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What Does A Tenfold Increase in Berlin's Real Estate Prices Mean for the City's Art?



BY KITO NEDO

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The cultural cost of accelerated growth in the German capital



Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction. Who would have thought that Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof Museum for Contemporary Art would one day lose 10,000 m² of exhibition space to the real estate business? The planned demolition of the Rieckhallen, a building displaying the museum's Flick Collection since 2003, is effectively a done deal: the lease ends in September 2021

and has not been extended by the current owner, CA Immo (a Vienna-based development company). The reason is obvious: in recent years, speculation and demand have driven up real estate prices in the German capital, with land prices in some districts increasing tenfold between 2008 and 2018. A not-for-profit art institution is clearly not attractive to property developers. Under the pressure of capital, even things previously considered inalienable – from historical monuments to an internationally renowned museum – are melting away.

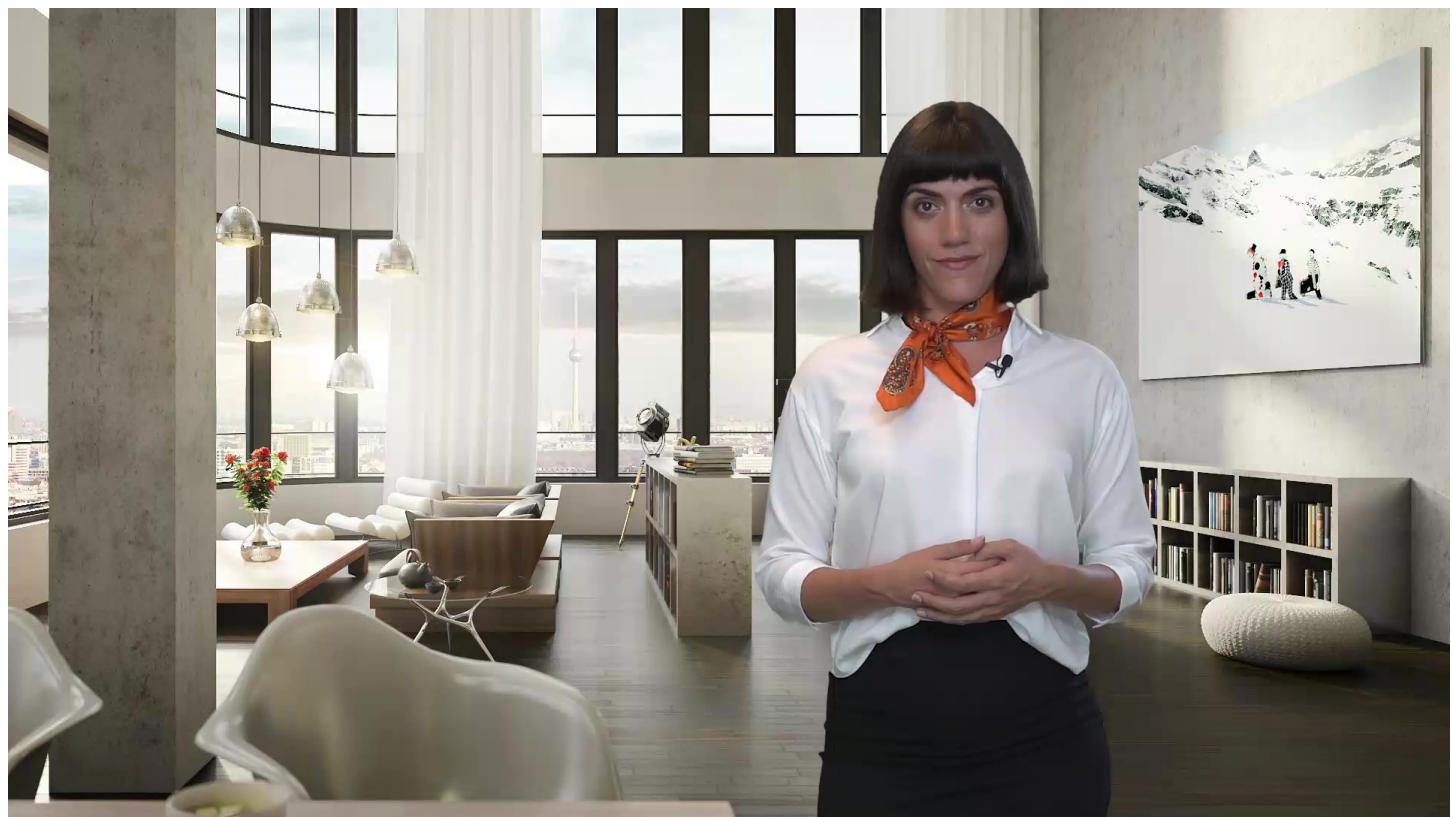
While the city's image once benefitted from a flourishing creative scene and vice versa, today it is all about profit. After the fall of the Wall, low rents and ample space drew international artists here. The curator René Block once called Berlin 'an ideal city for independent creative individuals who are free of capitalist and materialist cravings.' Long after the divided city was reunited, Berlin continued to feed off this much-cited myth. But a lot can happen in 30 years. Today, the city experiences social upheavals due to rapid growth, gentrification and displacement. For example, a vocal tenants protest movement titled Deutsches Wohnen & Co. Enteignen (German Housing & Co. Expropriation) calls for a referendum on whether to ban corporate property managers from Berlin altogether. These issues formed the backdrop for a series of exhibitions taking place across town dealing with urbanism, spatial politics and economics.



