

The Ephemeral

Essay from the book: Berlin_City without form

Text: Philipp Oswalt/ Translation: Tas Skorupa

In times of change Berlin experienced constant and radical reorganization, which left large undefined areas in its urban fabric. The collapse of four German states, the destruction of World War Two, the division of the city, stagnation and shrinking, bad planning and deindustrialization led to faults and created spaces which were deprived of their normal cycle of economic use as well as the everyday life of the city's population. In this way seemingly functionless spaces were created which formed a breeding ground for unexpected activities.

Remote from the conventional rules of society an enormous spectrum of spontaneous activities developed here, from gardens, trailer camps, markets, sport and recreation to cultural activities and nightlife. Along with these, new fashions, cultures, and lifestyles were created. While in the seventies and early eighties it was the squatter's movements, alternative lifestyles, and punk which experimented with collective forms of living and subversive aesthetics, following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 a club culture and techno scene developed which brought forth a new art and music scene. It is a good example of the emerging euphoria in the new Berlin and has contributed considerably to the capital's legendary status.

The sites of subculture are zones of independence. As counter-worlds they offer space for activities which are excluded or are not planned by society. In his examination of the subject of shopping, Rem Koolhaas describes the "paradigmatic change from the public and private to the controlled and residual,¹ that is, the left-over. According to him it is no longer an issue of public versus private, but of the conflict between controlled and abandoned spaces. On the one hand there are areas like shopping malls or airports which are planned in the tiniest details and run with great expertise and are neither public nor private, but on the other hand there are deserted left-over spaces, zones of the residual.

In the twentieth century, Berlin was an urban laboratory for examining the residual. Residual spaces represent the experimental fields of the city. Open to the unknown, they become catalysts for the emergence of the new. They exist only temporarily and are sooner or later reabsorbed by the controlling substance of the city organism; yet at the same time, spaces are formed in other places which are useless for general use by society. Like residual spaces, these temporary activities are also unstable. They transform themselves and disappear as spontaneously as they are formed. They thus react to exclusion and displacement. In this way the "Polish Markets" of the early nineties were driven from Potsdamer Platz to the city limits of Berlin and then beyond the German-Polish border. The club scene was displaced by developments it had stimulated itself with its success in the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall, and it thus migrated from Kreuzberg via Mitte to Prenzlauer Berg and Friedrichshain. Nomadism results from the external pressure and reacquired control of established societal structures over the territories, yet it is also the nature of temporary uses.

Due to their transitoriness, these ephemeral activities are not tangible. Moving around is a strategy of concealment. A good example of this is UFO, the first techno disco of the period before the fall of the Berlin Wall. As an illegal club it eluded the police by continually moving and informed its patrons by telephone chains. "The concept of UFO was simple. It took off and landed somewhere,"² says Dimitri Hegemann, the initiator of UFO. Many clubs copied this concept, always looking for new, unusual locations. By using music equipment, strobe lights, fog machines, drinks and drugs, unusual places could be transformed in just a few hours into the most sought-after club spaces. It was even easier to install one of the legendary weekday bars which were only open one day a week. Instability becomes the motor of constant new discovery. The change of location is accompanied by an updating of the idea. And then clubs run the risk of petrification when they settle down. To avoid this, the principle of a club in a club was developed. "Maria am Ostbahnhof," for example, serves as a platform for other organizers of events, such as "Flittchen-Bar," "Hirschbar," "Suicide-Club," or "Lomographische Botschaft," each of which has its own program and appeals to a different audience. By means of this principle, change which is no longer present in external circumstances is maintained.

Temporary uses come about in loose groupings which are formed, then grow, split, merge, and disintegrate. They act flexibly on a local level. Using a sort of urban guerilla tactics, they take advantage of chances that present themselves and adapt to changed conditions, developing extreme dynamics in the process. Temporary activities create a maximum of intensity with a

minimum of substance. Existing infrastructures, buildings, and land reserves are activated with the most meager local resources. This ease allows investors without capital to actively design the city and its space. The basic rules of capitalism seem to be without power in these zones: cultural and urban experiments can be realized practically without financial means and then in the process often develop an enormous effectiveness.

They spread out like rhizome, infiltrating the city like wickerwork and implant themselves in niches and gaps. Or they take over established places. Through this invasion they urbanize homogenous areas of the city, creating a mixture of activities which compensate for programmatic deficiencies. As a zone of otherness they radiate back on the zone of the everyday and the self-evident. They undermine existing categories and assumptions and destabilize existing structures.

They reprogram spaces that are closed down and lying waste. Transformer stations, bunkers, and coal stores are made into places of recreation, supermarkets and administrative offices are transformed into art galleries, factory buildings into apartments and cultural centers. Like in a surrealist collage, elements of opposite worlds meet. Living rooms become club rooms, the club scene merges with youth sport, art, or literature. There are crossovers of different cultural areas which had previously been separated. The basis of this is the club which serves as a platform open for different programs. The club becomes a place which simply offers the space and the infrastructure for different activities and events. Conventional orders are suspended in the process. Different things are brought together in the available space: for example, when new music styles come about by sampling, recombining, and merging of existing musical material, or when techno is recombined with jazz or choral music, punk with classical or salsa, hip hop with John Cage. The same applies for the interiors of the club culture. Materials and objects from extremely disparate contexts find a common meeting ground. In this way, a space for dealing with rejected, excluded aesthetics is created: While the aesthetics of the GDR have been systematically eliminated in the official Berlin of the nineties, the club and art scene has critically appropriated them by recycling found material.

