

# The History and Cycles of Squatting in Berlin (1969–2016)

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Our investigation on squatting in West and East Berlin from 1969 to 2016 reveals that approximately 650 entities—from houses, factories and villas to parks, unbuilt land, or the former death strip of the border between the two German states—have been squatted within a political framework and with political intentions (azozomox 2014b). Squatting is related to the general political circumstances and to the strength of the political movements.

The Berlin squatter movements emerged and developed in a specific historical context, with particular structural conditions and were part of different cycles of protest (Tarrow 1998).

The setting of a divided city with a wall (West and East Berlin from 1949 to 1989, the *Wall* was built in 1961) as a result of World War II and the post-war constellation (Cold War) contributed to the very special historical and political development of squatting in Berlin. The first squats emerged in the context of the 1968 movements as a precondition to collectively reappropriating private property.

**The first squatting movement** in the early 1980s was possible due to the existence of various social movements and the beginning of the *Autonomen*<sup>1</sup>, while **the second squatting movement** of 1989–1990 rose in the fusion of two radical oppositions in the West and East during the process of unification. In both cases the Berlin government first had to develop legal measures and political responses to confront the unexpected and massive squatting of premises.

The various squatting activities and movements markedly differ from place to place (Western or Eastern Berlin), from district to district (Kreuzberg and Prenzlauer Berg or Zehlendorf and Lichtenberg) as well as from time to time, from their intensity, cycles and strength of the movements. The composition of the squatters from 1969 to 2016 varies greatly, and expresses a broad diversity within the frame of anti-authoritarian, emancipatory ideas and politics. It also reflects the influence and interrelation with other social, cultural and political movements.

Amongst the squatters we find people with different class backgrounds and political tendencies (anarchists, anti-authoritarians, anti-imperialists, autonomous, anti-fascists, and environmentalists) as well as people of colour, migrants, inter- and trans-nationalists, refugees, creative artists, workers and more, but also, autonomist wimmin and dykes, radical queer and trans people, gays and drag queens/kings.

We present an overview of the different cycles of squatting in both West and East Berlin

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<sup>1</sup> The movement of the *Autonomen* was created in the early 1980s and is strongly influenced by anarchist and anti-authoritarian ideas. Therefore, this movement opposes any kind of power structures, domination and hierarchy, and continues its struggle against capitalism, racism, nationalism, sexism, homo- and transphobia, ableism, antiziganism, anti-Semitism and many more. They also reject the existence of states or nations.

and examine their specific political contexts (1), in order to further analyse the impact of structural conditions in terms of urban space and housing (2), and the legal regulations and policies of criminalisation (3), which also had an impact on the possibilities of legalising squatted places as the most common form of ensuring its long-term duration (4).

An exhaustive database of Berlin squats up to 2014<sup>2</sup> is the main empirical source used in this chapter.

## CYCLES OF SQUATTING

We distinguish five different time periods in which there are two major waves of squatting concentrated in a very few years or even months (1980–1981 and 1989–1990).

**The first cycle** lasted from 1969 to 1978 with 14 squats in nine years, which is only 2% of all 650 places squatted in Berlin since then. In this cycle, squatting emerged in the wake of the worldwide 1968 movements: the movements against the United States war in Vietnam, the woman/lesbian/gay/trans uprisings, national liberation movements (from Angola to Mozambique), riots and revolts in the streets of Paris, Prague, Belgrade, Tokyo and Mexico City against capitalism and state authority, from the *Black Panthers* and Black Power, the Native American movement (*AIM*), and the cultural revolutions with drugs, music and communes.

The political contextualisation of the 1968 revolts, uprisings and revolutionary demands created the preconditions for the following social movements in both East and West Germany and elsewhere. One of the outcomes of 1968 was the burning desire to live in the utopia of a new society, not in the future but in the present moment, instead of waiting for a change of political or economic power structures. Activists staked a revolutionary claim to break free from old, authoritarian and patriarchal structures of the heteronormative family as well as to create their own living spaces, communes and meeting points where the new ideas and creativity could be experienced in a self-determined and non-hierarchical way.

This led to a demand for space, and to the practice of appropriating houses, factories, university buildings, and so forth, be it legally or by renting, or by any means necessary: squatting in defiance of the law. Therefore, the emergence of the Berlin squatter movement in the beginning of the 1970s was not a singular historic event. It was part of a more general protest cycle and had already entered the political stage in other European cities such as Amsterdam, London and Copenhagen.

Probably **the first overt occupation in post-war West Berlin** took place in the summer of 1969, when students squatted the *Wilhelm Wesekamm House*, a Catholic dormitory in *Suarezstraße 15–17* (in the district of Charlottenburg) to run and self-organise the place independently. The squat was evicted only weeks later, on September 8, 1969, by 500 police officers. Another occupation in the aftermath of the 1968 revolt was known as the first political squat, and signalled the start of a long history of squatting in the city. Symbolically on May 1, 1970, the *Hoffman Comic Theater*<sup>3</sup> organised an open theatre performance, that

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.berlin-besetzt.de/#>

<sup>3</sup> The *Hoffmanns Comic Theater*, who almost always performed on the street, on markets, under the free sky and at fairgrounds, rehearsed and prepared acts and plays in a creative way, in a revolutionary way. Theatre as

led to the squatting by students and young workers, spectators and activists, of a vacant factory building in *Königshorster Straße 1–9*. The occupation occurred after demands for leisure rooms and spaces for working youth in the satellite town of *Märkisches Viertel*, addressed to the local district, were not met, nor even responded to. The police evicted immediately.

