

“Informieren, informieren: das ist unsere Hausaufgabe für die Bevölkerung!”

Berlin, 08.06.2010

Citizens of Europe's office is located just a few meters further the end of the street, but it was my first time entering the Lohmühle Wagendorf (www.lohmuehle-berlin.de). It was around 8 pm, warm summer air and silence. “*Entschuldigung, suche ich gerade Zosh, weisst du wo könnte ich ihn finden?*”- “*Sorry I don't understand German, could you repeat it in English?*”..”*Non dirmi che sei italiana? Anche io, sono un ospite e vengo da Firenze!*”. Fausto is not alone in this place, other two Italians live here from around 6 years. Again Berlin's effect!

When finally I saw him, Zosh was walking silently along one of the small pathways, followed by a dog and surrounded by several wagon-houses, plants and trees. He was just back from his working day in a bar in Charlottenburg, on the other side of the city. Zosh is German, not from Berlin but he spent here most of his life. He used to live in normal flats, but more than 20 years ago he decided to move to a wagon-community and then he changed his life building up the Lohmühle one, perfectly integrated with the rest of the neighborhood. Being the oldest member of it, he is in charge of taking care of the administrative issues and keeping the contacts. He can be seen as an alive “*memoria storica*”. We took a walk around the area, visiting the common spaces, the cinema, the small art gallery that is hosting now an exhibition about gentrification in Berlin, and the open stage where they organize concerts and events two days pro week. Their commitment and the incomes they receive from the events are entirely devoted to the community and to the district themselves: everything works on a voluntary basis. “*Das ist einen öffentlichen Raum! Was können wir für die Leute tun?*” is their main concern.

You live here since 1991 when the first community settled down in the area, could you tell something about its history?

When we moved in, the area was completely empty because exactly in this point there was the Wall. Our group was formed by 20 people, mostly of which punks and hippies whose main activity was to get drunk and do parties. At that time we were living in a kind of Berlin's “golden age”, a common destiny that this place shared above all with the other areas at the former borders of the Wall: Mitte, Kreuzberg, Prenzlauer Berg, Friedrichshain and Neukölln.

Slowly our community started experiencing important changes and a process of both natural and “forced” selection. Form one hand new people came and replaced the less active ones, and from the other hand after 6 years we received pressures from the public authorities. It was a matter of survival: either develop into a structured project or go through the eviction. So, in order to keep alive the community and the idea behind it, we decided in 1997 to establish a no-profit association, the “Kulturbanausen e.V.”. Apart from activities in the artistic and cultural fields, we developed through the years an ecological and environmental component, due to our practical needs. We renovated our wagons, built basic and common facilities, planted trees and flowers allowing a small ecosystem to grow and autonomously reproduce itself, and we installed solar panels and a small wind power system that made us independent form the energy supply.

And what about the actual relations with the outside, in particular with the Kiez's inhabitants?

Althought now we are a more organized community, we are still an open place, that external people can use both participating to our activities and developing their own ideas. Every Monday we have a *Plenung*, where everybody interested can come and make further proposals. Every member of this community has his/her duty towards the current projects we are offering; I am the official spokesperson but we share responsibilities. Skills, attitudes and competencies are the result of our commitment, not all of us had previous experiences with art, ecology or administrative issues: we learned by doing, day by day.

Inhabitants and associations of this area accepted our presence here and they are glad about it. They participate to our activities, bring here their kids, ask for cooperation and are actively involved in the implementation of common initiatives. Personally, I am also among the founders of the “KungerKiezInitiative” (www.kungerkiez.de), and this role brings us closer to our Kiez.

Apart from providing logistic support to musicians and artists in general, organizing workshops to promote the use of recycled materials or for example allowing *Kitas* (*Kindertagesstätte*) to celebrate here the San Martin’s day (11th November) with their kids, we do fund raising for international development projects. We are active also at a political level, being part of the “Media Spree Versenken!” (www.ms-versenken.org) and of the “Einwohner Initiative gegen hohe Mieten”. The first movement is more for students, young and alternative people and the second one addresses a bigger target of citizens: we need to establish strong connections and to work on several levels in order to survive against neo-liberal policies. We believe that this place belongs to people that want to use it!



The latter issue introduces a controversial topic for the city as a whole. What kind of difficulties do you encounter, mainly in terms of land permission?

We are experiencing the consequences of a worldwide privatization process, that especially here in Berlin is directly connected also to another big issue: gentrification. Before the fall of the Wall and few years later the central areas of the city were inhabited mostly by students, migrants or poor people, rich and well off ones have moved to the outskirts, to Grünewald or Zehlendorf and to Marzahn in the East part where modern *Plattenbauten* have been built. Then the situation changed and an endless flow of people started coming to Berlin: the more the city became attractive the more the lands’ prices increased and who could not afford the rent moved to a more external district. And here you have the present gentrification process, a real social problem for Berlin but that politicians keep on denying. It is very difficult to defend what is unknown, you can only protect and support what you are aware of and that is the reason why the land we live in has not been sold yet thanks first to the citizens’ support and then to the solidarity of other wagon-communities. The Bezirksamt Treptow-Köpenick (ed. District administration) supports both our presence and our civic engagement but the Senate has a different point of view. Indeed we still do not know what will happen next year, when the official permission we obtained in 2005 is going to expire. Our future is uncertain and unfortunately 2/3 of the squatted lands and buildings are already sold to privates or very close to this end.



Could you explain the reasons of this situation?

It is like a circle. Berlin is the city of alternative cultures, and this fact makes it so special and attractive, especially for tourists and artists from abroad. Berlin is interesting because of its heterogeneity: it is a city created by people! But politicians and other powerful stakeholders, especially from the economic field, want to transform Berlin into a normal European city, because all these changes are seen as a profitable business, a “money machine”. They do not want anymore such kind of projects, we are too “wild” and the land were we are is

valued around 2 millions Euro.

Nowadays it is very difficult, whether not impossible, to build up communities like ours. Berlin is still cheap and affordable, it is not a rich city; a huge percentage of citizens live using public subsidies. This kind of development is not sustainable, the social system is going to collapse sooner or later, but apparently there is more interest in selling the land to build luxurious hotels or new apartment buildings.