litschko, “Köpi-Wagenplatz versteigert”; “Köpi für 834.000 Euro zwangsversteigert.”
73. Puschner, “Eigentümer hängt an der Köpi.”
the I.R.E. Zweite Immobiliengesellschaft in Berlin. The purchase was too recent for any plans to be divulged, and attempts by the Køpi community’s lawyer at a conversation with Nordström were not successful. Described as a “pinstripe-suited man,” Nordström seems to augur a new phase in private development plans and potential clashes with the Køpi.\footnote{Litschko, “Køpi-Wagenplatz versteigert.”}

The social and political role of the Køpi community is one part of the argument for the significance of the site in its current condition. As one of the last surviving radical projects in the center of the city, the Køpi bears witness to a defining moment in Berlin’s history. The proliferation of alternative, utopian living communities and cultural projects was once a key feature of the city’s central-easter neighborhoods, a distinctive phenomenon of the transitional conditions during the early years of unification. Even if these projects did not last, their presence at a particular point in time—for weeks, months, or years—shaped the city, and the subsequent expectations, memories, and claims of certain groups. In the early 1990s, the central-easter neighborhoods were in many ways a giant playground, a realm of \textit{jouissance} and use value, a free space for artistic and social experimentation, when the city was transformed by the festival and not by the marketplace. This is a unique, irreproducible historical moment. It is not surprising that this moment disappeared given the constraints and rules of capitalism, but its memory is still important in the recent history of Berlin. Although the Køpi itself has changed since 1990, and although it is a living entity and not a museum piece, it is also at the same time a carrier of this history.

But there is more to the building from the perspective of architectural and social history. The complex was built at the beginning of the twentieth century as an apartment building for army officers (in keeping with Berlin’s history as a “casern city” since the eighteenth century); it included a large establishment called Fürstenhof, where parties, wedding celebrations, and meetings could be held (and which was the reason for the generous, large spaces on the ground floor).\footnote{The establishment is mentioned as early as 1905 in a newspaper advertisement, and is featured in a postcard from 1900. Schwoch, “Köpenicker Strasse 137/138 in Berlin Mitte.”} While the building type, architecture, and function were not exceptional for the time, today it is the last prewar building remaining in that portion of Köpenickerstraße. This is one of the oldest streets in the city (originally created to link the then-smaller city of Berlin to the neighboring town of Köpenick), but it would be difficult to glean the street’s old age from a walk around the vicinity of the Køpi.

Other areas of Berlin have benefitted from more generous preservation listings, but the Køpi is not officially protected as a historical monument and therefore could be demolished.\footnote{Landesdenkmalamt Berlin, \textit{Denkmalliste Berlin}, as of April 7, 2016, http://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/denkmal/denkmalliste/downloads/denkmalliste.pdf; Philips, “Räumung einkalkuliert.”} One could perhaps argue that the destruction of other
prenwar buildings around the Køpi has disfigured the street landscape to such an extent as to invalidate any attempt at preserving the historical view, especially since the building is not an exceptional architectural monument in itself. This argument assumes that preservation value lies in urban and contextual integrity and cohesiveness. A less cosmetic view of preservation would find value precisely in what the torn landscape reveals: the Køpi, along with the empty lots and nondescript modern buildings around it, is an index of twentieth-century urbanism, from the devastation wrought by the war to the devaluation of historical buildings in the postwar era. This is not to say that the area should remain as it is forever, as a frozen panorama of a particular century, but that the Køpi building—itself already a fragment of a larger complex—has reason to survive as an eloquent structure even amid urban changes around it.

It is not only as an architectural object that the building deserves attention. During the war it was used to house French forced laborers working for the AEG (Allgemeine Elektricitäts-Gesellschaft Aktiengesellschaft), or General Electricity Company. The AEG was one of the largest German industries in the early twentieth century, producing a range of items from electrical power to industrial and domestic electrical equipment. It was a pioneer of technological developments, design, and corporate identity practices. But, like many other industries of the time, the AEG was also a collaborator with the Nazi regime, donating money to the Nazi Party and using slave laborers and concentration camp inmates for some of its production lines.