The squatter movement in West Germany began as a revolt of rebellious youth (Amantine 2012, p. 12). Especially in the beginning of the 1970s, working class youth, trainees, dropouts and runaways comprised the majority of squatters at that time in Berlin. In 1971 more occupations took place: an old factory building in *Mariannenplatz 13* (Kreuzberg) for an independent youth centre; an empty single-family home in *Paulsenstraße 44* in the district Steglitz, to provide decent housing for a 10-person homeless family; and finally, on December 8, after a concert by the anarchist music band *Ton Steine Scherben*<sup>4</sup>, the former nurses' dormitory of the *Bethanien hospital* in Kreuzberg in *Mariannenplatz 1 A*, to give a home to 40 young working-class activists.

The house was named *Georg von Rauch-Haus*, inspired by an anarchist who was shot by the police just four days earlier in front of the house *Eisenacherstraße 2* in the district of Schöneberg. At the time of writing it remains the longest lasting squat, after being legalised in 1972 and enjoying a lease agreement until the year 2053.

The occupations of the early 1970s took place mainly in factories or other non-residential buildings in different districts of Berlin, four in Schöneberg, but only three of them in Kreuzberg (21%), which, in the 1980s, would become the stronghold of the squatting movement. Most of the squatters had a working class background and were inspired by antiauthoritarian, anarchist political ideology, although other political tendencies could also be found. The squatters did not hesitate to negotiate for the legalisation of their squatted places, but only on three occasions were agreements settled with the authorities, who dealt on a rather individualised political level from district to district rather than from an overall strategy laid out by the senate of Berlin.

**The first wave of squatting** in the early 1970s spread throughout the country, and a large movement of independent and autonomist youth centres was created with around 200 squatted or self-organised spaces all over West Germany. By the mid-1970s, the youth centre movement had declined, not only in West Berlin but also throughout the country. At the same time, issues of housing and urban regeneration gained importance.

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a tools in the struggle for radical change. Theatre as agitation to spread knowledge about the social structure of the system. Agitation that shows concrete possible ways of an utopian society and future instead of the brutal logic of capital interest. Some of the actors of *Hoffmanns Comic Theater (HCT)* founded in 1970 the anarchist rockband *Ton Steine Scherben*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ton Steine Scherben* was active between 1970 and 1985 and well known for the highly political and emotional lyrics of vocalist *Rio Reiser*. With their beating sound they became a musical mouthpiece for young working class youth and radical social movements in West-Germany, such as the squatting movement. Their first songs came from the theatre-plays they were participating in (*Rote Steine* and *HCT*) and with radical content, like "*Macht kaputt, was euch kaputt macht*" ("destroy, what destroys you"). Another famous songs was "*Keine Macht für Niemand*" - (No power for nobody"). Due to their radical lyrics they were also on so called "black lists" and were thus not played on West-Germany's public radio stations of the time.

**The second cycle** represents the first strong wave of the squatting movement in Berlin. It started in 1979 and lasted until 1984 with 287 squatted houses and sites for mobile dwellings (wagon places)<sup>5</sup>, which makes up around 45% of the total of squatted places in post-war Berlin. This cycle, out of all of them, registers the highest number of squats within just five years.

In West Berlin, the second phase of the squatting movement started when in February 1979 neighbourhood initiatives in the SO36 part of Kreuzberg decided to ‘rehab-squat’ two vacant apartments—this means to occupy and to immediately renovate the occupied space (Mulhak 1983, p. 218). The rapidly increasing activity of neighbourhood initiatives in different parts of the city prepared the ground for the squatter movement.

By the end of the 1970s, the dominant approach of the Berlin Senate on housing and urban renewal was broadly considered a failure. Tenants protested against the ‘clear-cut’ strategy of urban renewal, which consisted in demolishing whole blocks—and with them the urban social fabric—in order to build social housing separated by wide roads for a more car-friendly city. Additionally, against the backdrop of the economic crisis of 1973–1974 and its consequences, plus the fiscal and legitimisation deficits of the welfare system, urban politics was also in a profound crisis.

The eight squats in 1979 were the prelude to an overall number of 255 houses in the years 1980 and 1981 squatted by different movement groups with different political aims (40% of all Berlin squats in only two years!). Those different political, social and subcultural movements—from punks, the *Autonomen*, feminist, lesbian/gay, environmental and alternative movements, anti-nuclear-struggles, the movement against the western runway 18 in Frankfurt am Main (*Startbahn 18 West*)<sup>6</sup> and solidarity groups with the Nicaraguan revolution in 1979—emerged, interacted and created the conditions for an explosion of a new squatting movement with its own subculture, alternative economy, collective cooperatives, and organised structures of resistance. The neighbourhood initiatives were another current within the urban movements forming the breeding ground for the emerging squatter movement.