Andrej Holm, *Glossary of Privatization*, 2019, exhibition architecture by ARCH+ and Peter Grundmann, installation view, '1989–2019: Politics of Space in the New Berlin', 2019, Neuer Berliner Kunstverein. Photograph: Jens Ziehe © Neuer Berliner Kunstverein

The group show '1989–2019: Politics of Space in the New Berlin' at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.) takes an analytical approach. The exhibition, curated by Anh-Linh Ngo (the co-editor of Arch+ magazine) and n.b.k. director Marius Babias, presented critical portrayals of the social and infrastructural problems resulting from Berlin's accelerated privatization.

A large floor piece displaying a cartographic outline of Berlin opens the show. For *Cartography of Privatization* (2019), urban researcher Florine Schüscke marked all formerly state-owned buildings that were sold to private investors as blue dots on the grey city map, highlighting the extent of the sell-out. Taken together, the 7,700 sales that took place in Berlin after the reunification add up to a surface of around 21 km² – about ten times the area of Monaco.



Guerilla Architects, Shahrzad Rahmani, Philine Schneider, *Die Sprache der Spekulation* (The Language of Speculation), 2019, film still. Courtesy: the artist © Guerilla Architects, Shahrzad Rahmani, Philine Schneider

Elsewhere, urban sociologist Andrej Holm provides a terminology for privatization. Printed on large tear-off sheets, *Glossary of Privatization* (2019), works its way from A for *Altschuldenhilfe* (literally 'legacy debt aid', a law from the early 1990s that forced the privatization of 46,000 publicly owned apartments in East Berlin) to T for *Treuhand* (the agency tasked with privatizing East German state assets), to Z for *Zwischenerwerber* (intermediate purchaser, a model used to

fast-track privatizations). This specific legal terminology is juxtaposed with another vocabulary: for the video *Die Sprache der Spekulation* (The Language of Speculation, 2019), members of the Guerilla Architects collective aggregated nebulous adspeak from real estate brochures and websites. In the video, an actress recites it in front of generic-looking architecture renderings: words fly through the computer-simulated spaces like hollow shells. Such sales patter would be almost funny if it did not expose the marketing strategies of a creeping redefinition of basic human needs in a neoliberal city.



Dierk Schmidt, *Schloßgeister* (castle spirits), 2002–04, installation view, 'Stadtschlawinereien', 2019, KOW, Berlin. Photograph: Ladislav Zajac/KOW

A near-perfect complement comes in the form of 'Stadtschlawinerein' (City Tricksters Business) at KOW, a show including artists Alice Creischer, Larissa Fassler, Andrea Pichl, Andreas Siekmann, Michael E. Smith and the architecture office Brandlhuber+. In the messy field of gentrification and urban development, the familiar 'us against them' model may not be complex enough to grasp the issues. 'They're all city tricksters', writes gallerist Alexander Koch in the exhibition text:

'the ones who insert themselves into organic neighbourhoods whose distinctive historically evolved structures their investments and deals have or will soon have obliterated, overbuilt, and transformed.'