There have been many efforts in Berlin to mark sites of Nazi persecution and death: train platforms used for the deportation of Jews and other groups; sites of events such as the 1933 book burning ceremony; places of detention, torture, and execution of political prisoners, mentally and physically disabled people, sexual and ethnic minorities; and even the former residences of Jews who died in concentration camps. In comparison, there are not as many markers of sites associated with forced labor, perhaps because the victims are not as recognizable a group as Jews, gays, or the Roma and Sinti, or perhaps because these sites—workshops


and housing—were too embedded in German everyday life. Jennifer Jordan, in her study of memorials in Berlin, recounts a conversation with historian Laurenz Demps, who conducted one of the earliest and most respected surveys of forced-labor sites in Berlin: “Demps has counted 1,000 forced labor camps and factories in Berlin, and 100 Gestapo sites. They cannot all be marked, he says, but they are there.”

Associated with household brand names such as AEG, and located in otherwise “normal” neighborhoods, these sites belie the claims by postwar Germans that they should not be considered complicit with the Holocaust because they did not know the extent of Nazi terror. The fact that this building housed forced laborers is not an exception in Berlin or other German cities, but it is nonetheless historically meaningful as an indication of the enmeshment of Nazi terror with everyday or “ordinary” life.

Admittedly, Germany has done more than most nations to address its victims and past crimes, but this has been done in a way that isolates both the victims (forever cast as the “other,” in the form of minorities whose numbers are even lower than before the Nazi era) and perpetrators (circumscribed as the official members of the Nazi Party, and restricted to a past from which younger generations feel disconnected). Even when more glaring sites of oppression such as concentration camps were located near cities, the current presentation of these sites in memorials and museums tends to section them off and sever their historical and urban connections with the immediate surroundings (see chapter 4). Therefore, the opportunity to indicate this tangled history at the site of the Køpi is important. This history is not yet explicitly marked by the Køpi community, nor would it have been by any of the developers’ plans for the site. But according to Blase, some residents, including himself, are interested in this history and have researched at least parts of it.

Given the special circumstances of the Køpi building—from the leftist, anti-Fascist political position of the residents to the physical conditions of the building, still bearing marks of the war—this history becomes more significant and adds to the importance of the site as it is.

Although the Køpi has so far benefited from a lack of investors willing to fund development projects, this might change. The whole Köpenickerstraße is part of an area designated by the city government for urban renovation (Sanierungsgebiet)—the area known as North Luisenstadt. This means that the public power will seek partnerships with private capital to fund developments aimed at the private

---

market. In addition, the Køpi is located near the boundaries of the Mediaspree, one of the most ambitious urban renovation projects of unified Berlin. The Mediaspree encompasses a public-private partnership for commercial, business, and entertainment developments on a large scale (some of which have already been built), along with the refurbishment of the river shoreline on both sides so as to create a landscaped, attractive waterfront. This is entirely in line not only with the urban renovation policies for unified Berlin (see my discussion of gentrification below), but also with a global turn to waterfronts, reclaimed in postindustrial societies for leisure and economic regeneration.\(^{83}\) While the Mediaspree has been slow to start, with the pioneering projects (for instance, shiny corporate high-rises) scattered over an unevenly developed area, there is now more interest and pressure to push ahead. The lawyer who represents the Køpi community stated, on the occasion of the last auction of the *Wagenplatz* in December 2013, that the area has developed significantly, attracting the interest of potential investors who in the past would have stayed away.\(^{84}\)

**Gentrification in Berlin**

The struggles of the Tuttenhaus, KA 86, and Køpi need to be understood in the context of the gentrification of their respective districts—Prenzlauer Berg and Mitte. After unification, investment was concentrated initially on the central neighborhood of Mitte; from there, gentrification spread to the central-eastern districts of Prenzlauer Berg and Friedrichshain over the next two decades. The western district of Kreuzberg had already experienced a measure of gentrification before 1989, and this tendency continued into the postunification period. In the late 2000s, a second wave of gentrification moved westward from Prenzlauer Berg and Kreuzberg, reaching the working-class and immigrant enclaves in the western districts of Neukölln and Wedding.\(^{85}\) The initial path of gentrification was centrally based (the center of the city being a privileged place for symbolic, spatial, infrastructural, and

---


84. Puschner, “Die Køpi soll für Schuldner bluten.”

social reasons), and east-oriented, markedly focused on former East Berlin. The attention to East Berlin might be explained partly because of the area’s glut of vacant, cheap properties liquidated by the Socialist state or returned to the market at the hands of former owners (or their heirs).