Equally important was another political context. On December 11, 1980, one of the biggest construction scandals of Berlin involving building contractor *Dietrich Garski*<sup>7</sup> was made public, revealing the collusion of politicians, real estate developers and construction

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<sup>5</sup> Berlin had around 20 sites for mobile dwellings (Wagenplatz [Plätze, plural]). The first was squatted in 1981. After the fall of the Wall, several new places arose spontaneously on the former ‘death strip’, the no-man’s land between the Wall of East and West Berlin. All but one site, *Lohmühle* in the eastern district of Treptow, have been evicted. Other wagon places like *Schwarzer Kanal* (since 2015 called *Kanal*) were evicted, overrun and relocated by urban development plans. The *East-Side*, evicted in 1997, was comprised of several hundred people, one of the largest of this type in Germany.

<sup>6</sup> The *Startbahn-West*, was a runway extension at Frankfurt/Main Airport and was inaugurated in 1984. The significance of the *Startbahn* for NATO and the importance of the Frankfurt Airport for the capitalist world market became central themes in the protests, in addition to the ecological aspects. The connections between the resistance against the *Startbahn* and antiwar and antinuclear struggles were evident.

<sup>7</sup> *Dietrich Garski* went underground at the end of the year 1980, but then got arrested in 1983 on the Caribbean Island *Saint Martin*. In 1985 he was sentenced for credit fraud and breach of trust and received a prison-sentence of 3 years and 11 months.

companies. Only one day later, the prevention of squatting the house in the street *Fraenkelufer 48*, caused massive riots in the neighbourhood of Kreuzberg SO 36.

The resignation of the Social Democrat Governing Mayor *Dietrich Stobbe* in January 1981 contributed to the explosive expansion of squatting. More than 180 houses were squatted within five months. In just a few months, a large movement grew up: up to 5000 people were living in squats and various demonstrations of between 15,000 and 20,000 people took place, with widespread support from university professors, artists, some union chapters, church parishes, writers and public figures.

Almost half the squats in this second cycle were located in the district of Kreuzberg (around 115 houses), an inner city but nonetheless peripheral district almost surrounded by the Berlin Wall. The Kreuzberg neighbourhood, SO36 particularly, with around 80 squats by 1981, incarnated both the mistakes of the local strategy of urban regeneration based on extensive demolition and new building, and the emergence of an alternative milieu in the areas of Berlin that had been neglected while awaiting rehabilitation. Likewise, the neighbouring districts of Schöneberg (around 50 squats) and Neukölln (more than 20) became further centres of the rehab-squatting movement.

The phase of explosive expansion of the squatter movement ended as abruptly as it began. From the beginning of the massive squatting towards the end of 1980 until its end after the Berlin Senate elections in the summer of 1981, only a few months had passed.

The following years, until the last legalisations and evictions towards the end of 1984, were characterised by a process of selective integration of some parts of the movement into a transformed urban regime and a repressive marginalisation of others. The selective integration was also due to the division of the squatters into several factions over the question of negotiations.

With this division, the Berlin Senate could play the factions off against each other, weakening the squatting movement and finally driving it into a slow decline. The decline consisted not only in the loss in numbers of squats due to eviction, but also in the loss of unifying political demands and goals. So many fierce debates and discussions in the end diminished the strength, power and unity of the movement. Finally, around 100 squats were legalized, but new squatting actions stopped almost entirely. By November 1984, the last eviction took place and the movement ended.

**The third cycle** lasted from 1985 to 1988 and marked the period between the two major waves of squatting in the city. Only 25 squats can be counted, just 4% of all the squats in Berlin. Most of them lasted only a very short time and were evicted within days.

Longer duration or even the legalisation of these houses (less than five) were extraordinary special cases, mainly wagon places or other unusual entities. Generally, new squats were evicted and squatting was prosecuted immediately; criminal charges however were rather soft, and sometimes legal proceedings were suspended. In this period, one occupation in particular attracted a lot of public attention and gained widespread support from the autonomist and radical movement.

The *Kubat Dreieck*<sup>8</sup> (Triangle), officially Lenné Dreieck, around four hectares of land right behind the Berlin Wall near Potsdamer Platz, was squatted for more than one month from May 25 to July 1, 1988, and a little tent city was erected for a few hundred people. In 1988 the *Kubat Dreieck* became a property to be exchanged between East Berlin and West Berlin. When the West Berlin police came to evict the property on July 1, 1988, 182 squatters fled over the Wall to East Berlin, leaving a little later via the usual checkpoints after receiving a breakfast and being questioned by the East German border police.

**The fourth cycle of squatting** started in 1989 and lasted until 1991 and coincided with the fall of the Wall on November 9, 1989, and the unification process of the two German states in 1989–1990. It should be acknowledged that in the preceding years thousands of flats and also houses were squatted in East Berlin, from the late 1960s to the collapse of the regime in 1989, even though squatting in the East had quite a different character.

This widespread practice was also called ‘black dwelling’ (Grashoff 2011)—people with restricted or no access to the public system of housing, in many cases members of the East German political and cultural dissident scene, silently occupied apartments and in most cases anonymously paid rent.

These occupations were not outwardly visible, but they still had political intentions and impacts. On the one hand, places were squatted out of political considerations to create free spaces for a different way of life; on the other hand squatting was done for the need of a flat, which was not possible to have assigned. The housing shortage was the leading reason to squat. Economic reasons only played a minor role because in East Germany the rents were very low due to the East German government’s policy of rent controls which froze rents at rates of the year 1936. Thus, housing costs were contained to between 5% and 15% of the average income, so that everybody could afford to pay rents.