Without admitting art's political impuissance, the show brings together artworks that address Berlin's current urban development crisis. Demonstrative in this regard is Larissa Fassler's excellent billboard piece *Emotional Blackmail* (2018). The research-based work provides a bird's eye view of Moritzplatz in Kreuzberg with annotations on rent increases, land prices, the various real estate companies that own massive properties in this area and the social conflicts that have resulted. Known for the urban gardening project Prinzessinnengärten, the creative business-hub AufbauHaus, the co-working space Betahaus and the nearby König Galerie, Fassler highlights what is at stake at here if communities and companies don't work together.

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'Stadtschlawinereien', 2019, installation view, KOW, Berlin. Photograph: Ladislav Zajac/KOW

Other works show how far back these debates stretch. The painting series 'Berliner Schlossgeister' (Berlin Castle Ghosts, 2002–04) by Dierk Schmidt points to the ways in which the capital's castles have, through time, represented divergent political attitudes. Several paintings narrate the architectural and discursive transformation of Berlin's Stadtschloss (City Palace): from the Prussian Hohenzollern castle (1845), to the GDR Palace of Republic (1963–2003) to the current partial Hohenzollern reconstruction (opening in 2020), which is supposed to host the Humboldt Forum, a museum for ethnological collections from Africa, Asia and the Americas, which has drawn criticism by several decolonial initiatives. By using segments of tarpaulin taken from the building's imitation façade of the 1990s to promote the reconstruction project, Schmidt foregrounds the architectural changes which go hand in hand with ideological shifts. The fake Hohenzollern castle which now occupies the prominent site symbolizes the failure of progressive urban policy and the resurgence of a restorative, reactionary vision of the past.

It seems almost ironic that under the Social Democrat mayor Klaus Wowereit (2001–14), Berlin's publicly-owned real estate was flogged off wholesale and the housing market abandoned to despotic private interests. In 2004, for example, the non-commercial housing association GSW, with its 65,000 apartments, was sold to various international investment funds for 405 million Euros. Finally, unbridled rent hikes led to a broad-based tenant protest movement. Nonetheless, at a recent foundation stone-laying event in Berlin, Wowereit said: 'Change is essential. We mustn't scare off investors. On the contrary, they must be welcomed.' As if a former mayor of the city is no longer required to engage with present politics.



House of Statistics. Photograph: Victoria-Tomaschko

The sprawling vacant lot behind the Tacheles building (the ruined remains of a shopping arcade used as an alternative arts centre from 1990 to 2012) is soon to be filled with offices and apartments designed by architects Brandlhuber+, Grüntuch Ernst, Herzog de Meuron and Muck Petzet. The project's overall costs are currently estimated at around 600 million Euros. Meanwhile, the city discusses a rent cap. Also in Mitte, the Haus der Statistik (House of Statistics) at Alexanderplatz provides a good counterexample to how to avoid the city becoming another playground for capital: here, artists and urban activists have prevented a sell-out to investors and the planned demolition of a once-public building. This fall, STATISTA, a joint venture between ZK/U – Centre for Arts and Urbanistics and KW Institute for Contemporary Art, organized a series of projects and workshops here to foreground the participatory potential of the building. The House of Statistics will host a mixture of social and cultural initiatives. It's a hands-on approach towards making sense of urban development. Perhaps Berlin's urban crisis can kickstart new radical thinking about the possibilities of art and cultural spaces in the city. The first signs are already there.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

Main Image: Larissa Fassler, Kotti (revisited), 2014, installation view, 'Stadtschlösser', 2019, KOW, Berlin. Photograph:

Ladislav Zajac/KOW

KITO NEDO

Kito Nedo lives in Berlin where he works as contributing editor for *frieze* and as freelance journalist for several magazines and newspapers. In 2017, he won the ADKV-Art Cologne Award for Art Criticism.

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1 Surrey Street
London
WC2R 2ND, UK
+44 (0)203 372 6111

New York

247 Centre St
5th Floor
New York, NY 10013
+1 212 463 7488

Berlin

Zehdenicker Str. 28
D-10119 Berlin
Germany
+49 30 7675 80230