East Berlin was also attractive because of its thriving nightlife, art projects, young population, and alternative culture. In the years soon after unification, the East not only held the promise of cultural ebullience, but also had an exotic and mysterious appeal—the area had been inaccessible to most West Germans and foreigners for forty-five years. West Berlin fell out of fashion in the 1990s as public and private eyes turned toward the “newest” part of the city. Of course, East Berlin can be defined as “exotic” and “new” only from the point of view of someone from West Germany or another country. Officially, East Germany ceased to exist and joined West Germany, which, as a political, legal, and national entity, continued to exist in its basic form; this political inclusion of the former East was paralleled by a western-based cultural perspective that marked both the tone of urban transformation (gentrification of the former East, as opposed to, say, socialization of the former West) and the narratives that framed such transformation. As Andrej Holm puts it,

East Berlin stands for the transformation of the autonomous, socialist German Democratic Republic into the eastern portion of the capitalist Federal Republic of Germany. At the same time it also stands for the collision between two urban bodies that had been separated for decades, and the attempt by Berlin elites to develop the city into an international metropolis, as the new historical capital of Germany.  

The starkness of gentrification in the eastern neighborhoods is due at least in some measure to the contrast between their current commodified trappings, and the preceding Socialist landscape of East Berlin. Mitte, Prenzlauer Berg, and Friedrichshain were located in the eastern side of the city, in the GDR. Socialism had kept these areas out of the private real estate market for forty-five years. The GDR government did carry out urban improvements, but it had a limited amount of resources. It invested in showpiece projects such as Karl-Marx-Allee,

86. Holm, Restrukturierung des Raumes, 12.
87. Peter Williams identifies gentrification in Eastern Europe before the collapse of the Soviet Union. He notes that, despite crucial differences between Socialist and capitalist cities, the patterns of residential segregation in Eastern European cities “indicate the persistence of class inequalities under different modes of production” that translate in unequal distribution of wealth, resources, and material conditions. This prevents a naive portrayal of Socialist cities as “virgin territories” in terms of market differentiation and inequality. Williams, “Gentrification in Britain and Europe,” in Gentrification, Displacement, and Neighborhood Revitalization, ed. J. John Palen and Bruce London (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 224–25.
88. Jörn Düwel describes the GDR’s reaction to the economic constraints in terms of priorities: “Throughout East Germany, reconstruction work began with residential buildings on the outskirts of cities. The first phase of development brought lively building activity in Berlin, but did not reach the centre until the mid-1960s.” Düwel, “The New Centre: Architecture and Urban Planning in the Capital
Alexanderplatz, housing projects, and the renovation of Husemannstraße in Prenzlauer Berg. But large sections of Mitte, and most of Prenzlauer Berg and Friedrichshain, were neglected and dilapidated. Many of their inhabitants were misfits in East Germany—artists, students, dissidents, retirees. This marginality may be partly explained by the proximity to the Wall, as the area of Mitte was cut off from its surroundings on three sides. The formerly central neighborhoods became peripheral, and the Wall marred their reputation with evocations of immobility, imprisonment, control, and repression. Official policies and social perceptions contributed to turn the city away from these areas. Once the Wall was gone, this changed. After unification, parts of Mitte, such as the Spandauer Vorstadt (see chapter 3), underwent quick and intense upgrading. The area where the Köpi is located, at the southern tip of Mitte, has been much slower to develop, and is only now drawing more attention with the designation of the North Luisenstadt Sanierungsgebiet (see above).

Like Mitte, the neighboring district of Prenzlauer Berg—home to the Tuntenhaus and KA 86—also experienced extensive gentrification. The area was particularly attractive to investment because of its proximity to the center of the city and its wealth of historical architecture—block after block of nineteenth-century apartment buildings made “the neighborhood in the 1990s into ‘Europe’s largest historical renovation area.’” A large portion of Prenzlauer Berg (including 80,000 apartments) was officially designated as a Sanierungsgebiet, and as such it was the object of concerted urban policies by the government. Unlike previous instances of urban renovation, however—such as the large-scale modernist urban renewal efforts of the 1960s and ’70s (Kahlschlagsanierung), and the grassroots-oriented “careful urban renovation” (behutsame Stadterneuerung) of the 1980s—this time the government expected to fund most of the renovation through private investment, meaning that the transformation of the district would necessarily be geared toward private profit and steered by developers as much as, if not more than, by other political actors such as the government or local organizations. Apartment rents in