Although new flats were constructed in eastern Berlin, the number of flats in old buildings diminished. Demolition costs were expensive so many houses stood empty for years. In 1979, 1200 apartments were listed as occupied by the authorities. By 1987 the numbers had grown exorbitantly—1270 squatted places were recorded in one single district, Prenzlauer Berg. In addition, the reappropriation of entire houses by political collectives, projects, initiatives and groups who opposed the regime or wanted to live an alternative and communal life also occurred, but to a much lesser degree—we note only 11 cases, which represents only 3% of the squatted spaces in the whole city of Berlin until 1989 (for example, *Rykestraße 27*, *Mühsamstraße 63*, *Dunckerstraße 21*, *Lychener Straße 61* or in *Fehrbelliner Straße 5*).

Squatters used these political spaces for exhibitions, concerts (from rock to punk), political

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8 In the course of the occupation the area was named “Kubat-Dreieck” after the political prisoner *Norbert Kubat*, who had died in police custody on May 26, 1987. *Norbert Kubat* was arrested during the *First of May-Riots* 1987 in Kreuzberg and charged with breach of the piece (Landfriedensbruch). After refraining from enforcement of arrest, the request of suspension of his detention, was rejected, on May 26 he committed suicide.

talks and events, theatres, galleries, bars, or anti-authoritarian children's nurseries. Nevertheless, the new squatting wave in 1989–1990 was for many East Germans the continuation of squatting apartments and buildings in the time of the GDR.

The period 1989–1991 represents the **second big wave of squatting** in Berlin. The number of spaces squatted totalled 214, 58 of them (27%) in West Berlin from January 1, 1989, to October 3, 1990 (the day of the unification); 139 squats (65%) in East Berlin and 17 (8%) in unified Berlin from the October 3, 1990, until the December 31, 1990.

Therefore, when the Wall came down, squatting erupted suddenly in East Berlin. From 9th of November 1989 to the 3rd of October 1990, 134 squats were taken. It is notable in this context to observe the relatively high number of squats in West Berlin: 45 in the year 1989, and 13 in 1990 (until October 3). Out of those 58 squats, 55 were evicted immediately within days. Express evictions within 24 hours were enabled by the so-called '*Berliner Linie*' policy, which drove squatters to squat in East Berlin.<sup>9</sup>

As a consequence, squatters from West Berlin nurtured substantially the 1990 squatting wave in East Berlin. In April 1990, western activists were explicitly invited by a call published by the East Berlin grassroots initiative *Church from Below* (Kirche von Unten) to squat vacant buildings of the Mainzer Straße in the district of Friedrichshain in order to prevent the execution of existing demolition plans (Arndt et al. 1992, p. 32).

The 12 squatted houses in Mainzer Straße in 1990 quickly became one of the centres of the stillgrowing squatting movement and contributed significantly to the overall amount of 50 squats in the district of Friedrichshain.

As we stated before, the squatting wave from 1989 to 1991 extended mostly in the (former) East German state GDR, not only in Berlin, but also in cities like Leipzig, Dresden and Potsdam (Holm and Kuhn 2016). The collapse of the regime led to an uncertain legal situation, which created the perfect environment for all those willing to squat to massively appropriate vacant houses.

In East Berlin, 126 houses were occupied until the magistrate (the administration of East Berlin) issued a decree of no more tolerance of occupations after July 24, 1990. Only a few buildings more (13) were taken over after this date.

While the majority of squats were willing to negotiate legal rental contracts for all, the preliminary talks with the municipal authorities were cancelled in October 1990.

One month later, on November 14, 1990, the 11 squats in the Mainzer Straße 2–11 were evicted after 200 squatters and around 1000 supporters resisted for two days, building barricades, digging deep holes in the streets with excavators, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails, and using slingshots and flare guns against the police.

Coming from all over Germany, some 3000 police officers resorted to water cannons, police tanks, heavy tear gas, sharp munitions (at least in one reported occasion), helicopters and special combat units causing many injuries and arresting 417 persons.

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<sup>9</sup> There was an open call in the weekly radical autonomen paper *Interim* (West Berlin) and meetings in Kreuzberg (West Berlin) in April 1990, to squat massively in the Eastern district of Friedrichshain, especially in Kreuzziger- and Mainzer Straße.

Although the 11 squats were lost, the fierce resistance as well as the tremendous critical media coverage, which exposed the first huge operation of West German police in East Berlin after the unification, resulted in two considerable outcomes. Firstly, the administration (Senate) of Berlin resigned after the *Alternative Liste*<sup>10</sup> quit the governing coalition with the Social Democrats (*SPD, Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) in disagreement with the decision to evict the squatters. Secondly, round tables between squatters, politicians and mediators on the local district level were institutionalised, which ultimately led to the legalisation of the majority of the remaining squats in the former East Berlin (Amantine 2011, p. 37).

**The fifth cycle of squatting** in Berlin lasted from 1992 to 2016. Within these 24 years 107 spaces were squatted, 17% of all squats in Berlin in almost half of the time since 1969. Only 14 of those squats were legalised (13%); the rest were evicted within hours, days or weeks. Since 1992 squatting seemed impracticable. Most squats did not last long, so they could not develop any significant infrastructure for the movement, and they do not even remain for long in the collective memory.

