

SOCIO-SPATIAL STRUCTURES AND STRATEGIES OF THE BERLIN SQUATTER MOVEMENT

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Research Question

What were the social and spatial conditions of squatting in Berlin and how did squatters and their strategies relate to them?

Periods of the Berlin Squatter Movement

1971-1979 11 squats in the context of a country-wide youth center movement, two legalizations, one of them the famous Georg-von-Rauch-Haus.

1979-84 “Rehab-squatting” in the context of neighbourhood initiatives, alternative and youth movement, 255 squats in the years 1980/81 alone, almost half of them (115) in Kreuzberg. Around 100 squats legalized.

1989-1996 Between Fall of the Wall and formal reunification at least 114 buildings in Eastern Berlin squatted and around 90 legalized. Driven by Eastern alternative and dissident milieu and autonomous movement of Western Berlin.

2000-now Relatively little squatting activity in the context of anti-globalization movement and new urban struggles. Only about 50 squats, almost all of them evicted within 24 hours.

Literature

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Suttner, Andreas (2011): „Beton brennt“ Hausbesetzer und Selbstverwaltung im Berlin, Wien und Zürich der 80er, Wien; Berlin; Münster: Lit.

STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BERLIN SQUATTER MOVEMENT

The Urban Condition

Squatting in Berlin is an inner-city phenomenon. Around 70% of squatting took place in inner-city districts, 17% at the margins of the inner-city. The first big wave of squatting in 1980/81 was directly connected to the crises and the failure of “clear-cut” urban renewal in Western Berlin: *Firstly*, the extensive and concentrated speculative vacancy of whole apartment houses offered the space necessary. *Secondly*, housing shortage and decay and the long-time mobilization of neighbourhood initiatives gave legitimation to the “rehab-squatters”. And *thirdly*, the decaying neighbourhoods offered affordable space for an alternative milieu who became, along with immigrant workers, a main habitant group of districts like Kreuzberg or Schöneberg – the squatter strongholds of the 1980s.

The inner-city districts of Eastern Berlin, especially Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg – the first centers of 1989/90 wave of squatting, had experienced a similar development of neglect, vacancy and decay. Against the background of a bureaucratized and normalizing public system of housing allocation, especially young people, artists, oppositionals or dropouts squatted silently – the so-called “black dwelling” (Grashoff 2011). Especially in Prenzlauer Berg black dwelling was starting point for a significant alternative milieu.

Power Vacuums and Political Context

Both in Western Germany and in the GDR squatting was regarded as criminal offence. Nevertheless, the way squatting was practically handled depended on its political context.

The legalizations in the first period were framed by the Berlin city administration as self-help experiments for adolescents and thus as innovations for an overstrained welfare system.

In the 1980s, the manifest crises of fordist urban politics was the main political context. The activity of neighbourhood initiatives had prepared the ground. When in December 1980 a major construction scandal got public and one day later a intended eviction caused riots in Kreuzberg, the Governing Mayor retreated, generating a power vacuum that made possible the explosive expansion of squatting in the following months. The massive legalization of squats and implementation of a progressive urban renewal regime – integrating some parts of the movement and marginalizing others – were then part of a wider hegemonic transformation towards a neoliberalization of urban politics (Kuhn 2012).

In 1989/90 it was again a power vacuum, now following the Fall of the Berlin Wall, that made possible a comparable wave of squatting. And as the death of a squatter in September 1981 was the symbolic end of squatting activity a decade before, now it was the violent eviction of Mainzer Str. in November 1991. From then on, the “Berlin Line of Reason”, originally formulated as strategy of de-escalation towards the squatters and now saying thats squats were to evict within 24 hours, widely impeded successful squatting actions.

Concentration/Fragmentation of Ownership

Most of the about 200 legalizations since the 1970s took place in squatted houses in public hands, but public ownership did not necessarily facilitate legalization. Instead, the concentration of ownership seemed to be a central condition for the possibility of legalization. Among the around 80 houses squatted in the neighbourhood of Kreuzberg SO 36 in 1980/81, 27 were owned by four public housing societies and another 34 houses by private redevelopment agencies (Suttner 2011, S.175f.). The concentration of ownership enabled the squatters of houses with the same owner to negotiate collectively and thus to combine forces. Additionally, the Senate supported these negotiations in order to accelerate his efforts to pacify the movement and to isolate the more radical squatters not willing to legalize.

In contrast, among the houses squatted in 1989/90, more than 80 % were owned by public housing societies. The fragmentation of ownership in the course of a accelerated neoliberalization of urban politics and commodification of housing since the end of the 1990s caused an increasing uncertainty of the legalized squats. Out of the around 120 state-owned houses in Eastern Berlin squatted in the year 1990, at least 85 were sold to private owners later on. For the legalized squats, these privatizations often meant rent increases, impeaches of contracts, lawsuits or, in at least five cases, eventual evictions. At the same time, theses changes of housing markets and policies were the occasion for new efforts of organizing the (ex-)squatter scene and generally for the emergence of new urban conflicts and new squatting activities from the mid-2000s on.



Geographical Distribution of the Squats

Conclusions

The emergence and the phases of explosive expansion, institutionalization and decline of the Berlin squatter movement have to be understood as an interplay of its structural conditions on the one hand, and its strategies, tactics and political composition on the other. The legalizations following up the wave of squatting in 1980/81 are a good example for this interplay,

The legalizations as part of an alternative urban renewal regime were a contingent outcome of political action both of the squatters as of the decision makers in the local state institutions. Those parts of the movement aiming at conserving the built structure or at alternative forms of housing and working, began negotiate and to develop institutional forms in order to safeguard the houses. On the other hand, the cleavages between “negotiators” and “non-negotiators” or between groups with an agenda in housing or urban renewal policies and those aiming at a more comprehensive transformation of society, offered a gateway for the strategy of division and pacification pursued by the Senate.

Now, this interplay of squatters and local state not only changed the parties involved, but also the structural conditions for the next generations of squatting. In the 1990s, now in the context of evolving neoliberalization of urban politics, the legalized squats of this period constituted subcultural niches and sources of irritation, but were not able to challenge the new urban landscape of neoliberalization. Contemporary squatting actions, emerging in the context of new urban conflicts have to face these changed structural conditions and to develop appropriate strategies and identities in order to potentially open up new windows of opportunity for squatting.

Data Base of Squatting in Berlin

This work highly depends on and would not have been possible without the extended and detailed data base set up by *azozomox* and his Analysis “Squatting in Berlin 1970-2014” (April 2014) written in the context of the MOVOKEUR Research project.