the area averaged 12.28 euros per square meter in 2016, making it the fourth most expensive district in Berlin (the most expensive is Mitte at 14.85, followed by the traditionally posh western district of Grunewald at 13.23). Next to Prenzlauer Berg and Kreuzberg, another neighborhood—Friedrichshain—also went through similar processes. Friedrichshain is still home to several Hausprojekte, including a cluster on Rigaerstraße near Liebigstraße where counter-preservation mixes with the colorful aesthetics of vibrant murals and graffiti. These Hausprojekte are not discussed here, but a brief mention of them and of Friedrichshain serves to delineate their place in this history. Friedrichshain was once touted as “the next Prenzlauer Berg”—first by students and artists who moved there, turning away from Prenzlauer Berg when the area began to gentrify; then by investors in search of profits. Friedrichshain—like Mitte—is a large district that gentrified irregularly. The area around Simon-Dach Straße and Boxhagener Square, with picturesque streets and old apartment buildings, was the first to become trendy. The district is bisected by the monumental Karl-Marx-Allee (rebuilt by the GDR according to principles of Stalinist architecture: imposing and ornamented apartment buildings along grand boulevards and plazas). The Stalinbauten, as the edifices have been nicknamed, enjoyed renewed popularity after unification. Tenants value the spacious apartments, comfortably equipped with elevators and central heating, clad with Meissen porcelain tiles, and boasting generous vistas of Berlin through large picture windows. The revalorization of the Stalinbauten as desirable living spaces helped spread gentrification from the southern part of the district northward. Because this front of gentrification came later, several communities north of Karl-Marx-Allee were able to survive for a relatively long time—for example, the Hausprojekte on Rigaerstraße, including the XB Liebig, Rigaer 78, Rigaer 94, Rigaer 105, and the Liebig 14 (the latter evicted in 2011).

Gentrification and the Scene

Gentrification has a particular link to art, culture, and architecture. Governments may use cultural facilities as anchors of gentrification, initiating urban upgrading through museums, concert halls, or public spaces. The role of art and culture in gentrification is not limited to public art projects. The valorization of a neighborhood is often associated with a lively artistic or bohemian community—the “scene.”

95. Ladd, Ghosts of Berlin, 181–89.
96. “Räumung Liebigstraße 14 in Berlin.”
In her discussion of alternative cultural projects in Berlin, Melbourne, and Amsterdam, Kate Shaw defines the “scene” with relation to alternative cultures:

The concept of “scene” thickens that of alternative culture by including not only all the arrangements of proponents, participants, audiences, supports and infrastructures involved in cultural production, but the connections between particular forms (music, film, theatre, literary, art etc.).

Alternative cultures encompass individuals, groups, and activities, while the scene conjoins them in networks and environments that are more than just the sum of their parts. The scene is a spatiotemporal formation that lives off continuous, multiple activities; it transforms districts or neighborhoods, giving them “character”—I use the word consciously to evoke the dramaturgical connotation of an “urban scene.” The term is not just a label attached by cultural critics. “Scene” is commonly used in German in reference to an ebullient combination of art practices and spaces, entertainment, and sociability patterns that are both trendy and alternative—“die Szene.”

The Berlin scene, moving about the central neighborhoods of Spandauer Vorstadt, Prenzlauer Berg, Kreuzberg, Friedrichshain, and more recently Neu-kölln, Wedding, and Moabit, includes artists, students, architects, academics, performers, DJs, writers, journalists, and media workers; it is located on the sites of the city’s famous techno music culture (clubs, parties, record stores), and also in art galleries, independent bars and restaurants, alternative clothing and design stores, and the lively milieu of sidewalk cafés where the scene spills over the street.