Despite these repressive conditions—including the sanction of fines, although very few criminal convictions—squatting has been ongoing. In some exceptional cases it has resulted in contracts ensuring a longer existence.

The social centre *New Yorck im Bethanien* on *Mariannenplatz 2A* was occupied in 2005 and gained a lease contract in 2009. The *Refugee Strike House* in *Ohlauer Straße 12* was occupied in 2012 and existed for more than 5 years in part; of the approximately 250 original refugee squatters, 225 were evicted or driven out in the summer of 2014, and only 25 remained in two floors, while the rest of the building was boarded up and controlled by the city council, who paid all together around 5 Million Euros for the security guards.

On January 11, 2018, the *Green Party* of the district Kreuzberg evicted the last remaining refugees from the school.

And the “grannies” of *Stille Straße 10* in Berlin Pankow—a group of pensioners, seniors (300 retirees altogether) aged 67–96—squatted their seniors’ centre in 2012. After more than 111 days of squatting, several demonstrations and widespread support, they signed a long-term option for a contract. (azozomox 2015, pp. 189–210)

A new phenomenon to be observed in this period is the increasing participation of marginalised and discriminated-against minorities like people of colour, migrant persons, refugees, homeless people and empowered street kids. The Refugee Strike-House, which included an *International Women Space* (International Refugee Center 2015, pp. 162–167; azozomox and International Women’s Space 2017, pp. 207–221; International Women Space 2015), is one example of this new type of squatting.

The *Refugee Protest Camp* squatted the Kreuzberg square *Oranienplatz* from September 2012 until its eviction in April 2014 (International Refugee Center 2015).

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<sup>10</sup> The *Alternative Liste* was founded in 1978 and became the official West Berlin branch of *The Greens* in 1980. In 1993 it renamed to *Alliance 90/The Greens Berlin* after the merger with East Berlin’s Greens and Alliance 90.

Other examples of this trend are the *Eisfabrik* occupied by homeless people from Bulgaria (evicted in December 2013), the informal camps *Teepee* (since 2012) and *Cuvry Brache* (evicted in September 2014) raised by homeless people, migrants and dropouts, and the *Gecekondu* from the neighbourhood initiative *Kotti & Co.*, organised mainly by tenants originally from Turkey/Kurdistan (although many are German citizens) (azozomox 2014a).

Through their visibility and public attention, these squatters also criticise and question racism, capitalism, exclusion and intolerance. Furthermore, the wagon place *Kanal* changed their composition of inhabitants from predominantly white and German people to mostly refugees and migrants, black people, people of colour and Rrom\_nja (Romnja\*), from different political, social and class backgrounds, living there now.<sup>11</sup>

## HOUSING AND THE URBAN CONDITION OF SQUATTING

Squatting in Berlin is an inner-city phenomenon. Although the urban geography of Berlin changed with the unification of West and East, around 70% of squatting took place in the inner-city districts of Mitte, Schöneberg, Kreuzberg, Friedrichshain and Prenzlauer Berg. Another 17% (104 squats) took place in neighbourhoods at the margins of the inner city—Charlottenburg, Moabit, Neukölln, Wedding, and Lichtenberg. And the final 3% (19 squats) in Zehlendorf can be assigned to the fact that the Free University (FU), one of the hubs of the West German student movement in the 1970s and 1980s, is located in this district.

Since the 1950s, a strategy of urban renewal based on the urban imaginary of a functional city with separated areas for living, work, consumption and mobility, was reshaping post-war West Berlin. Relevant parts of the inner city were declared rehabilitation areas, where the existing apartment blocks built around the turn of the century were bought out by public housing societies, demolished and rebuilt, being replaced by large estates of social housing.

Other neighbourhoods with large sections of historic apartment buildings suffered from neglected maintenance, structural decay, extensive vacancy, and only temporary leasing as landlords awaited the declaration of a rehabilitation area with an eventual state acquisition. Additionally, the rehabilitation was enforced directly by the city administration, without any opportunities for public participation and accompanied by a system of cronyism between the long-time ruling Social Democrats, the public housing enterprises and the construction sector.

The first signs of change in the Berlin Senate housing policy date back to the ‘Second urban renewal program’ of 1973 which initiated a slight turn away from the strategy of demolitions and new construction towards the rehabilitation of existing housing stock (Bernt 2003, p. 41). In 1975, an ensemble of apartment blocks in the district of Charlottenburg was chosen as a first experiment in ‘preserving’ and ‘socially acceptable’ renewal under the direction of the architect Hardt-Walther Hämer (Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung 2004, p. 38).

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<sup>11</sup> <https://kanal.squat.net/?cat¼9>

In 1978, the Senate decided to set up an International Building Exhibition (IBA) in order to leverage its new inner city-oriented approach for housing. One section of the IBA was directed by Hämer, and had its geographical focus on the centre of neighbourhood resistance and squatting—the district of Kreuzberg. Beside the achievement of conserving and rehabilitating a total of 36,000 apartments (Schlusche 1997, p. 157), the main goal of the IBA was to reconcile the neighbourhood initiatives and the squatters on one side and the local state institutions and real estate owners on the other.

Due to its institutional status as an organisation financed mainly by the federal government and relatively free from administrative restrictions, the IBA was able to enforce its agenda of ‘cautious urban renewal’.

