

THE GOOD THE BAD AND THE MARKET

The third installation of the IFHP LAB series visits Berlin to discuss affordable housing provision, the city's collective culture and spaces of resistance between public, private and citizen actors within the city's housing environment.

“The role of the dissident architect appears not as a figure of resistance but as an opportunist who understands his/her context and decides to react and adapt in a Darwinian sense, where not the strongest but the most flexible species succeed.”

- Ethel Baraona Pohl (ES) Critic, writer and curator, co-founder of dpr-barcelona and editor of Quaterns.

HUBRIS AND RESISTANCE

In many cities across the Western world there is talk of a “new housing crisis”. Present and especially animated in housing markets – such as London, Berlin, New York and Paris – the situation represents a magnet for footloose, speculative real estate capital. As a result, this housing crisis has brought to light again the Engel's “housing question” generating protests and resistance among groups of city dwellers who fear their ‘right to the city’ is being fundamentally compromised.

For a long time Berlin was perceived as a city with low rents and living costs, especially when compared to other German and European cities. And indeed, average rental prices for housing stayed about the same from the early 1990s until 2005. The main reasons for this were substantial public investments and subsidy programs, a high level of construction activities in the early 1990s, a sizable segment of public and social housing and strong rent regulations in the 1990s. All these factors contributed to a housing system which was much less vulnerable to market dynamics.

Berlin has traditionally been a city of tenancy. Until not very long ago, almost 90% of all households lived in rented flats, the majority of which belonged to larger state-controlled corporations. Mortgages have traditionally been hard to come by in Germany and tenants are still relatively well protected by law. Accordingly, home ownership rates, already low across Germany, are even lower in the capital: in 2011, 15.6% of Berliners owned their own place, compared with 49.5% in London. Owner occupancy was – and still is – rather the exception than the rule.

With the privatization wave that started in the late 1990s Berlin privatized some of its housing corporations, at the same time ending the century - old social housing system. Housing went from being a basic social right to being a commodity.

Berlin is growing and the demand for accommodation is increasing. To ensure that rents remain affordable, Berlin needs more housing. On the other hand, Berlin's social housing stock is falling. According to Hanover's Pestel Institute, the German capital needs an additional 500,000 affordable homes, but the city hasn't built new social

“Urban planning does not work without political will. Politicians need corrective influences. It is important to me that all these ‘alternative developments’, as they are called, are accepted as genuine alternatives for urban planning. If not Mediaspree, then what?”

*- Christian Schöningh (DE)
Architect, founding partner of
Die Zusammenarbeiter*

housing since the early 2000s, and at the current rate it would continue losing around 4,500 homes a year. The main reason for this is a shift in Berlin’s urban and housing policies: since the turn of the millennium, subsidies for building and renovations provided by the city have been completely cut. At the same time, existing rent regulations and planning restrictions on new construction were lifted, and a broad array of planning procedures deregulated. As a consequence of these simultaneous developments, rents are on the up in all housing segments in recent years.

Currently, the city senate claims to have found funds to support the building of around 1,000 affordable homes this year. But whether they will be in the center or towards the Brandenburg outskirts remains unclear. Social housing corporations are in charge of this massive production of housing, applying traditional housing models and conservative approaches.

Given these developments, it’s probably not surprising that Berliners have increasingly taken to trying to beat the speculators by buying property themselves – not individually, but collectively, and not just

empty buildings, but pieces of empty land, as well. The city is currently experiencing an unheard-of surge in co-housing communities and communal living groups (“Baugenossenschaften” or “Baugruppen”). Members of co-housing groups are able to participate in all stages of the housing realization (land acquisition, design and construction) – at the wholesale price. These projects are based on the fact that the group has to work together to determine how they will be living and in what kind of house. However these initiatives remain scattered and isolated and they are not included into a broader planning agenda for the city.

At the same time several groups of activists call for demonstrations against the gentrification of Berlin in general. While many of the capital’s countless urban transitions have occurred without comment, Berlin’s long history of activism and counter-culture means that residents do not always shrug and bow their heads grudgingly when certain political or municipal decisions are made. Over the years, resident campaigns, such as the one against the Media Spree development, have made it to Senate level and helped change

the minds of politicians seeking to sell off the city’s remaining land (and related assets) to the highest bidder. The current public campaigns against plans to build on Tempelhof Park have similarly been potent enough to announce a referendum and ultimately stop construction of the area.

Ultimately, the debate over the use of public spaces in Berlin is about much more than physical terrain; it is related to a wider discussion about concepts of the right to the city, and about ideas and ideals of social and spatial justice.

The IFHP LAB aims to explore these conflicts. Representatives from the public sector, social housing corporations, private companies, academy and cooperatives will discuss how and why co-housing communities and groups should be supported in terms of ideas, structures and finances – while at the same time not losing focus on the broader and the common good. The lab will share tools for shared housing production, bridging housing corporations with local initiatives and the possible new role of the private sector in affordable housing provision.