To a certain extent the “scene” is a spectacle; it presupposes performers and spectators—and not just because it involves art and artists. The scene, understood as the ongoing social and cultural transactions in a certain place, is itself a performance in display. Elke Grenzer suggests the theatrical dimension of “scene” in her discussion of high-profile architectural projects in Berlin, aptly titled “Setting the Stage for a New Germany: Architecture and the Scene of Berlin.” Through analyses of the Reichstag, Postdamer Platz, and the Jewish Museum, Grenzer goes into detail on the theatrical meaning of scene, but does not address the sociocultural connotation described above. Taken together, Shaw’s and Grenzer’s texts provide

---


a more complex understanding of the scene, which oscillates between the two connotations—the sociocultural and the dramaturgical. The oscillation points to the emancipatory potential of spatial appropriations, in the idea that performance (in the broad sense of the social and cultural transactions alluded to above) may transform urban spaces, change their meanings, and affect the rest of the city.\textsuperscript{102} However, it is also the spectacular quality of the scene—how it easily produces images and icons, how it attracts and seduces a wide public—that makes it into a potential tool for gentrification.

The role of the scene is ambiguous. Artists, musicians, students, intellectuals, and activists who make up the “scene” are neither gentry nor proletarians. Although some may have been born and raised in the potentially gentrifying area, they are often outsiders who moved in precisely because rents were low and there were empty or neglected spaces malleable to creative intervention. The “scene” may join the locals in solidarity and fear of displacement, but most artists, students, and intellectuals possess a cultural cachet that gives them more mobility and clout in asserting their right to the city.\textsuperscript{103} In addition, the presence of an art scene—studios, galleries, clubs, performances, installations, parties—no matter how “alternative” and outside of the mainstream, increases the potential value of a neighborhood. The art scene makes the neighborhood attractive, entertaining, pleasurable; it gives color, character, and identity. It may be the case that the artists and students also end up displaced if rents become too high or if most apartments are available only for sale and not for rent. There are also distinctions within cultural communities—the difference between commercial, mainstream galleries and alternative exhibition spaces; between glossy nightclubs and improvised parties; between an alternative scene and “the culture industry—art dealers and patrons, gallery owners and artists, designers and critics, writers and performers—which has converted urban dilapidation into ultra chic.”\textsuperscript{104} But none of this mitigates the fact that an art scene is also a factor of gentrification, and that a local scene, “if not displaced by gentrification, is a candidate for appropriation by the market.”\textsuperscript{105}


\textsuperscript{103} Brian Sullivan, “The Displacement Enigma,” \textit{Pratt Planning Papers} 1, no. 1 (October 1981): 16. Sullivan does not deny that gentrification displaces artists or intellectuals as well as low-income groups, but he notes that the latter have more difficulty relocating and reestablishing social and cultural communities: “Displacement means more than not living within walking distance of a Häagen Dazs or quiche boutique. It means the disruption of many important social, economic, religious, and institutional connections that enable them to survive” (16).


The other “perverse” link of gentrification is architectural preservation. Spaces become affordable to low-income populations for a reason—isolated neighborhoods that lack infrastructure; small houses and plots; neglected public and private spaces. Landlords may be uninterested enough to ignore squatters for long periods. Affordable central neighborhoods such as Mitte, Prenzlauer Berg, or Kreuzberg in the early 1990s had been neglected for decades. Most of these buildings might not have been exceptional monuments, but the concept of heritage has expanded since the postwar era to include vernacular architecture and whole urban ensembles where the fabric of buildings and streets is more important than any single object. These urban ensembles are now prized by architectural historians, architects, and preservationists.106

The effort to preserve and restore these sites poses a quandary. The social displacement associated with urban conservation is often described as a side effect. However, some texts suggest that the relationship goes both ways—that is, social displacement may be used as a tool to improve spatial conditions. Writing in 1984, Peter Williams admits that “many planners and architects see social upgrading as a necessary cost of the preservation of the built environment.”107 In Williams’s ambiguous formulation, cost can mean a calculated price, a step toward the final goal, an inevitable consequence—or all of the above.

In historical areas architectural heritage adds extra value. Heritage attracts tourism, and it makes the cityscape profitable by creating commercial and entertainment districts and promoting the consumption of urban spaces.108 Architects, historians, and critics sometimes dissociate spatial improvements from their social context, and celebrate the conservation of architecture in praise like this: “The nineteenth-century fabric of European cities has been renovated. . . . Suddenly, fine old buildings sparkle again, forgotten squares and streets have new life.”109 Similarly to the creation of public cultural institutions, the renovation of historical districts seems justifiable. Indeed there is nothing essentially or intrinsically exclusionary about recuperating historical buildings or improving living spaces. But the repeated correlation between renovation and displacement has forged long-lasting social representations and meanings. It is these meanings that fuel resistance to preservation, and in the case of Berlin the display of decrepitude and decay—counterpreservation.