The overall regime of ‘clear-cut’ urban renewal produced three main structural conditions for the massive eruption of squatting in 1980–1988. Firstly, the extensive and concentrated speculative vacancy of whole apartment houses, sometimes over whole streets and blocks, offered the space necessary for an organised squatting scene.

Secondly, the mobilisation of neighbourhood initiatives against housing shortage and the destruction of the built and social environment revealed the shortcomings of urban renewal policies, raised political pressure on the local state and legitimised the ‘rehab squatters’. Thirdly, the decaying apartment blocks and backyard factory buildings in districts like Kreuzberg and Schöneberg offered affordable space for an alternative milieu of activists who made them the squatter strongholds of the 1980s.

Although the political aims of the squatters’ movement of 1980–1981 went far beyond the conservation of the built and social environment, or the demand for political participation that many neighbourhood initiatives had raised, the symbolic framing as ‘rehab squatting’ fuelled other forms of political squatting. The squatter movement thus intervened at the point of rupture between the disenchanting Fordist urban politics and the emergence of the neo-liberal city (Kuhn 2012).

This transitional moment opened up a window of opportunity for urban movements that even the newly elected conservative Berlin Senate in May 1981 could not close without significant concessions. These concessions included the implementation of a new ‘cautious urban renewal’ regime adopted by the Senate in 1983 with more participation of the residents, although private property interests and neo-liberal policies still determine the capitalist nature of the urban agenda.

Squatters themselves put into practice the ideas proposed by progressive planners since the 1960s: rehabilitation of the urban fabric instead of speculative vacancy and decay; reanimation of the ‘*Kreuzberg mix*’ of living and working within the apartment blocks instead of mono-functional concepts of renewal; creation of an autonomous and self-administered infrastructure of social and medical services, meeting places, garages and workshops, and kindergartens and playgrounds instead of the paternalistic and commodified services of a local welfare state in crisis.

Additionally, the political pressure exerted by the squatters inspired and strengthened the factions of reformers within the different state institutions. And one of them, *Werner Orłowski*, was even elected to the district council for building and construction of Kreuzberg in July 1981.

Consequently, the ideas of cautious renewal and affordable housing were institutionalised in the old building section of the IBA, and the Berlin Senate responded with programs subsidising alternative self-help projects in social, cultural and medical realms (Katz and Mayer 1985, p. 40). Legalised squats directly benefited from a programme of ‘self-help in construction’ that financed the rehabilitation of collective housing by its residents.

The urban rehabilitation strategy in East Berlin in the 1980s and its impact on the 1989–1990 squatters’ movement shows parallel traits with the situation 10 years earlier.

A nationwide housing programme implemented by the East German government in 1971 aimed at the extensive new building of mass-fabricated housing units at the periphery of the city, leaving the inner city to decay. Large parts of the inner-city districts Mitte, Prenzlauer Berg and Friedrichshain remained vacant or became sites for massive silent squatting.

In particular, Prenzlauer Berg became a preferred domicile for artists, political opponents and dropouts, who in the course of the 1980s had formed an alternative milieu similar to its counterpart in the west. The residents of Friedrichshain, in contrast, had predominately a working or lower middle-class background.

At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, the Berlin housing policy was characterised by a contradictory patchwork of three different approaches: a declining Fordist, state-led and publicly financed strategy of new building; a progressive model of ‘cautious urban renewal’ largely limited to the district of Kreuzberg; and an increasingly implemented approach of liberalisation and privatisation started by the conservative-liberal Senate in the mid-1980s (Kuhn 2014, p. 91).

By then, the market-oriented factions in all political parties used the situation of political and fiscal distress to accelerate the tendency of neo-liberalisation and both the social-democrat-green (1989–1991) and the conservative-social-democrat (1991–2001) Senates began to implement new supply-side oriented instruments of housing policy, mainly in the eastern inner city.

The main success of the 1980s squatters’ movement in Berlin was the enforcement of a theoretically progressive and resident-oriented policy of housing and urban renewal, and the establishment of a new collective and self-administrated housing stock within the 105 legalised houses (Koopmans 1995, p. 178). However, this also entailed a fast demobilisation, incorporation, and temporary disappearance of the squatters’ movement within the following five years.

Like the first wave a decade before, the second Berlin squatters’ movement was able to enforce the conservation of their houses through legalisation and therefore to create an alternative stock of housing with relatively low rents and with an organisational structure of

self-management. But at the same time, its anachronistic presence in a rapidly transforming housing market implied that squatting in the 1990s hardly had any disturbing effect on the neo-liberalisation of housing in Berlin.

Thus, squatting had become relatively marginalised and powerless by the time processes of gentrification emerged (Holm and Kuhn 2011, p. 654). The flourishing alternative culture in the 1980s and 1990s, the squatters' success in preserving the built urban fabric from demolition and reconstruction, their contribution to the diverse daily life already established by migrants, and their political culture of protest and participation, were finally transformed and integrated into a policy of gentrification (Kuhn 2014, p. 185) with its consequences of rising rents, displacement and social homogenisation.

Nowadays, while in the peripheral districts of Marzahn-Hellersdorf and in Spandau, empty flats can be rented for an average price of 6 euros per square metre, in Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg the average price is 11 euros. The districts of former mass squatting became the most expensive and hip districts in Berlin.