The principle of crossovers also has an effect on social categories. The "Polish Markets" which appeared in West Berlin at the end of the eighties were places where Poles, Turks, and Germans encountered each other with an otherwise unknown intensity and directness. Another example of social mixture is "Volxgolf," organized by a private initiative on the grounds of the former Stadium of World Youth. Construction workers, managers, refugee children, the downtown scene from Mitte, and Turks from Wedding meet here to play golf, now and again playing at night with fluorescent balls, barbecue fires, and beer. The inner city wastelands particularly present unexpected suburban or country scenes in the heart of the metropolis: playing boules on the wasteland at Potsdamer Platz in the eighties, going for walks and barbecuing at Gleisdreieck, riding ponies on the former death strip of the Berlin Wall behind the Springer Building in Mitte. Or also the scenes of the postwar period, when the impoverished population planted vegetable gardens in front of the Reichstag, farmed in the Tiergarten, or bathed in bomb craters. And like man, nature also develops. The wastelands of Berlin, with over 1300 types of plants, are the richest biotopes in Europe in terms of numbers of species.

Temporary activities spread their subversive character in political action. Sit-ins and sleep-ins are a radicalized version of reprogramming. Instead of moving into available niches, existing institutions such as factories or schools are removed from their normative everyday cycles and used for an alternative scenario. This piracy is a means to an end, the aggressive reprogramming of space is a tool to change established structures. Introduced by the student movements of the sixties, this means of violence-free resistance has continued to this day in the form of school and workers' strikes. The most recent example is the transformation of the Alcatel Cable Factory in the Neukölln section of Berlin into the "Hotel Alcatel" in September 1999. Employees whose jobs were threatened had occupied the factory using this name.

Due to their instability, temporary uses usually represent only a short or somewhat longer transitional period for a location. As stopgaps, temporary programs can be displaced by different ones and can disappear without a trace. But often they act as triggers which enable a temporary use to establish itself and take on a permanent form. A good example of this is the squatters of the eighties and nineties in Berlin. Two-thirds of the slightly less than five hundred houses were emptied, but approximately one-third could be given a lasting use by purchasing or renting. These houses today form a network of alternative culture, among which – apart from numerous living and working collectives – there are also cultural organizations like "UFA-Fabrik," "Kerngehäuse," "Schokoladen," or "Tacheles." Another example is Auguststrasse, where in the summer of 1992 the exhibition "37 Rooms" took place for one week. Thirty-seven curators each

conceived one room in various empty buildings. This one-time art event was a sort of trial run for the twenty-odd commercial galleries which have established themselves there by now. Real estate owners take advantage of such initial uses. They tolerate or initiate more and more non-commercial temporary activities in order to prepare for future uses, to make the real estate known as a "location", to raise its price, and to make it easier to market.

For their initiators and the people running them, temporary uses are often a transitional step towards professionalization and establishment. Good examples of this are the careers of Thomas Ostermeier and Jens Hilje, the director and the dramaturge of the "Baracke" stage of the Deutsches Theater. Having become known through their work for the provisional experimental stage in the mid-nineties, they have now taken over the direction of another theater, the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz. The same is the case for the club and gallery scene, which among other things has led to the founding of music labels or cultural institutions such as "Kunstwerke" on Auguststrasse.

Established institutions such as museums or marketing departments of large corporations are by now copying the nomadic strategies and the event character of temporary uses. By making available their structures and concepts, they are trying to push their way into the youth and culture scene. They stage street events such as the Street Soccer World Cup in 1995 in the Lustgarten on Museum Island in Berlin which was organized by the sporting goods company Puma as part of an advertising campaign. Or the "Long Night of the Museums," which has been taking place twice a year since 1997, in which Berlin's museum world becomes a sort of party-giver.

The urbanity of the temporary in Berlin is thus in danger of disappearing. On the one hand there are the threats of being displaced, and on the other hand by becoming established or "taken over by the enemy." At the same time, new things are being created in the residual zones located somewhat further out, unnoticed by the public. The instability of the metropolis expresses itself in temporary uses. Here the leftover energy of the metropolis can be released, the "free radicals" can develop. Contrary to the lethargy of architecture and the ossification of buildings, temporary activities are flexible and changeable in their fleeting lightness. They generate and absorb the unexpected and new. As persistent and unpredictable as temporary activities are, undoubtedly they will continue to reinvent themselves and spring up unexpectedly in the future of the city.

1. Lecture at the conference "Learning from the Mall of America," 22 November 1997 at the University of Minnesota. The work is the result of a study done with students, entitled "Harvard Project on the City" (1996-97).

2. Quoted after Oliva Henkel and Karsten Wolff: Berlin Underground. Techno und Hip Hop zwischen Mythos und Ausverkauf, Berlin 1996, p. 32.