107. Williams ascribes this view to official programs such as the European Campaign for Urban Renaissance. Williams, “Gentrification in Britain and Europe,” 224.


In Friedrichshain, Prenzlauer Berg, and Mitte, inhabitants of buildings not yet renovated try to resist gentrification by adopting a counterpreservationist standpoint, highlighting the association of spatial improvement with social exclusion. As Grenzer suggests, Berlin is a stage—but not only for commercial spectacles such as Potsdamer Platz. The city is also a stage for alternative performances, with an engaged audience that is receptive and used to such demonstrations. The scene of Berlin has a history. Alex Vasudevan identifies a dramaturgical dimension to squatting whereby squatters perform “their counterclaims to the city . . . as architectural ‘events.’” Vasudevan focuses on a particular squat, the K77 (founded on 77 Kastanienallee in 1992), whose members “deliberately recast the act of squatting as a form of ‘continuous performance’ (unbefristeten Kunstaktion) or installation art” inspired by the work of, among others, Joseph Beuys. Visitors and Berliners are acclimated to the appropriation of the city for artistic and political demonstrations, from the informal exhibitions and cultural gatherings of Prenzlauer Berg to the riots, demonstrations, and banners of Kreuzberg. The people who put up posters, graffiti, banners, and installations today do so with a consciousness of the public dimension of the city. The fact that these actions are not permanent architectural designs does not make them less worthy of consideration. Although squats may be short-lived, banners put down, and graffiti erased, these manifestations convey a pointed, unmistakable message that resonates with a wider public and may reverberate beyond the actual duration of each demonstration.

This participatory, critical, and performative attitude represents a particular approach to the city, one that views urban space as open for transformation and occupation, regardless of legal property considerations. This attitude may have been favored by the peculiar status of both West and East Berlin, where the postwar landscape had been peppered with vacant buildings. Perhaps the ubiquitous sight of unused, empty buildings, which was a hallmark of divided Berlin and continued into the first years of unification, contributed to the formation of a more flexible view of the city, one predicated on the use value of space as defined by Lefebvre as opposed to its monetary or exchange value. In The Production of Space, Lefebvre explains his understanding of use value versus exchange value with relation to Karl Marx’s theory of capital, and applies this distinction to space and architecture. Exchange value is associated with the insertion of space as an abstraction in global fluxes of capital, while use value is the hallmark of social practices in particular places:

Exchange with its circulatory systems and networks may occupy space worldwide, but consumption occurs only in this or that particular place. A specific individual,

---

111. Ibid., 295.
112. Lefebvre, The Production of Space, 100.
with a specific daily schedule, seeks a particular satisfaction. Use value constitutes the 
only real wealth, and this fact helps to restore its ill-appreciated importance.\footnote{Ibid., 341.}

Lefebvre criticizes disciplinary approaches to space based purely on quantitative 
measurements, and instead proposes that “a science of space or ‘spatio-analysis’
would stress the use of space, its qualitative properties.”\footnote{Ibid., 404.} Use value is not always 
or necessarily emancipatory, but because it is spatially situated, it is a precondition 
for the democratic, countercultural reappraisal of space Lefebvre called for as 
a way of asserting a collective right to the city.\footnote{Henri Lefebvre, \textit{Writings on Cities} (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996).}

The house squatting movement distills this attitude and remains a symbolic 
force in Berlin, even though the number of squats and \textit{Hausprojekte} has steadily 
declined since the mid-1990s. In the early 1990s there were approximately 120 new 
squats in East Berlin, mostly in Mitte, Prenzlauer Berg, and Friedrichshain.\footnote{Holm and Kuhn, “Squatting and Urban Renewal,” 650.} In 
July 1990 the city issued an ordinance against new squats, marking an inflection 
point from the initial proliferation. Not only did this curb the formation of new 
squats, but the police also started to carry out evictions, several of them violent. 
This culminated in protests, confrontations, and a street riot on Mainzer Straße, 
a street on which a number of politically active squats were concentrated. From 
then on, squatters increasingly engaged in “negotiated solutions,” which legalized 
their status whenever possible;\footnote{Ibid.} on the one hand, this afforded them some safety 
and stability, but on the other hand, it entailed contracts, rents, and a formal and 
oficial status that did not always appeal to squatters’ ideologies. By the mid-1990s, 
no guarantee of stability), most squats continued to participate in leftist political 
actions, to promote alternative and communal lifestyles, and to keep their living 
spaces in an intentionally rough and dilapidated state. They continued to organize 
parties and events, and kept on hanging banners and signs on their façades. The 
vibrancy and potential for urban change of squats survive after legalization.