## **CRIMINALISATION AND NEW REGULATIONS AS AN ANSWER TO THE SQUATTING MOVEMENTS**

In both West and East Germany, squatting was regarded as trespassing, hence as a criminal offence. So squatting was never legal, but the fairly small number of squats in the beginning of the 1970s in West Berlin (14 squats in nine years) were handled individually, which led in some cases (*Georg von Rauch Haus*, *Tommy Haus*) to their legalisation.

That did not mean that squatters were not stereotyped or criminalised by the media and governments. Several houses were searched after the accusation that they supported armed struggle, anarchists, and enemies of the state. Both squats mentioned above were named in solidarity with *Georg von Rauch* and *Thomas Weisbecker*, activists who had participated in armed groups such as *RAF*<sup>12</sup> or *2 June Movement* (*Bewegung 2. Juni*)<sup>13</sup> and were killed by the police in 1971 and 1972.

When squatting became massive and turned into a movement in the early 1980s, the Berlin Senate had to find an adequate response. The Berlin Senate of CDU (Christian Democratic Union of Germany) introduced the *Berliner Linie* (Berlin Rule) in 1981, which instructed the police to evict a house within 24 hours after an owner filed criminal charges of trespassing against the squatters.

The *Berliner Linie* tightened the previous unofficial policy guideline for dealing with squatting called *Berliner Linie der Vernunft* (Berlin Rule of Reason). Put up by the transitional Governing Mayor *Hans-Jochen Vogel* (SPD) just some months earlier, this approach distinguished 'between peaceful and social commitment, on the one hand, and

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12 The Red Army Faction (RAF; *Rote Armee Fraktion*), was founded in 1970 and dissolved in 1998.

13 The 2 June Movement (*Bewegung 2. Juni*) was based in Westberlin and active from 1971–1980.

violence and destructions, on the other' in order to facilitate 'legally established conditions' for squats (Sonnewald and Raabe-Zimmermann 1983, p. 67).

Moreover, an eviction could not be executed when the house owner did not have any concrete plans or measures for construction, renovation, or instant rehabilitation. At that time, speculation with property and buildings became everyday reality. Whether held by social democrats or conservatives, the West Berlin Senate used different existing laws to crack down on the movements.

For example, in the 1980s, in the face of the first big squatting movement, the Senate and the state prosecutors resorted to the offences of 'use of violence', 'promotion of violence', 'resisting arrest', 'inciting a riot' and 'forming a criminal terrorist organisation' to prosecute the squatting movement.

From December 12, 1980, to October 20, 1982, there were 7809 preliminary proceedings carried out and 1409 people arrested. Out of the 172 arrest warrants issued under the anti-terrorist law §129, 93 led to prison sentences, 18 of them without parole.

At the peak of the movement, on September 22, 1981, during protests against the evictions of eight squats earlier in the morning, 18-year-old squatter *Klaus-Jürgen Rattey* was chased by the police until he was struck by a public bus, run over and dragged 40 metres. He died on the spot and was the first fatal casualty of the movement. On the same night, a demonstration of 10,000 people ended in heavy clashes and confrontations with the police and several groups attacked more than 50 targets, including banks, police stations and offices of real estate companies. The death certificate of the squatter recorded 'professional rioter' as his job designation—nothing could describe any better the icy and repressive atmosphere at that time.

Similar criminalisation of squatters followed in the coming years. After an extreme hateful media campaign against the squatters, the wagon place *East-Side*, with up to 500 people residing there, was evicted in 1996. *Klaus Landowsky*, the parliamentary chairman of the CDU, justified the eviction comparing the inhabitants of the wagon place with rats, rabble, scum and neglect. (Similarly, the Nazi minister of propaganda, *Joseph Goebbels* classified the Jews as rats, vermin and bugs.)

The *Rigaerstraße 94* (occupied in 1990) was searched many times and was strongly stigmatised by the Berlin Senate, which asserted they were just violent criminals and terrorised their neighbours. The surrounding area of the meanwhile legalised squat was declared a 'crime-contaminated area'. From October 2015 to February 2016 at least 1500 persons, not only squatters, had been stopped and frisked by the police.

Also the occupied school in *Ohlauerstraße 12*, the *Refugee Strike House*, occupied by refugees in 2012 and squatted until 2018, faced harsh repression. The refugees living in the former school were not allowed to bring friends into their own squat. Their house was sealed off by private security, hired legally by the district government, and only the squatters who could present a personal identification could pass the security and were allowed to enter the building (International Refugee Center 2015, pp. 144–148).

This repressive instrument is unique in Germany and is actually issued and carried out by the *Green Party*, which derives from social movements of the 1970s in West Germany. The process of legalisation of some squats and the eviction of others can be interpreted as a state strategy of splitting up and pacifying the movement, by criminalising the most radical branch of the movement that questions private property as the foundation of capitalism and refuses negotiations and rental agreements.

## THE LEGALISATION OF SQUATTED SPACES

All in all, 200 squats, representing 30% of all 650 squats, have been legalised since the 1970s. At least 35 buildings of those 200 were bought by the squatters themselves. Legalisation existed right from the beginning in West Berlin where the first squats represented a new challenge for the state institutions. The way squats have been handled by the state has always depended upon the political context.

Out of the first 14 occupations, only two were legalised and one was abandoned after it had successfully prevented the planned construction of a power station. In 1979, seven out of eight occupations in that year gained legal status, totalling 10 legalizations out of 21 squats in the decade from 1970 to 1979 (azozomox 2014b).