In her seminal study of Kreuzberg, Barbara Lang proposes the concept of sym-
bornic gentrification to describe the neighborhood in the 1980s, when signs of spatial 
upgrading appeared, but gentrification (as measured in real estate values and popu-
lation displacement) had not taken hold.\footnote{Lang, \textit{Mythos Kreuzberg}.} The average rent might not have gone 
up, and the proportion of renovated apartment buildings or fancy eateries might
have still been small, but even small changes were seen as having a potentially significant impact; the ever-widening perception of change was real, and it spread among inhabitants with the force of fact. Once the symbolic dimension of gentrification took hold, it fueled further demographic, architectural, and economic changes in both directions—Kreuzberg residents moving out in search of more “authenticity,” more mainstream residents moving in and creating both more supply and demand for upscale services.

If Lang speaks of “symbolic gentrification” (and the concrete resistance to it), we may now speak of “symbolic squatting” (in the face of concrete gentrification) to understand the role and potency of legalized squats. The reverberations of the squatter movement go beyond the actual number of surviving squats or Hausprojekte. House squatters, or Hausbesetzer, tried to build an alternative society. They viewed themselves as social and urban agents not just capable of, but entitled to transform the city, to use its existing raw matter and mold it into a new form. Spatial practice was inseparable from social action and from a cultural and political project. As a result, conventional concerns for property or law were not only irrelevant, but intentionally called into question. This dynamic, democratic, anarchic view is reflected in spaces that accommodate all of these qualities in their chaotic appearance and organization. Counterpreservation is not tantamount to squatting. However, both have in common the transformative appropriation of the city, and the opposition to the exchange value of urban space.

The antigentrification movement, which is not exclusive to Berlin, has taken strong hold in the city partly thanks to the presence of alternative cultures, which are not only affected by gentrification, but also prone to mobilization. In 2011, Konrad Litschko, a journalist and active chronicler of social movements in Berlin, announced: “Gentrification is the new combat word.” Litschko was covering the notorious May 1 demonstrations in Berlin, which often turn into riots. In 2011, according to Litschko, the demonstrations were both more politicized and more peaceful than in the recent past, and they all focused on the right to the city, fighting “against rising rents, for alternative living spaces, against sleek upgraded façades.” Litschko concluded that the “day is finally repoliticized,” thanks to the focus on the issue of urban renovation.

The Hausprojekte are an important part of this movement, as centers of political activity and criticism. In this sense, the Hausprojekte are more than just enclaves, but acquire a larger role as activists and as models of alternative housing. However, there are limitations to the reach and aspirations of Hausprojekte and even of the antigentrification movement. Litschko, the journalist, notes that the May

120. Holm and Kuhn suggest this in their examination of the potential contribution of squatting to urban policies, in “Squatting and Urban Renewal.”
1 demonstrations in 2011, for all their concern with the “integration of city residents,” lacked the participation of important sectors of the population who are also affected by rising rents: “the average renter, migrants.”

Ethnic minorities, which in addition to economic challenges also face social, cultural, and religious issues, are by and large not a strong part of Hausprojekte (either as residents or as part of their political fights). Even though Hausprojekte cannot be faulted for not taking on all the different issues of the world, at the same time the absence of ethnic minorities is glaring in the German context. The complicated status of immigrants is a pressing problem in Berlin and in Germany; in numbers, more so than the plight of Hausprojekte. The deep-seated racial prejudices that have marked German history, and which in the postwar era were felt more intensely by the Turkish population (and, in the post-Wall era, by Eastern Europeans), might be more pervasive than leftist groups would like to admit. One could argue that if Hausprojekte are committed to a democratic city and an inclusive Socialist politics, the question of immigration and ethnic minorities in the city must be part of the agenda. At the very least, the limitations of Hausprojekte as political actors and models must be recognized alongside their potentialities.

122. Ibid.