Overall, the vast majority of legalisations took place in the first and third cycles of squatting—1980–1981 and 1989–1990.

In total, 174 squatted houses were legalised in those periods, accounting for nearly 90% of all the legalised squats in Berlin in a 47-year period. From 1992 to 2016, only 14 places have been legalised, out of 107 occupations.

Legalisations illustrate well the interplay of strategies, tactics, and political composition of the squatters' movements on the one hand, and their structural conditions on the other. Against the background of the massive vacancy and decay in the neighbourhood, and the legitimisation crises of urban renewal policies, the legalisation of squats was a concrete instrument of an alternative urban renewal regime.

Nevertheless, this was a contingent outcome of both squatters' and local decision makers' actions. Squatters who aspired to safeguard the occupied houses began to negotiate and to develop institutional forms in order to make that possible. Afterwards, as part of the integration of self-help approaches into public services, some of the legalised squats received public funds.

On the other hand, the cleavages between 'negotiators' and 'nonnegotiators' gradually deepened within the squatters' movement. This internal split—between squatters with an agenda focused on alternative housing and urban renewal and the autonomous/anarchist squatters aiming at creating spaces free from the state and capitalist rule (Schulze and Gross 1997, p. 45)—offered a gateway for the strategy of division and pacification pursued by the Senate.

A similar outcome of division, pacification and alienation of houses from their neighbourhoods occurred in the 1990s. The difference was made by the fall of the Wall and the newly enacted laws in the process of unification of the two German states. All of the 114 occupied houses in East Berlin had been state-owned or state-controlled property. However, the 'laws of restitution' granted former private owners the right to repossess properties expropriated by the East German authorities after 1945.<sup>14</sup>

This process was usually lengthy and complex. Some heirs of the property were estranged and dispersed all around the world. There were disputes among claimants.

Properties also changed hands many times. Some bought a house for 300,000 euros in East Berlin and later sold it for 1.3 million euros when Berlin was becoming the new hip trending place to be for tourists and investors. This affected, for example, the legalised squat *Brunnenstraße 183*; their lease agreement expired after 16 years and they were evicted in 2009. Our records reveal at least five such cases of legalised and then evicted squats.

## CONCLUSIONS

In almost half a century of history, the Berlin squatter movement evolved in five cycles. Among them, two big waves of squatting took place in the years 1980–1981 in the west and in 1989–1990 in the eastern part of the city. In these four years, 70% out of a total of around 650 houses ever squatted in Berlin with any form of political intention are counted—255 in the first wave and 206 in the second. In contrast, the vitality of the squatters' movement before and after each of these two waves has been significantly lower: 14 squats (2%) in the first cycle between 1969 and 1978, 25 squats (4%) from 1985 to 1988, and 107 squats (17%) in the long fifth cycle from 1992 to the present day.

The first political squats evolved in the context of the revolt of 1968, the emerging social movements and proletarian youth demanding spaces for collective self-determination. These pioneering currents of squatting were complemented by a radicalising neighbourhood movement, other social movements and the emerging, more radical Autonomes. All these together made possible the explosive dynamics of the first big wave of squatting in 1980–1981.

In addition, the crisis of the 'clear-cut' urban renewal approach, and the concentration of extensive vacancy and housing shortage in the inner city were articulated by the practice and discourse of 'rehab squatting'. These activists helped increase the legitimacy of squatting, so that the movement became a relevant political actor that could neither be ignored nor merely repressed by the laws of criminal trespass.

The legalisation of some squats in West Berlin was both a way of securing the houses for the squatters, and a measure for the Senate to contain, control and pacify the movement as a

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<sup>14</sup> The ownership structure of the Nazi era (1933–1945), where property rights had been taken mainly from the Jewish population and redistributed as part of the process of 'aryanisation', was thus potentially restored.

whole. This process and the integration of grassroots demands into the regime of 'cautious urban renewal' led to a rapid decline of squatting at the end of the second cycle.

With a socialdemocratic and green Senate in 1989 and the fall of the Wall in November of the same year, the fourth cycle of massive squatting unfolded predominantly in the eastern part of the city, after almost all squats in the western part were evicted. This was helped by similar socio-spatial conditions, but also by the long-existing practice of silent squatting ('black dwelling').

Again, the squatters' movement achieved the legalisation of a large part of the squats which meant a significant stock of affordable and collaborative housing, and a lasting infrastructure for social movements. However, in contrast to the first wave 10 years earlier, these new legalised squats were alienated from the gentrifying neighbourhoods and movements around them.

The last period saw the turn of the Senate towards a neo-liberal, statebacked but market-driven mode of urban renewal. The ongoing rehabilitation of the inner-city housing stock diminished the amount of vacant houses.

The invariable criminalisation of squatting, the precariousness and the occasional evictions of formerly legalised squats under the conditions of speculation in gentrifying neighbourhoods, and finally the alienation of a partly subcultural squatting scene from the needs of their neighbourhoods and from the urban struggles evolving there, pushed the remaining squatter movement on the defensive.

All this resulted in a significant decline, nearly to the extinction of the movement. Since then squatting has been an important part of different social struggles against urban touristification and gentrification, for example, with an ever greater diversity in the social composition of squatters.

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